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Easter Vigil

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Death and Resurrection that is Ours in Holy Baptism”

Tomorrow we will break forth in great joy and celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead. **Tonight**, we take a moment to enjoy the calm before the storm, so to speak. To think and meditate, just a bit, on the significance of this night, in the stillness of the night.

Tomorrow we will go with the women to the empty tomb and hear that wonderful story again. **Tonight**, we consider the resurrection of our Lord through *Old Testament* eyes.

Tomorrow we will feast on our Lord’s body and blood in Holy Communion, receiving that which He gave for us, and is still giving to us. **Tonight**, we remember and focus on Holy Baptism, when our Lord Jesus first came to us through water and the word; when He made His resurrection our resurrection!

And so consider the three readings we heard this evening from the Old Testament. They tell us much about our God, and help us to understand what God has done for us and gives to us in Holy Baptism. First we heard the story of Abraham and Isaac, a story which we know well. It is the story of when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, the child of the promise! But how God provided a ram as a substitute to be slain in his place, giving us a picture of Jesus, the Lamb of God who was sacrificed on the cross in *our* place. And Abraham named that place, appropriately, “***The Lord will provide.***” . . .

But there is something else about this story – something else to consider, that gives us a picture of Holy Baptism – and that is that in providing a substitute for Isaac, Abraham, in a sense, *received his son back from the dead*. For in Abraham’s heart, Isaac was as good as dead even before the knife plunged into his flesh – He had it in his mind to accomplish the deed. Abraham trusted that God could bring his son back from the dead, to fulfill His promise, if that’s what it took. And God did, giving Isaac back to Abraham, in a sense, from the dead.

And that is a picture of what God does in Holy Baptism. What many see is just a nice little ceremony with a little bit of water splashed here and there. But what is happening here is death. For here in these waters, Paul says, we are *actually* joined with Christ in

His death. Therefore, here in these waters we actually die – not physically, but we die to sin with Christ. We die to relying on ourselves, to relying on what we can do, to relying on our offspring. . . . But then, like Isaac, God brings us back from death. Having drowned the old, sinful man in us, God then raises us from the dead with His Son, and gives us a new life to live. And not just any life, and not just the same old life we started with, but a new life that will never end! A new life lived by faith in our Saviour and in His promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation. A new life not just as a child of a man and a woman, but as a child of God. In the waters of Holy Baptism, Christ’s resurrection is made our resurrection to a new life. And so here truly, for you and me, this is the place where ***“The Lord will provide.”***

And so these are waters which both kill and give life, which is also what we heard in the second reading, about the rescue of Israel through the Red Sea, another story you know well. There, God used water to save His people as they passed through it, but there He also used water to destroy His enemies, as they drowned in it. . . . And so too in Holy Baptism. This is a water that both kills and gives life – for we are saved as we pass through these waters *in Christ*, but our enemies are destroyed and drowned in the water *without Christ*. As Luther wrote in response to the question, *“What benefits does Baptism give? It works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.”*

The problem is, that’s all so easy to forget! Sometimes its hard to believe the protection and salvation and rescue that Baptism gives us, especially when we, like Israel, look over our shoulders and see Pharaoh and his horsemen charging up hard behind us! When we see all the evil and trouble in this world, pressing us hard on every side, and it seems that there is no way out. The evil and wicked are so many and so strong, and we are so few and so weak. . . . And doubts and fears arise.

But at just such a time, Moses said something very significant to the people: ***“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will work 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 be silent.”*** What an amazing statement! ***“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”*** That statement is just as true for you and I and the church today as it was for the children of Israel back then. For the Lord fights for us, in the water. Our baptism is not just an historical moment, but an *ongoing reality*. It is our Lord’s powerful means to both save and to destroy; to rescue and deliver us from the hands of our enemies; to make Christ’s resurrection, our resurrection. . . . And in His capable hands, it does both perfectly. So we need not fear, no matter what we see around us, or what *seems to be* around us. We need only return to our baptism in repentance and faith, for the Lord is faithful to His promises. And no matter what we see, or what seems

to be, *“we have only to be silent. . . . The Lord is fighting for us.”*

And then finally from Ezekiel we heard such a wonderful picture of what our baptism has worked in us. Such a wonderful picture from where many would least expect to find it! From an *Old Testament prophet!* That through the water of God, *“we will be washed clean; we will be given a new heart – our stony, hard hearts of sin will be replaced with hearts of flesh; we will have a new spirit within us; and we shall be His people, and He will be our God.”* . . . And Holy Baptism, empowered by Jesus’ death and resurrection, does exactly that! Because of this night of the resurrection, everything is different; everything has been changed. The old is gone; the new has come. Death has been defeated, and life reigns triumphant. When the ladies go to the tomb in the morning, it will be empty, as one day our tombs will be empty. That is the promise in which we live; that is the life that we now live. It is as we sang,

**Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain
Of triumphant gladness!
God has brought His Israel
Into joy from sadness. (LW #141)**

And we, the Church, the new Israel of God, rejoice. And not just tonight and tomorrow, but everyday. For the new life of resurrection provided for us this night. For the new life that Christ has given to us in Holy Baptism, rescuing us through water and His Word. For His promise of eternal life, which is a life which lies not just in the future, but is already the life that we now live everyday. And while that life may not look very glorious, or very victorious, now, what is now hidden will one day be made known. For now, we trust that which we cannot see, and believe in what has been made known to us.

Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain . . . for the day of resurrection is here!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.