

April 4, 2015

Easter Vigil

Ezekiel 36:24-28

24 I will take you from the nations, I will gather you from all the countries, and I will bring you to your own fertile land. 25 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be cleansed of all your pollution. I will cleanse you of all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one, 27 and I will give you my spirit so that you may walk according to my regulations and carefully observe my case laws. 28 Then you will live in the land that I gave to your ancestors, you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

1 The LORD's power overcame me, and while I was in the LORD's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. 2 He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry. 3 He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?" I said, "LORD God, only you know." 4 He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the LORD's word! 5 The LORD God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. 6 I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the LORD." 7 I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. 8 When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them. 9 He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, human one! Say to the breath, The LORD God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live." 10 I prophesied just as he commanded me.

When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. 11 He said to me, "Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.' 12 So now, prophecy and say to them, The LORD God proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. 13 You will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. 14 I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the LORD. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the LORD says."

Zephaniah 3:14-20

14 Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem. 15 The LORD has removed your judgment; he has turned away your enemy. The LORD, the king of Israel, is in your midst; you will no longer fear evil. 16 On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem: Don't fear, Zion. Don't let your hands fall. 17 The LORD your God is in your midst—a warrior bringing victory. He will create calm with his love; he will rejoice over you with singing. 18 I will remove from you those worried about the

appointed feasts. They have been a burden for her, a reproach. 19 Watch what I am about to do to all your oppressors at that time. I will deliver the lame; I will gather the outcast. I will change their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth. 20 At that time, I will bring all of you back, at the time when I gather you. I will give you fame and praise among all the neighboring peoples when I restore your possessions and you can see them—says the LORD.

Daniel 3:1-29

1 King Nebuchadnezzar made a gold statue. It was ninety feet high and nine feet wide. He set it up in the Dura Valley in the province of Babylon. 2 King Nebuchadnezzar then ordered the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials to assemble and come for the dedication of the statue that he had set up. 3 So the chief administrators, ministers, governors, counselors, treasurers, judges, magistrates, and all the provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. They stood in front of the statue the king had set up. 4 The herald proclaimed loudly: "Peoples, nations, and languages! This is what you must do: 5 When you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, you must bow down and worship the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Anyone who will not bow down and worship will be immediately thrown into a furnace of flaming fire." 7 So because of this order as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument, all the peoples, nations, and languages bowed down and worshipped the gold statue that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

8 At that moment some Chaldeans came forward, seizing a chance to attack the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar: "Long live the king! 10 Your Majesty, you gave a command that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument should bow down and worship the gold statue. 11 Anyone who wouldn't bow and worship would be thrown into a furnace of flaming fire. 12 Now there are some Jews, ones you appointed to administer the province of Babylon—specifically, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—who have ignored your command. They don't serve your gods, and they don't worship the gold statue you've set up." 13 In a violent rage Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were brought before the king. 14 Nebuchadnezzar said to them: "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego: Is it true that you don't serve my gods or worship the gold statue I've set up? 15 If you are now ready to do so, bow down and worship the gold statue I've made when you hear the sound of horn, pipe, zither, lyre, harp, flute, and every kind of instrument. But if you won't worship it, you will be thrown straight into the furnace of flaming fire. Then what god will rescue you from my power?" 16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered King Nebuchadnezzar: "We don't need to answer your question. 17 If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. 18 But if he doesn't, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up."

19 Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and his face twisted beyond recognition because of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In response he commanded that the furnace be heated to seven times its normal heat. 20 He told some of the strongest men in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of flaming fire. 21 So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, still

dressed in all their clothes, and thrown into the furnace of flaming fire. (22 Now the king's command had been rash, and the furnace was heated to such an extreme that the fire's flame killed the very men who carried Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to it.) 23 So these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell, bound, into the furnace of flaming fire. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in shock and said to his associates, "Didn't we throw three men, bound, into the fire?" They answered the king, "Certainly, Your Majesty." 25 He replied, "Look! I see four men, unbound, walking around inside the fire, and they aren't hurt! And the fourth one looks like one of the gods." 26 Nebuchadnezzar went near the opening of the furnace of flaming fire and said, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. 27 The chief administrators, ministers, governors, and the king's associates crowded around to look at them. The fire hadn't done anything to them: their hair wasn't singed; their garments looked the same as before; they didn't even smell like fire! 28 Nebuchadnezzar declared: "May the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be praised! He sent his messenger to rescue his servants who trusted him. They ignored the king's order, sacrificing their bodies, because they wouldn't serve or worship any god but their God. 29 I now issue a decree to every people, nation, and language: whoever speaks disrespectfully about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's God will be torn limb from limb and their house made a trash heap, because there is no other god who can rescue like this."

John 20:1-18

1 Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. 2 She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." 3 Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. 4 They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. 5 Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. 6 Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. 7 He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. 8 Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying. 11 Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. 12 She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. 13 The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." 14 As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

Romans 6:3-11

3 Or don't you know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. 5 If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his. 6 This is what we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin. That way we wouldn't be slaves to sin anymore, 7 because a person who has died has been freed from sin's power. 8 But if we died with Christ, we have faith that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ has been raised from the dead and he will never die again. Death no longer has power over him. 10 He died to sin once and for all with his death, but he lives for God with his life. 11 In the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

The word vigil comes into play in the strangest places within our culture. If someone is vigilant, they carefully keep watch, often for danger or change from the unknown. Vigilantes take law enforcement into their own hands because of dissatisfaction with the established police authority. An invigilator is a person who supervises candidates taking a test, taking care to ensure no cheating occurs. Hypervigilance is the act of constantly, tensely, annoyingly searching out threats. For some reason, all the words that utilize vigil seem to trend negatively, or at least toward suspicion.

Even when we use the word vigil, it often connotes sadness or grief. Community vigils often occur to mourn the loss of life, especially innocent life. We remember the vigils here in the New River Valley after the loss and death of Noah Thomas. These gatherings, often held in public places by candlelight, tell stories of those passed to help those in attendance grieve, as well as cast some sort of hope for justice, or reunions, or change in our society.

But tonight's vigil is different. Vigilant we keep watch, but not for danger. We vigil as those who grieve the passing of our friend Jesus, the loss of our Lord, the death of God, but we also look with anxious anticipation toward the morning. Soon, our candlelight will give way to the light of God, reborn in the world.

Like other vigils, we too gather to tell stories, and the stories that we tell help us shape our expectations. We hear prophecies from Ezekiel, that God will birth within us a new heart and a new spirit, that God will cleanse us of the idols within our lives and the

pollution that poisons our relationships, our bodies, our world. Even more than that, we hear that God intends to bring new life to the dead, to knit together sinew upon bone, flesh upon tendon. God promises that not even death can separate us from the good work in store for us, so might we hope that Jesus' death is not permanent either?

We hear from Zephaniah a prophecy of healing and return, that the lame will find deliverance, that the outcasts will find reconciliation, that the exiles will return home. God will not allow inaction or broken relationships or distance to prevent goodness from returning to creation, so might we hope that Jesus' distance might not last either?

Then we hear the longest story of the night, of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. What an incredible tale. These men, friends of Daniel in the Chaldean court, were set to be martyred for their unwillingness to worship the idols set up by King Nebuchadnezzar. Remember, this king is a powerful king. He built the fabled hanging gardens of Babylon and destroyed the massive Jerusalem temple complex. He's not used to being denied, so when these peons, these Jewish exiles whom he's welcomed into his court, refuse to obey his will, he loses it. He heats the furnace seven hundred percent hotter than before, intent to wipe out any memory of this disobedience, this challenge to his authority. Only an epic fire could extinguish this flame of faithfulness within Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And yet, when bound and tossed into this brick oven of destruction, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego aren't alone. Someone else appears within the fire meant to destroy them, unbinds them, and carries them through the flames. If even a fiery furnace can't prevent God's faithfulness from carrying us into new life, then might Jesus' death be only temporary?

We vigil in the dark to recall the light of these stories, hoping and praying that the light might once more arise on this world. And while we await for him to arise, Jesus remains at work. Jesus is at work, cleansing us with the most radical act of forgiveness, self-sacrifice. Jesus is at work reconstructing our lives out of the skeletons of our old selves and binding us together with his own flesh and blood. Jesus is at work, going the furthest of distance from life into death in order to bring reconciliation to humanity. Jesus is walking through the fires, harrowing hell itself so that even those condemned to death might not be forsaken, but instead might find new life in relationship with God.

So tonight, we vigil, not only in grief but in hope. Hope that the light will come out of this darkness. Hope that the morning will end the despair of this night. Hope that, beyond death, there is life, not only for Jesus, but for all of us.

And so, with the return of the lilies out of our ashes, with the light coming into this darkness, with this new fire warming the cold of our hearts, we see an empty tomb. We've yet to see the Lord, but what other explanation is there? What else can we say, but Christ is Risen?! Amen.