



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

THIS IS THE NIGHT

Sermon for Easter Vigil, March 26, 2016

The story of Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea is the only Old Testament story that is mandated by the Book of Common Prayer to be included in the readings of the Easter Vigil service. All of the other readings are optional. Not this one. Why?

Because the story is deeply connected with baptism—and this is the night, above all others, which the ancient church set aside for baptism. So I am delighted that two young adults have come prepared to be baptized.

The link to baptism is through the element of water. Now water is a powerful symbol. We need it to live; our bodies are mostly water, the earth is covered mostly with water. The ancient Israelites needed wells and springs in the desert to water their flocks. They needed rain in due season to water their fields. But they were also afraid of water: of being drowned in the sea or in flood. Of not getting water when they needed it—fresh, life-giving water.

So this story is a story about drowning, or almost drowning, when crossing a sea to safety, with a terrible army in swift pursuit. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid jumping off the cliff into the river far below—because there is sure death behind them.

But God holds back the waters while the Israelites cross. Then the waters sweep back and drone the chariots of Pharaoh's army. A miraculous deliverance. Miriam, sister of Moses, takes up her tambourine and she and the other women sing their victory song: I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

That's God, a mighty warrior, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, working wonders. And he is on our side!

With God's help, we are able to pass through the waters of death into the promised land of life.

So the water of baptism does not only cleanse you from sin, but delivers you from death. Or through death. For as Christ died and then lived,

so we die, in some way, in order to live as new people, new children, born not of flesh but the spirit, adopted children of God, sisters and brothers of Christ. Through the water of baptism, we share his journey—through life to the cross and death to new life.

Reading 2: Salvation offered freely to all (Isaiah 55:1-11)

What do we have to do to get God's blessing? What is the cost of salvation? The prophet Ezekiel tells us the blessing is free, salvation is a glass of water handed to you as you run, no cost, just take it. Drink. It is all grace—a gift freely given.

But we have trouble accepting grace, don't we? We keep trying to earn God's love through good deeds. If I feed the hungry or go to church, God will love me, forgive me, my life will get better; if I pray hard enough, my loved one's health will improve. Let's make a deal, God. Tell me what you want me to do.

God thinks about it. And God says, seek my face, follow my will—I have shown them to you in the face of Christ, in the commandment to love one another as I have loved you. You think all the time about bills to pay, food to eat, but I have food of a different kind, thoughts of different kind. Good food—the word of God. Good thoughts—that are like seeds planted in good soil, and watered by seasonable rain. See, the new plants will push up in spring—right now—they will bear flowers and fruit—in your life. Flowers, of peace and joy. Fruit, of good works done because of love and gratitude, not out of fear of punishment or hope of reward. That's what God has in mind for us—and what God has in mind will happen—good things—but we have to help by letting go and letting God. Just water with prayer and weed out evil through works of kindness. God will give the growth (1 Corinthians 3:7).

Reading 3: A new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:24-28)

You are starting to get the picture. Being a Christian, following Christ, is like getting new operating instructions for the mind. We are taught certain things by the world—by our parents, teachers, friends and by the and results of our own experiences as well. Some of the lessons are good: be kind and loving. hard-working and reliable. Some are not so good: it's a zero sum game, dog eat dog, do unto them before they do it to you, it's only business, nothing personal.

It's always personal, because "it" happens to people. And persons count. Everyone deserves respect, has an innate dignity because they are made in the image of God—says so right in chapter one of the Bible. You can never lose that original blessing, only obscure it. And you should never forget that others should be treated as you would want to be treated. Friendship with God is the highest good. Having good friends is also a wonderful thing. And what it takes is an open heart to receive love and to give it.

In the Bible you often hear that some people's hearts were hardened. Pharaoh, others. People lose innocence and acquire a tough shell to protect them from getting hurt. People make false promises. People lie. Be innocent as doves, Jesus said, but wise as serpents. Keep your eyes on the prize. But make sure you keep your feet on the ground.

But no matter what, harden not your hearts, as it says in Psalm 95, lest you lose the way to the peace of God. The peace of God. It's like a safe place, a sanctuary deep in your deepest self, what the Bible calls your heart. There, broken heart, hard heart, no matter—if you give it to God, God will give you a new heart. And then you can enter the land of promise, and find the peace of God that passes all understanding.

Reading 4: The valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

Sometimes it is too late. The damage has already been done. The patient died during the operation. The soldiers fell in the battle. The bodies lie where they fell. The bones bleach in the sun as the years pass. Life has been lost in this place.

But this doesn't reckon on the power of God. The one who created the universe from nothing can also give life to the dead. For humans, yes, it is impossible. But nothing is impossible for God.

Do you believe that? The prophet wasn't sure what to think when God showed him a vision of a valley full of dry scatted bones. Can these bones live, God asked him? O Lord God, you know.

But look what happens next. God doesn't just go ahead and reanimate the bones. God has the prophet talk to them first. "Alright, bones, listen to the word of God. You think it is all over but God is going to breath new life into you. You are going to grow new ligaments, muscles and skins, your organs will grow back and skin will cover your body."

And it happens—in this dream vision, the bones grow new bodies. Now they are all over the field, the valley, like sleepers waiting to wake. But they aren't moving.

So God tells the prophets, speak to the wind. Say to the wind, come and breathe new life into these old bones and bodies. And the breath comes and the bodies stand. But then they—the army like a field of robots, switch turned on but no spark of life— and they speak and say they are lost, dried up, as good as dead, without hope.

My friends, many feel this way even today. As if their lives are headed no where, as if the country is going in the wrong direction, as fi God has abandoned God's people. This is exactly the situation of the people of Israel in Ezekiel's time. They were defeated, in exile, hopeless. They were alive but just going through the motions. They had no hope of return to their land.

But God was speaking a new word to them through the prophet. You will return, you will live once more in your ancestral home. Your children will play in the streets and your elders will sit in the shade by the square. Do not despair but believe.

And by this word spoken through the prophet, the spirit of the people began to revive.

May it be so today. May this night be a new beginning of hope and sense of purpose. This is the night when Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This is the night when we remember our victory song. Alleluia, Christ is risen, the Lord is risen indeed.