

## Homily for the Great Vigil of Easter

Holy Saturday, April 11, 2020

By Br. Finn Coll Buckley

I just chanted this wonderful ancient acclamation that began with and kept repeating the word: Rejoice.

Rejoice? Are you kidding?

I open my eyes every morning and **look** out at the world – and am confronted with a global pandemic, callous nationalist leadership, oppression, fear, despair, death, and so much hate.

My eyes take it all in – the whole of creation groaning, all humanity with gritted teeth, striving and struggling in the day, hopeless and fearful in the night. My eyes behold, and my heart aches.

And then I am asked to chant the glorious proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, singing, "Rejoice!" It's too much.

And so it was with heavy pessimism that I approached the task of writing a homily for the Great Vigil of Easter in 2020. In my ponderings, the word "vigil" kept rattling around my brain, looking for something to connect to. Of course, it means an exhaustingly long ritual prayer service that takes up a whole night that I'm sure could be spent in a million more fun ways.

But at it's root, it just means to watch.

To peer into the darkness.

To scan the horizon.

To be... vigilant, waiting with razor-sharp attention.

But what am I to do when I keep this watchful vigil, and all I can see in the darkness, on the horizon, is a world ensnared in fear and despair?

I'm not afraid to tell you that God spoke in my heart today. The Voice that I seldom get to hear, but that I have come to recognize as the Holy One, said to me,

“You’re looking wrong.”

Okay, fine. How then should I look? How should I keep vigil?

Getting no further flash of insight, I went back to the readings we heard tonight and bashed my head against the Bible for awhile. The readings from Genesis and Exodus relate these epic tales of God’s action in the world. Sr. Marlene told us in the Creation Narrative, how God made all these varied and miraculous things and – importantly – called them all Good. Sr. Jenny then told us the story of how God saved the people from the genocidal powers of the Egyptian empire, intervening against the laws of physics, parting the sea so that the Israelites evaded Pharaoh’s armies without so much as a skinned knee.

Then, Lauren and John gave us the words of the Prophets Ezekiel and Zephaniah! Through them, we hear God speaking to the people, assuring them that they will be cared for – promising them peace, rescue, renewal, prosperity, and even holiness. God paints a picture for them of a life yet-to-be, a glorious time worth waiting for.

And there it is.

Worth waiting for.

Worth watching for.

Worth looking for.

I’d been looking wrong.

I’d been looking to the dark horizon, keeping vigil with only my pessimism and anger in my head to keep me company. I’d been trying to see Jesus, looking through a lens clouded and cracked by my own despair.

Now, I’ll say this loud and clear so there can be no doubt: Nobody can ever be blamed for their despair! Nobody can be condemned for their fear, uncertainty, doubt, and anger at the way the world looks right now. None of this is normal – none of this is right. As a Christian, I weep with those who weep, and I ask you all to weep with me – because these days of pandemic and oppression are surely worthy of tears.

And through those tears, I must also, what... rejoice?

Yes, says Zephaniah.

In the midst of exhorting the Israelites to faithfulness in a time of awful oppression, slavery, and hopelessness, God gives them an instruction. In the middle of all these hope-giving promises, God says, "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!"

How? How, in the midst of all THIS, am I to rejoice?

Tonight, I believe God has given us the answer to that question.

Remember.

Tell the stories of God. Tell the stories of love. Tell the stories of hope. Tell each other the tales of your families, friends, communities – of all the Good, the True, and the Beautiful things that have been. Recall those stories aloud, proclaiming them to each other, and as you hear them, let them enter you – from ears to mind to heart to soul – and let them rest there within you.

Then, as the Goodness of God rests in your soul in the form of those sacred stories, turn your eyes to the promises. Read the promises God gives us in the Prophets, yes, but also, recall the hopefulness you once had. Encourage each other through the tears, telling yourselves and one another that yes, now is a time for weeping and lament and even rage – but the day IS COMING, says the God-Who-Is-Love, when peace, tenderness, compassion, merciful justice, reconciliation, and even Love will be the Way of the World.

Now... look to the horizon.

Peer into the darkness.

Keep Vigil with me... and watch...

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