

## Easter Vigil 2011

I love this service.

I always find the Vigil to be a special treat.

In it we encounter the mystery of God's love  
in a way that no other service of the Church year offers.

Consider: We have just heard the lessons that form the core of our belief system—  
that shape our understanding of God. A God who creates good things, a God who  
makes agreements with humans and honors them when humans don't,  
a God who desires faith over idolatry, a God who delivers slaves.  
A God who finally conquers death forever.

This, our final day of the Triduum, marks one more place of identity for us as Christians;  
it reminds us of who we are and what we are about.

We are first a people of a story, a book,

a tale so outrageous that one can only accept it in faith.

Like the ancients we sit in darkness around a sacred fire  
and tell the stories of our spiritual ancestors. We are shaped by story.

And of each of us it begs the question "by what story are you shaped"?

If you ponder it, your life is shaped by some primal story about yourself.

Who you are and who you become depends largely

on what story you have accepted about yourself and decided to make true.

Sometimes others create that story and hand it to us for our acceptance or rejection.

Sometimes we live out stories that are others' about us,

without knowing we can edit this story at any time,

add large blocks of copy or remove them.

As Christians, we stake a claim on the story of Jesus as also our story.

It is who we are in the world.

It is embellished and expanded upon by all the stories we just heard.

These are also stories of a people, of a community and not just individuals.

We must feed on these stories as a community,

ferreting out new meanings and new understandings of ourselves as a community.

And allowing them to shape how we approach our common life.

In our leadership we must see them and hold fast to them and claim them

even when it's tough to do so, even if it seems irrational or ridiculous to do so.

Why do I think this so important?

Well, indulge me as I allow someone else to make the argument for me.

I want to turn to the Very Reverend John Donne.

As you may know, Donne was a near contemporary of Shakespeare,  
born just nine years later.

His writing is another example of the rich flowering of English poetry and prose  
that began in Elizabethan time and spilled over into the reign of King James I.

He is probably most widely known for his lyrical love poetry,  
although he wrote sonnets, prayers and meditations as well.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.  
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

And he was also a priest, most famously as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, where he was known as a powerful preacher.

After a very serious, life threatening illness Donne wrote a series of meditations.

One includes these well-known words:

No man is an island, entire of its self;  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main;  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less

As well as if a promontory were,  
As well as if a manor [house] of thy friend's or thine own were;  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind;  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.

For centuries, people have found these words comforting.  
Partly, I think, because we hear in them the assurance that in loss, we are not alone.

But Donne's primary meaning is slightly different, and it is broader.  
Donne is speaking of more than the offering of sympathy or support;  
more even than compassion, given by one individual to another.  
It is the actual integration, the interdependence of humankind that he describes.  
No man or woman is an island, entire of itself.  
No one of us can ever be "entire" or whole on our own.  
We are not independent, self-sufficient.  
We cannot isolate ourselves or claim to be unaffected by what affects others.  
Or to put it another way, our individual stories are but part of a larger story.

Donne would say that the phrase, "There, but for the grace of God, go I"  
is not just bad theology, it is meaningless nonsense.  
By God's grace, there go I.  
No matter whom it is I look upon or what their situation may be,  
by God's grace, there go I.  
It is not just that I care what happens to others;  
what happens to others happens to me.  
As Donne says, Europe is affected, diminished when any piece is washed into the sea,  
whether it is a meaningless forgotten clod of mud, or the great pillar of Gibraltar.  
Every loss directly affects the whole.  
None of us can ever be "entire" without one another.

Listen to some less well-known words that come earlier on in the same meditation.

The Church is catholic, universal,  
So are all her actions.  
All that she does belongs to all.

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When she baptizes a child,  
That action concerns me;  
For that child is thereby connected to that head  
Which is my head too  
And engrafted into that body  
Whereof I am a member.  
All mankind is of one author and is one volume.

We celebrate a baptism this night,  
sharing our common story and our common life with June, engrafting her into the Body,  
now sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own for ever.  
Other churches are also holding baptisms tonight, and those baptisms also concern us.  
Each of them around the world  
enriches the household of God in which we live and dwell.  
Their joy and hope and renewal are our joy and hope and renewal.  
No one is an island.  
Every baptism grafts new life into the Body of which we are a part.  
Every baptism in the world this night brings new life to me.  
Oh, June, beloved child of God, see what an important part of the story you are!  
We will watch and pray in hopes that you will come  
to accept this identity as your own and make it true.  
And so we pray for all your brothers and sisters this night.

This Easter vigil, probably more than any other service of the church,  
unites Christians across all time and space,  
draws together each and every child of God  
as we are all of us swept through the funnel of this night into the Easter dawn.  
This is not "our" Paschal candle that has been lit this evening... that burns in our midst.  
This candle is not one candle, entire of itself. This is the light of Christ.  
The fullness of the Light of Christ that shines to enlighten and lead  
all Christians across all time and space.  
This is not one candle that burns in one building on one night.  
The light of Christ is not limited or dimmed by any boundary of century  
or language or denominational doctrine.  
This candle is the light of Christ.

Therefore, never send to know for whom this candle burns. It burns for thee.

Whenever a baptismal candle is lit any day in any part of the world,  
that candle burns for thee.  
The promise and forgiveness and inclusion of that baptism are for you.

On every occasion when a Paschal candle somewhere  
leads a body into the church for burial, that candle burns for thee.  
It bears a light that no death can diminish,  
given to us to lead all of us through the darkest places of human endurance  
always closer to God.  
Every time it is lit, it brings light to our lives.

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Whenever the light of Christ brings mercy and love into the world,  
that light burns for thee.

Each of us is made holier every time a human hand anywhere  
reaches out to another in love and caring.

The light of that love burns in our hearts.

Whenever a flicker of hope rises miraculously up out of sorrow or despair,  
that same flicker is kindled in our hearts.

Wherever a spark of creativity brings new beauty into the world,  
that spark dances into our souls.

Every single act of Christian charity and kindness that brings light into the world,  
brings light into our world.

Every time the light of Christ shines, by God's grace, it shines for us.

It doesn't matter if we see it or even know about it,  
every time the Light of Christ is lit, it brings light to us.

It affects us.

Think of the power and breadth of that light, that marvelous and holy flame.

The Light of Christ.

Do not send to ask for whom this candle burns. It burns for thee.