

"A New Heart and a New Spirit"
The Resurrection of our Lord
Easter Day
31 March 2024
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Ezekiel 36:24-28

INI

The Stories of an Ancient People

At the Great Vigil of Easter there are so many texts to choose from. We are treated then to stories from an ancient people, stories of salvation, redemption and return – Creation, the Flood, Abraham and Isaac, Israel's deliverance from Egypt, the Dry Bones and other readings from the Prophets. And I think, appropriate to this day, resurrection as well. I remember well the disputes that I have had with fellow colleagues, with various worship committees and with various organists as well. These disputes always centered on all the readings that are available to us at the Great Vigil. The argument usually was centered on the amount of the readings, and their relevance to our time and to our age. I remember having an argument with a Lutheran Vicar regarding the usefulness of the Hebrew Scripture in general. It left me disheartened and not a little sad. The stories of an ancient people give us a glimpse into so many images of God, so many promises and covenants that were made, the personalities that shared their vision of God, the warnings of the prophets who spoke what they thought was God's truth in their now. It is heartening to listen to the stories and to the prophets and to realize that they have a great deal to tell us now – in our time.

Not too many Sundays ago, on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, we had a reading from the prophet Jeremiah. It was a reading that allowed that God was going to make a new covenant, a new set of promises with God's people. The important thing that Jeremiah wants us to understand is that unlike the stones spoken aloud, eventually written down, the law that was given on Sinai, and eventually written down, the temple, the altar, the sacrifices and holy acts, unlike all of these things and actions Jeremiah saw this new covenant written on our hearts. Jeremiah concludes his teaching with this comment, *"No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord."* Thus Jeremiah calls us to an interior life, that is called to know God in our very hearts.

The Call to an Interior Life

Among the readings available to us this evening is a reading from Ezekiel.

In case it has not been read, let me read it to you now. Say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring

you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

In order to fully understand the context of this reading we need to remember that this was written to a people returning from exile, returning to the land of their fathers and mothers, the land of their ancestors. Thus Ezekiel sees them gathered and brought together from many countries, from the worship of idols, cleansed to be God's own once again. They were to experience a resurrection of sorts. Ezekiel reminds them that their newfound freedom in the return is not due to their own merits or deeds, but rather is a sign of God's forgiveness, the redemption so freely offered.

It all begins with a sign with which we ought to be familiar especially on this evening. It begins with a washing. In a way it is a repetition of creation, where the chaos of the waters was calmed and order was brought into creation, into the universe. Thus Ezekiel sees this new washing as a release of the people from a deplorable past. Their sins of forgetfulness and unkindness to one another would be washed away – they would be clean again. In this washing they would have a new mind and a new heart, a resurrected existence that would allow to reenter the land, and to once again be in relationship with God. Each individual would know this in the very fiber of their being. God and humankind would be in relationship, and all would know the reality of that promise, that covenant.

The Resurrection

Saint Paul is mindful of this new interior life that comes from the washing. From the second lesson for this evening.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

In my sermon on Maundy Thursday I related the story of Helen's baptism in a Greek Orthodox Church. There rite makes it perfectly clear that baptism is also a participation in the death of Christ, with the candidate being plunged three times into the waters of the font. It is good for us to remember what the ancient peoples thought of the waters – they were deadly. In the psalms we hear phrases like, the waters of death rolled over me. The use of waters as a cleansing act of renewal was and is a highly evocative symbol of a thing once viewed as a threat to life, being renewed as a gift to life. Thus in baptism we all participate in two differing aspects of the washing with water – death and life, Christ's death and resurrection, being buried in the waters of baptism, and being raised out of them restored to life. In this we participate in Christ's resurrection. But what about our own?

Saint Mark closes his Gospel with a stunning reality. *"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."* The women's knowledge of the resurrection was a fearful thing, but in that they were not alone. The Magdalen doesn't recognize Jesus, Peter himself is reluctant, Thomas doubts the whole enterprise. Perhaps their fear is grounded in the understanding that this action on the part of God in raising Jesus indicated a new thing. Perhaps that same fear resonated among the people who heard Jeremiah or Ezekiel's message to them. We are, all of raised to something new.

Hopefully in the Sundays that follow we will be renewed by the Easter mystagogy, the understanding of the mystery and how it sends us out into a different kind of living and relationship to the world, to creation. Let remind you once again of your resurrection in the baptismal promises.

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Such are the promises made, mindful of the teachings of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Paul. They make us mindful of the renewed spirit that is within us. And so we all say. "I will, with God's help."

Alleluia, Christ is risen! Now let us go and live in that reality.

SDG