

The Great Vigil of Easter

Saturday April 10, 2004

Let us hear the record of God's saving deeds in history, how he saved his people in ages past; let us pray that our God will bring each of us to the fullness of redemption.

The story of Creation

Genesis 1:1-2:2

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights — the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night — and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

Creation

Years ago, I was wandering around the Pier One at the South Street Seaport in NYC. I came to a small stall and stepped just inside the entryway to get out of the hurried flow of other shoppers and lookers. There I stopped and stared in wonder and amused amazement. In front of and all around me was a riot of color and forms. Nothing moved and yet everything moved.

Here a great bright green egg so shiny it seemed wet — there a deep rich royal blue egg larger than the green one — over there a bright vibrant red egg — in the corner, a yellow egg — so yellow it pulsed. From each of the eggs the sculptor had created masses of things that crept and crawled and pulled their way out of large cracks sculpted in the eggs.

From the green egg there emerged butterflies of all descriptions — monarchs, swallowtails, butterflies that had never been seen except in the mind's eye of the creator. They emerged and then

appeared to rest on the outside surface of the egg —their brilliant wings gently seeming to flutter although they were as stationary as anything could be.

From the rich blue egg came the head and long yellow spotted neck of a giraffe. A tiger rested on its side near the edge of eggs crack. A snake coiled on the outside and a magnificent Arabian horse's head peered up from the inside of this shiny blue Noah's Ark of an egg.

From the red egg a wild variety of pansies and daisies and orchids tumbled helter skelter in a cacophony of color and form. Exotic blooms next to wood violets next to roses.

Creation interpreted by an artist.

God created —a wild and unruly jumble of colors, shapes, and sizes —things that crawl — things that fly —things that roar —things that purr —things that talk and laugh and cry —things that kill and things that are killed —things grotesque like the hippopotamus —things strange like the platypus —things so beautiful and ethereal they take your breath away —things silly like the ferret —things with scales and things with fins —things with wings and little blind things that run through the soil —things and things and things and more things —God created.

Creation interpreted by The Artist.

As every artist knows —whether it's words or paint, chisels or fingers, clay or fabric or pencil —musical notes or pastels —a piece of paper, a piece of charcoal —metal or glass or wood —a child —when you create something you give to your creation something of yourself. You, the artist are not diminished by this giving. To the contrary —you —the artist —you are changed —made richer—fuller —somehow enhanced by this act of creation. Each brush stroke, each new color combination, every new thought put into words, reveals a different part of the artist creator.

God, the consummate artist, created —and into each and every one of us —into each creeping crawling furry purring creation a bit of God the artist, was placed. And with every finned and scaled and feathered thing that was created, more of God was revealed. With every tail that twitched and every throat that howled —with each and every new creation a different facet of God was made manifest.

That artist whose work I saw at the Seaport that day —he understood Creation —the tumbling falling chaotic heaps and piles of Creation that just keeps on coming out of those eggs.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be...’”

And there was. And it was all good —the sun and moon, the night and day, the water, the dry land, the stars and the plants, the birds and fish, the cattle and the snakes and the lions and tigers, the horses and the pigs. And it was good.

“And God said, ‘Let us make humankind IN OUR IMAGE, ACCORDING TO OUR LIKENESS.’” In the image of God **we** were created. “And God saw everything...and indeed it was very good.”

In the image of God we were created and it was very good. In the image of God we are still being created. And it is still good.

Creation continues. God continues the work begun —in us and through us —God creates — and we create —as God had given us eyes to see and ears to hear — fingers to mold and shape and write —minds to understand and speak.

In this —creation —is love.

Donna Devlin

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac Genesis 22:1-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of

the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea

Exodus 14:10-15:1

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers." The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

The Exodus

Your back is to the wall, you've run as far as you can go; you've run out of options. Whether the pursuer is another person, or even depression, mounting bills, unemployment, or even shame or guilt, there you are, alone and desperate. You know that the only out is to go through — but how? You'd give anything for a rescuer, a savior.

The Israelites know this feeling well. Walking, perhaps running, from all they had known, they set out for a new land, a new life. Before they could even get used to the notion of being free, they were pursued, and found themselves trapped beside the Red Sea. As panic set in, they forgot all the

deeds of power that they had seen in Egypt, and even forgot who traveled with them in pillar of cloud and fire. What to do now?

Go forward, says the Lord.

Surely if any people were in need of saving at that time, it was the Israelites —and God did not disappoint. God parted the waters of the sea, and forward the Israelites went. They passed through the water, which formed walls on their right and on their left. And when they were through, God returned the waters to their normal place, drowning the pursuing Egyptians. What looked like an impossible barrier — the sea — turned out to be the means of their salvation. Now safe on the other side, with their enemy vanquished, a future of freedom lay before them.

In our spiritual lives, we too face a very real enemy — the enemy of sin. “My sin is ever before me,” says the Psalmist — and indeed it is, standing in front of us like an accuser, a pursuer. We are trapped, with no way out. We are a people in need of a savior.

Like the Israelites of old, we have one. And like the Israelites, our safe passage lies through the water —the water of baptism. On the other side of this symbolic water lies our Promised Land, brimming with freedom from the power of sin, from fear, from death.

Tonight, as Jeremy and Braden take that journey, we will remember our own journey as well. We will remember that the walls which once seemed to trap us no longer exist, and that we do not face our accuser alone, but with Christ at our side. No matter what form our pursuer takes — illness, shame, even death — we are never alone, never forgotten. Out of his great love, Christ takes our hand and leads us through —forward, into the arms of God.

Debbie Cook

The valley of dry bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "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." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ' Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.

The Valley of the Dry Bones

God has taken Ezekiel and set him down in a valley - a valley strewn with dry and lifeless bones. His question to the prophet is, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel's reply is that only He, the Lord, can answer that question. But I think that we, ourselves, know the answer to the question put forth by the Lord, our God.

The scripture says that these bones were scattered all over the plain —shattered pieces of a people without hope left to dry up in the sun. When Ezekiel does as the Lord commands, the bones come together and attach themselves with tendons and flesh —each piece coming together in perfect order.

How many times have we ourselves felt stranded, alone and lifeless —left out in the desert? How many times have we felt lost and without hope just as these remnants of the people of Israel?

Many of us have had things happen in our lives which seem to shatter our soul and scatter us through that desert where Ezekiel stood.

God issues this challenge to Ezekiel - to declare His will to the bones—for this remnant of humanity to hear the word of the Lord. In return for listening, the Lord offers them life once more. He offers to them the breath of life—the hope of their return from their graves—their resurrection. Is this not the promise that has been made to us today? We need only listen to the scripture we hear each Sunday or read in the silence of our rooms to hear the promise that Jesus holds out to us. Each time we open ourselves up to the word of God, another piece—another bone—is put back into place. If we listen carefully, we can hear the quiet voice of God guiding us along our path out of that desert valley. We need only open our hearts to receive the breath of life that He has offered to us.

This breath of life comes to us in many forms. Some of them unmistakable like the wind—coming in the form of healing or in the realization that we are not alone and are loved unconditionally. It may take the form of a person bold enough to step forward and share their faith journey with us when we are in that place that can only be compared with the valley of dry bones. Other times it is less recognizable like a soft spring breeze—showing up in the smile of a child, a walk in the sunshine, the unexplainable peace found in silence, or a comforting hand placed upon our backs at just the right moment in time.. New life and hope are breathed into us through every one of these experiences.

As Christians, we await the promise in the glory of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday. We need to remember that we, ourselves, are offered our own resurrection and new life each and every day through His sacrifice and His grace. He waits for each one of us with outstretched arms offering an embrace. The Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and asks us to believe. The only thing we need to do to receive this gift of life is to take that deep breath and say, "Yes."

Lisa Hoffman