

Telling the Eternal Story

The liturgy of the word begins tonight with the call: "Let us hear the record of God's saving deeds in history, how God saved the people in ages past." There is nothing new about this salvation story told and retold throughout the ages and epochs of time. It is the grand narrative of creation and redemption that weaves through all of human history and works its way into the very being and nature of our world. God has been telling the same tale from the beginning, hoping that we would hear of his great love and respond.

At the dawn of existence, God began by calling into being all that was, and is, and that shall be by speaking words of life into the void. But even at the start, all that was not-god began to assert itself in the form of chaos and darkness that threatened to swallow creation before it could even be established. But this was not God's will and it would not endure. God set a limit by shining forth the light of his own being and summoning out land from the watery abyss. God said no to the disorder and endless night, and yes to daylight and solid ground, and it is into this place, this world teeming with potential, that God set humanity and walked among them.

When God's chosen people had fallen into slavery and were threatened with destruction, God heard the cry of their suffering and sent one of their own to remind them of the eternal story. Moses stood before Pharaoh and told him to let God's people go, because God's people were free people. And when fear and resignation crept into the Hebrew's hearts at the banks of the Red Sea, God opened a pathway to deliverance and brought his people to a land of promise, flowing with milk and honey. God said no to the slavery and suffering, and yes to freedom and fulfillment. He set them in a country where they were told to rule justly, to welcome the foreigner and the outcast and care for the widow and the orphan, making them the primary proclaimers of the story and commanding them to make it known to all their children and anyone who would listen and learn.

The people failed to remind their children, and they followed badly, and then failed to follow at all, until they were lead away in chains by a harsh captor. God's people fell into exile, their institutions destroyed and their kingdom annihilated. They lost their home and their faith; sorrow imperiled the hope of the promise. And when God sends Ezekiel to look out on the remnant, he sees only desiccated bones and hope that is even more dried up. God uses his human prophet to retell the eternal story, to speak life to the bones and to breathe the breath of God back into them. God said no to the hopelessness and lostness of his people who were scattered and scared, and yes to inspiration and restoration through his Holy Spirit. They bring life back to Israel and they return home to their faith.

When the people had fallen again, putting their faith in false messiahs and giving in to their sinful desires, God re-entered the story himself, as both author and actor. It was not something new happening, but the eternal story enacted among us, in the form of a human, empowering us to do the same. The people had come to a point at which God himself among them would be mocked and beaten and killed. But in the Easter miracle God said no to human hatred and yes to salvific love, no to sin and death, and yes to redemption and resurrection. God

spoke the ultimate word in his beloved Son, and yet it was not the first word, and not the final word; it was simply the word spoken most clearly and most concretely. It was the eternal word, and without it there is no story to tell. There would be order from chaos, light from darkness, hope from despair, life from death. And the story goes on with us taking up our roles and adding new chapters to the redemption narrative of our world and our people. That is why we gather on this most holy night.

This is not the night on which the story happens. It is the eternal story, going on from the beginning and being manifest in our world and in our lives on a continual basis. This is the night we join in the story. The second half of that opening liturgy that I quoted earlier says, "and let us pray that our God will bring each of us to the fullness of redemption." This is the night on which we realize the story of redemption, we actualize with our bodies, and we vow to tell it and make it true of our lives.

After kindling the new fire, calling light into the menacing darkness, we light our own candles from the Christ candle so that we too can push back the chaotic abyss of our world. We are recreating a new world, here on the solid ground of our faith, in this place where God interacts with us. We are to take this light into the gloom of night, into all the places where darkness and disorder still reign, and offer the hope and stability of the light of God.

Then we renew our baptismal covenant – promising to fight oppression and suffering wherever we find them. We remember how, in our own baptisms, we crossed over, through the waters, into the promised land of God, and we have a responsibility to make sure this land governed well and the story is told. We vow to strive for justice and peace, to respect human dignity and serve Christ in all persons. We are to go forth and sooth the sorrows, break the bondage, and deliver those resigned to living life that is somehow less than the full humanity that God has planned for them.

Then we take up those who long to live the abundant life found in God, and to be filled with the breath of God. We quench the dryness of their bones with the waters of baptism, and we breathe God's Spirit into them, speaking the inspired words, "you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." We offer hope for new life to those who are fallen, and we promise ourselves that when we fall into the exile of sin we will remember that there is a way to return to the life of Christ. And we take on the responsibility of reminding the baptismal candidates when they forget or lose their inspiration.

We renounce sin and return to God, because we will tell the story of resurrection, and second chances with our own lives. We have known our place in the passion of Good Friday, but that will not be our identity. Here we recognize our salvation as an Easter people. And we ring our bells at the sound of the great Alleluia because we are telling the world that these bells are not tolling death but proclaiming life springing forth from the empty tomb.

We come back every year because we forget and we stray. That has long been the human role in this story. But each time God is beckoning us to remember and to join in, to take our rightful place in the story. God is no longer sending leaders like Moses or Ezekiel. And God already did his ultimate work in Jesus. Now God is sending legions to tell the story, and we are them. It is the ancient drama of our Lord, and tonight we remember that he is the author but we have become the actors. This is the night we re-enact the resurrection in our sacred space, so that

we can then take it out and manifest it in the spheres of our lives, making them sacred spaces. Every year you bring your new experiences and circumstances and situations and promise again to connect them to the story and to live the life that God beckons us to.

This is the night we call on members dispersed throughout the world to gather. Tonight we call back those who have become overwhelmed by chaos in their lives, those who have fallen into slavery to sin, those who have given up hope, and those who are living in a reality of death, and we say it is time to come out, because none of those are eternal stories. It is time to start over in the story of creation and redemption, to be the resurrected people of God. So this is the night where it begins, and it begins again, and it begins anew, where we form the habit of being in the world in a way that says no to the sin and chaos and despair and yes to life and wholeness and salvation. Too often the stories of violence and suffering and death are told, filling the space of our world with their emptiness. Tonight, we vow to reclaim the narrative, to tell again the eternal story of God's redemptive love until it is the end of all stories. And we start the telling of the story with the words of the everlasting anthem, "Alleluia, Christ is Risen, the Lord is Risen indeed, Alleluia." Amen.