

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
Easter Vigil – April 3, 2010
Exodus 14:10-15:1; Isaiah 55:1-11; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Zephaniah 3:12-20
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All during Holy Week, from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we have been remembering – calling to mind and heart the last events in the life of Jesus. Remembering is a formative activity; it shapes us. As disciples of Jesus the remembering we do during Holy Week helps us focus on important characteristics of our Lord – his willingness to do the will of God in spite of the consequences to himself, his non-retaliation when betrayed and when he was the victim of violence, his humility, and the love he bore for his friends. The last days of Jesus' life can instruct us, inspire us, and shape us.

The Great Vigil of Easter is also about remembering, but the scope is much wider. Tonight we have the opportunity to begin at creation and end with the glorious resurrection of Christ. Tonight we remember the story of redemption – what has already happened, what is happening now, and what, by faith, we expect to happen. God's plan of salvation. Our hope.

Our first reading from the book of Exodus is the account of God's mighty action in delivering the Hebrew people from the Egyptians who enslaved them. Through the leadership of Moses God broke into history and delivered God's oppressed people. As we remember the ancient event of the exodus we join with countless other people of faith in affirming God's saving action in the lives of human beings. Who can tell how many people in what varied situations of oppression have derived strength and hope from this biblical account of God's help?

Tonight we have also heard the words of three prophets – Isaiah, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel. Each of these men conveys God’s promises to those who seek and love God. Each uses different images to describe the wondrous gifts of God. Which of the images best conveys God’s promises to you?

Isaiah speaks to those who are hungry and thirsty. They are invited to “buy” wine and milk without money, to delight in eating rich food. The people who have turned away from God are invited to repent so that they may receive mercy and forgiveness from the God whose pardon is abundant.

God invites God’s people into an everlasting covenant. The invitation comes with a reminder that we cannot comprehend God’s actions: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). Thank God!

The invitation into covenant with God also comes with God’s guarantee: the divine word will be effective. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

The prophet Zephaniah also offers images of God’s promises to God’s faithful people. They “will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid” (Zephaniah 3:13b). God will turn away the people’s enemies and remain with them, a strong warrior in their midst. God says, “I will save the lame and gather the outcast, . . . I will bring you

home, at the time when I gather you” (Zephaniah 3:19b, 20). God promises peace, protection, and homecoming.

Ezekiel wrote in Babylon during the Babylonian exile, so his message about God’s promise of homecoming was especially important to his fellow exiled Israelites. God promises: “I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.... Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors” (Ezekiel 36:24, 28). God promises exactly what God’s exiled people desire.

But returning to the land is not enough. Being restored is not enough. God’s people need cleansing, renewal, and transformation. God promises all this as well. “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” (Ezekiel 36:25-26). This last image may sound familiar to those of you who have heard me preach before. It is one of my favorite biblical images of God’s promise to those who seek and love God.

About five years ago, when I was preparing for my ordination to the priesthood, I sent invitations to my friends. The guest list was a varied assortment of people I had known at different times and contexts in my life. There were clergy, faithful and active lay people in the Episcopal Church and other churches, agnostics, and a couple of “devout” atheists. Not everyone could attend the ceremony. Not everyone wanted to. But my friends supported me in what they recognized to be a very meaningful and joyous occasion in my life.

One friend who was not able to come to my ordination sent me a package. There was a lovely note attached to a small wrapped gift. I eagerly opened this gift – a malachite paper weight in the shape of a heart. And I said aloud, “But I don’t want a heart of stone!” My friend didn’t know the biblical image, so she couldn’t have anticipated my objection.

I keep this paperweight to remind me of what God wants and what God promises. I believe that my heart is more flesh than stone, largely because of God’s grace and goodness. But I know that all the stone is not yet gone, and I know that there is always the danger of flesh becoming stone. Parts of my heart are petrified with fear, hardened with anger, shielded for self-protection. Perhaps you can recognize the places of stone in your heart. The good news is that God has promised to give us new hearts. God has promised to give us new spirits. God has promised to so transform us from within that we may truly be God’s faithful, beloved people.

Tonight we remember God’s saving action in history. Tonight we remember God’s promises, disclosed to us through the prophets: plenty, pardon, peace, protection, an invitation into everlasting covenant with God and a call to come home. Tonight we remember God’s mysterious and gracious work in our souls, work that renews and transforms us into new beings. Tonight, with joy and hope, we celebrate and anticipate the fulfillment of God’s glorious plan for the salvation of the world. Amen.