

LIVING BETWEEN MEMORY AND HOPE

Why is this night different from any other night? And why is this service more elaborate than any other service? For two reasons: at this Easter Vigil, more extensively than at other times in the year, we “hear the record of God’s saving deeds in history, how he saved his people in ages past.” And also at this Easter Vigil we pray at length that “our God will bring each of us to the fullness of redemption” (Book of Common Prayer, p. 288). So tonight we look back together and we look forward together.

For Christians, and indeed for people everywhere, there can be no hope apart from memory. Without a clear recollection of what God has done in the past, we are robbed of any real sense of what God will do in the future. Without memory we cannot learn from our past sins and failures; without memory we cannot take heart from our past achievements and triumphs over adversity. And so tonight we recognize that we are living between memory and hope, between captivity of many kinds and the liberty which is God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ. This Easter Vigil, if you like, is the Magna Carta of our freedom – a freedom whose scope and promise are spelled out in the lessons we have listened to this evening.

The one Old Testament lesson that is required reading at the Easter Vigil has to do unashamedly with politics, with the deliverance of a captive people so that, free at last, they could become a nation in their own right. In the drama of the first Passover God intervened against their oppressors, putting the faith of the enslaved Israelites to the test as Moses cried out:

“Do not be afraid! Stand your ground, and you will see what the Lord will do to save you today ... The Lord will fight for you, and all you have to do is to keep still.” (Exodus 14:13-14)

And that memory of deliverance from oppression which God brought about in the Exodus has kept hope alive. Alive through long years of slavery here in the United States, alive in the face of Nazi tyranny and Stalinist terror and apartheid in South Africa. And it keeps hope alive right now in Southern Sudan where an endless conflict has meant suffering and death or long years of exile for thousands just because they are committed followers of Jesus. Against all the odds victims of war and injustice continue to put their hopes in the lesson of the Exodus. The lesson that the days of every oppressor are surely numbered and that the Lord who reigns for ever and ever will act to deliver any people held captive.

Once established as a free people, the Israelites faced a new challenge – to live according to God’s law so that their society would be just and fair, honoring master and servant alike and treating the immigrant, the stranger in the land hospitably. Eventually, however, the people turned their backs on God’s law, and greed and self-interest prevailed more and more. The society began to fall apart, and God had to intervene again:

“I condemned them for the way they lived and acted, and I scattered them through foreign lands.” (Ezekiel 36:19)

But, as always with God, the story did not end there. As always, God’s judgment was meant to make a new start possible. After long years of exile, the people returned to rebuild their society, basing it once more on God’s law and God’s love:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you and make you clean from all your idols and everything else that has defiled you. I will give you a new heart and a new mind And will see to it that you follow my laws and keep all the commandments that I have given you.” (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

And that memory of God’s deliverance of a society that had fallen apart – that memory is the basis for hope today. In recent years our nation’s life has been shaped more and more by greed and self-interest. As a people we have forgotten a fundamental Biblical truth about life: to fail to honor employer and employee alike; to favor the wealthy at the expense of the poor; to spend billions on warfare while millions have no health insurance; to

pollute the atmosphere and to exploit the environment for profit regardless of future consequences – to do that is to invite not just the collapse of the market, grievous as that is, but ultimately of the social order itself. So tonight, living as we do between memory and hope, we are being called by God to pray and work for the good of all and for the health and well-being of our own nation and of the world at large.

In the face of the challenges that the Israelites faced in rebuilding their society, hope became a commodity in short supply. Exhaustion, lack of vision, spiritual dryness took hold, and there seemed no promising way forward. And it was then that Ezekiel had a vision which was described to us again tonight:

“[The Lord] led me all around the valley, and I could see that there were very many bones and that they were very dry.” (Ezekiel 37:2)

God leaves Ezekiel in no doubt that these bones represent the people of Israel who say that “they are dried up, without any hope and with no future” (Ezekiel 37:11). But, as always with God, that is not the end of the story. Ezekiel is commanded to tell the dry bones that God will breathe new life into them so that the people will indeed have a future and a hope.

And right now that is a powerful message of encouragement to all of us. Confronted by the problems besetting our society and our world and casting a cloud over many of our individual lives, we are tempted to stop caring about the wider world and to give in to spiritual exhaustion or quiet despair. But God is speaking a word of hope directly to us tonight:

“Prophecy to the bones. Tell these dry bones to listen to the word of the Lord. I am going to breathe into you and bring you back to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”
(Ezekiel 37:4-6)

Deliverance from oppression, from greed and self-interest, from lack of vision and from despair. But, as always with God, the story does not end there. For, underlying all of this and of even greater significance, is deliverance from the power of sin in us and the power of death over us. That is at the heart of the good news proclaimed at this Easter Vigil. That is the promise which Edward has chosen to live by as a newly baptized follower of Jesus.

You and I may be tempted to think of this deliverance from sin and death as merely private and spiritual and otherworldly, having nothing to do with our day-to-day life in the real world. If that’s the case, remember Jesus’ first words to the women who on Easter morning found his tomb empty:

“Peace be with you. Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” (Matthew 28:9-10)

Go to Galilee – Galilee where they had first met Jesus; Galilee where they live and work; Galilee where home and family and friends are to be found. That is where they will meet Jesus again and that is where memory and hope come together at last.

And those are Jesus’ words to us this Easter night. Jesus, risen from the dead, promises to meet us where we are, for Galilee is now right here in Westport. This is where we meet him, this is where he shares our journey from day to day. And this is where he offers us deliverance from captivity of many kinds so that we may live in the freedom which is God’s gift to us in Jesus risen from the dead.

Remember that as you receive Christ into your hands and into your hearts at the altar tonight. And in these confusing, even threatening times embrace the hope that God is holding out to you; enhance it gladly, for this is a life-giving opportunity not to be missed. For, yes, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us and has risen from the dead for us. Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! Amen.