

Homily for the Easter Vigil, Year B

March 30, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

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Genesis 1:1-2:2 (The story of Creation.)

Exodus 14:15-15:1 (The Israelites cross the Red Sea.)

Ezekiel 36:16-28 (I will give you a new heart and a new spirit.)

Romans 6:3-11 (We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.)

Mark 16:1-7 (He has been raised.)

Tonight, on this holiest of all nights, the Church celebrates that singular and inexplicable moment when God's plan for the salvation of the world reached its fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In the special liturgy of the Word which we just celebrated, the Old Testament readings have taken us through the story of salvation history, starting from the very beginning, the act of Creation. In the beginning there was only God; nothing else existed. Then, by the almighty *Word* of God, all things came into being. God's response as he gazes upon his handiwork is very telling, and important for us to remember. Each "day," he approves of the work that he has done, seeing how good it is. Then, at the conclusion of all his work, he surveys the entirety of his Creation, including the human race, and declares all of it to be "very good." We might recall those words whenever we find ourselves becoming cynical, or even depressed, about the state of our world or the state of the human race. Rather than passing our own judgment on the world or its people, let us listen to *God's judgment*: "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good."

Another important theological lesson to be learned from the Creation story is the special relationship between God and the human race. Among all the living creatures that populate the earth, we are the only species created in the divine image and blessed with the knowledge of our Creator. However, that special relationship was not to remain static, for part of God's plan was for the Divine Word, through whom all things were created, to become incarnate, taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. By entering into our *human* life, the Son of God enabled us to share in his *divine* life. Relationship was transformed into *communion*.

The next story that we heard tonight came from the narrative at the very heart of *Jewish* religious history: the Exodus from Egypt. And the particular part of that story that we heard tonight has special significance for Christians, because of its symbolic connection with Baptism. The Israelites had already escaped from Egypt and were several days into their journey toward the Promised Land, but they were still within striking distance of the Egyptian army and its war chariots. It was not until the Israelites *passed through the waters* of the Red Sea that they were truly free. Christians see this passage from slavery to freedom by means of water to be a symbol of Baptism. Before Christ, all human beings were slaves to sin and death, and there was no escape. Now, through Baptism, we can pass through the waters and emerge as a new creation, sons and daughters of God, reborn into *freedom*, with God's promise of salvation and eternal life.

The third story tonight came from the *darkest* time in Jewish history: the Exile in Babylon. Despite their covenant with God, the Chosen People had lost everything. The Jewish monarchy, descended from King David, had come to an end. The great Temple in Jerusalem, their one place for sacrifice and worship, had been destroyed. The people were scattered or enslaved. There was nothing left, *except* the faithfulness of the God who once called them to be his holy people. *For the sake of his holy name*, God promises not just to restore what was lost, but to cleanse his people of their sin, to give them a new heart, to place a new spirit within them, and to reclaim them as his own possession. We Christians see this promise as another foreshadowing of Baptism. For, through the Sacrament, God cleanses us of our impurities, creates a new heart within us, gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, and claims us as his own sons and daughters.

Moreover, as St. Paul reminds us in his Letter to the Romans, through Baptism we have *died* with Christ, in order to rise with him. Paul says that “Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him.” We believe that the same is true of us who have been baptized into Christ. Death no longer has power over us, either. We belong to Christ now, and he has *all* power over life and death, as he proved on Easter morning.

Ironically, Christ received his sovereignty over death by submitting to it. As the Scriptures foretold, the Son of Man had to be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day. Jesus tried to explain this to his disciples *before* his death, but they could not understand. Hence, the women who went to the tomb early Sunday morning were utterly amazed when they found the tomb empty and encountered an angel, who proclaimed, “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised.” As Mark tells the story, the women were so scared and bewildered that they fled from the tomb and said nothing to anyone! That appears to be the original ending of Mark’s Gospel. The Mystery was so profound and so shocking that even the first eyewitnesses didn’t know what to make of it at first.

We can forgive those first disciples for being overwhelmed by the mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In fact, I dare say we should all pray for the grace to be *a little more overwhelmed* by it ourselves. We can easily take Christ’s resurrection and our own salvation for granted. That’s why we are so blessed tonight to come together to celebrate this great Easter Vigil. Our liturgy began with the light of the Paschal Candle piercing the darkness of the church and spreading throughout the assembly. This is a powerful symbol of the *Light of Christ* and his resurrection, which overcomes the darkness of our world and spreads as it is shared by all believers. The uniquely extended Liturgy of the Word tonight then reminded us of all that God has done for his people throughout history, and especially what God has accomplished for us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Next, we will bless our baptismal font, renew our baptismal promises, and recommit ourselves to the covenant that Christ initiated by the outpouring of his own blood. As we are blessed with the waters of this font, may we be reinvigorated to “put on Christ” every day of our lives and allow his light to shine forth through us. May our entire lives be a testimony to him. May our every word and action cry out, “Alleluia, he is risen!”