

## **The Great Vigil of Easter. April 11, 2020. The Pandemic.**

For many of us, there has never been a time when we felt so alienated from those activities and communities that tell us who we are. For some, that's work or friends or larger family or a hobby we're passionate about. And now suddenly we can't do those things or be physically with those people. For others, it may be that we've always built important parts of our identity on our relationships with those in our home--and now perhaps those relationships are strained almost to breaking. And if those relationships are a bit of a mess, then who are we?

There are many challenges to this enforced isolation, but lately I've been thinking about this one. About how we enact and remember who we are, and maybe even continue to grow and flourish when so much of what feeds that identity has been cut off. Without wanting to overstate things, it reminds me of what can happen to some people after an abrupt retirement or the loss of a spouse or child. If I'm not this job, that person's partner or parent, a member of these communities, then who am I?

I can't help, then, but think of tonight as a kind of antidote to this unmooring of identity. It won't give us back everything that we've lost or had suspended; it won't iron out all the creases that are forming in our relationships at home. But it does give us an answer to who we are. It does root us back in our identity as God's people, the adopted children in the family God has nurtured over the centuries. Tonight we tell the stories of God coaxing a people into divine love from creation, through the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the vicissitudes of ancient national life, and finally Christ's triumph over death and the grave.

We are adopted by baptism into that people of God. We are among the people God has saved and is saving. These stories are the stories of God's saving work in the world, first to the children of Israel and then to the whole world. These are the stories of God saving us--they are the story of our salvation. At a time when our usual markers of identity are missing or distorted, tonight we back all the way out to tell ourselves the story of who we are. They aren't all bright and cheerful. There is failure in them, and fear, and pain and sin. There is plenty of uncertainty and misunderstanding and even death. But the constant through all of them is God's patient and constant caring presence with God's people. These stories do not tell us that things will be easy or that we will always get things right. They tell us that God's love is constant even through and beyond death. They tell us that God's love is stronger than death. In terms of who we are, they tell us that we are the people who know that we can rely on God's unfailing love in the garden, in front of the Red Sea, in the valley of dry bones, and even on the cross and in the grave.

And then, in a moment, we will respond by renewing our baptismal covenant, by reaffirming the promises made at our baptism. Having reminded each other of who we are, we will remember what it means to be those people. In a time when there is so much that we cannot do, we joyously commit to do those things we can--the things that are the work of those who have been redeemed. We might be doing them a little differently these days, but a month of quarantine has surely taught us that seeking and serving Christ in all persons doesn't become irrelevant just because it's the same blessed people every day. The pandemic has laid bare just how much work we have to do in striving for justice and peace among all people. And the shuttered world is crying out for the Good News that has saved us, and which we promise to proclaim by word and deed.

My friends, it is an Easter unlike any other. And it is just like every Easter. Christ is risen, Christ is rising in our lives and raising us up into new life. Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.