

Sermon for Holy Saturday - Easter Vigil - Year C - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 4.16.22

Tonight is a night full of the telling of stories. The portions of Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, and Ezekiel are all part of the story of God and human beings, a story that stretches back to creation. It is a story we have come to call salvation history.

In the beginning, the very beginning we read that the earth was a formless void and darkness covered everything. Chaos. Into this chaos came a mighty wind, the creative wind of God and all was created. It took some time, for creation does not happen all at once. At the end of each creative act, God said that it was good. Good. Late into this process God created humanity and we too were said by God to be good. In six days God created and on the seventh day God said that it was finished and God rested. God blessed and made holy the rest of the seventh day. What do we take from this old, old story? We learn that a part of our salvation lies in honoring creation. It lies in remembering that in the beginning all of creation was called by God good, blessed, holy. We learn that we are to care for what God created and to rest as God ordained. Both are good, blessed and holy.

As is the way of history, many years pasted and many things happened to the Israelites. They found themselves as slaves in Egypt. God sent a leader, Moses, to lead the people to freedom and to the land promised to their ancestors. But when the time came to trust God and to follow Moses, the people were afraid. They looked back instead of forward and cried out to the Lord saying: Let us alone and let us go back to what we have known. But Moses said to the people “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...”. And so the Israelites passed through the waters of Sea of Reeds on dry ground. The people learned that salvation lay in believing in the Lord.

Moses was the first among leaders of Israel, but many more came after. There were warriors and priests, prophets and sages to protect, to teach and to guide along the path that God had ordained. One such was Isaiah, who described for all time what the salvation of God would be like. God invites all to come, those who are thirsty, poor, indebted, or hungry in any way, invites them and us to be filled with the richness that is God’s abundance. To come means to seek God, who in reality is always near, easily found if we open our hearts and minds to what is before us. God is generous, forgiving and merciful and longs to fill us with God things. God has made an everlasting covenant and promise to human beings, a promise of steadfast, sure love. Love that is waiting for us to share with God and with one another. Salvation we learn is living in loving relationship.

The people did not always listen, we do not always listen. We hear the consequences of this failure to listen and to obey in the words of the Prophet Isaiah. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way...” Salvation has at times seemed very distant. Yet, God has never given up on us. Salvation has always been at our fingertips and only as distant as our will to return to God. God, speaking through the prophet Ezekiel has promised to sprinkle with clean water, to give a new heart and a new spirit to all who seek God’s forgiveness and follow God’s ways. God promises that we will be God’s people and God will be our God. In that promise, that relationship we are saved.

God through Ezekiel has promised that dry bones will live because the spirit of God will enliven them. The bones that Ezekiel saw in the valley were described as very dry. It seemed at least in the moment to be hopeless. The lesson of God to Ezekiel and to us is that it is never hopeless, that God is always willing to put breath in us so that we may live and know that God is God. The salvation of God is like that mighty wind of creation first active in the beginning. “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” It is the Spirit, the breath of God that gives us life and in that life is salvation. It is given to human beings to be the ones who know and share this knowledge of salvation. It is given to us to prophesy and say to the Spirit come and fill our hearts and lives that the world may be transformed.

Many centuries later, the prophesy was again fulfilled in a new and unique way. In the words of a modern-day prophet, Jesus came, was sent to earth to obey God, to gather the people and to bring life and bring it abundantly to all who believe.

We began this night with the lighting of the new fire, and from that fire we lit the paschal candle and each of our candles as well. Light was the first event of creation: “God said let there be light and there was light and God saw that it was good.” That light is echoed in our new fire this night. Even as darkness and chaos have come upon the earth from time to time, the light, our light has never been extinguished, and is renewed in each of us as we sustain our faith with Word and sacrament.

Many times over the centuries and many times in our own lives we may have been in the place of the disciples on the day after the crucifixion. They were all from Galilee, Jesus first place of ministry and promise. It must have felt like the world had returned to the darkness, the void and chaos of the time before God created. It was certainly an echo of such darkness. The women who went to the tomb on that first Easter morning did what we all do when we know not what to do. We return to the familiar, to what we have always done and we find consolation in doing so. They went to the tomb with the spices they had prepared. They were doing what women in that time always did for those who had died, they lovingly anointed the body that was left behind when life was gone. They did it because that is what they had always done because it was the custom. They had no thought as to how the great stone that blocked the tomb might be moved so that they could enter. When they arrived, the stone had been rolled away. This was the first sign that something had happened. It would be the first sign of what was to come. Like Ezekiel's experience in the valley of the dry bones, this was a sign that God's spirit was here and that Jesus was alive, resurrected as he had told them he would be. From the moment the women saw the stone had been rolled away everything changed and they were terrified. They entered, but did not find the body of Jesus. Instead there were two men in dazzling robes who told them that Jesus was not there but had risen. They knew that they were in the presence of God, call them spirit or angels or they knew not what. They were terrified as we are often terrified by what we do not expect, do not understand and cannot explain. The women listened to the words of the men who spoke to them. The women remembered the words of Jesus, how he told them all that would happen.

They realized that it was just as Jesus had told them in the beginning when they were still in Galilee, that he would be handed over to sinners, be crucified and rise again. It had been so, he had been arrested, tried and crucified and so the final promise, that he would rise again. They believed that it was true. For them and for countless others throughout the centuries and to our own time, this was the essence of faith. That the words of Jesus were true and were to be believed and more than believed, to be lived. The women became the model for all of us who believe. In doubt and despair they came to see with their hearts the truth of the good news. And in seeing, they went to tell others. Peter, who hearing got up and went to see for himself the empty tomb, also is a model for us. Seeing, he believed as well. We can none of us believe for another, we must each see and believe for ourselves. We must each be able to say with authority and with faith. "Christ is risen, the Lord is risen indeed, alleluia.

And so the story of salvation comes full circle from the beginning, from creation to the new beginning and new creation we have in Christ. It is ours to have, to hold and to share. Happy Easter.