

23 April 2011
The Great Vigil of Easter

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“How Holy is This Night”

How holy is this night. Yes, holy, for our Lord has made it holy. He has set it apart for His special work. Tonight, the captives are released, the sinners are forgiven, and the dead are given life. Tonight, man is reconciled to God in Christ.

And so tonight is a night of rest, calmness.

Thursday was a night of wonder and awe, as we remembered our Lord's giving us His Supper, and then with the stripping of the altar, remembered Him giving Himself over to death.

Friday was a day of wonder and sadness and solemn joy - wonder at the love of our Saviour, sadness over our sin, and solemn joy that He would endure the cross for us.

Tomorrow is the day of celebration, the full-throated joy of the resurrection, when our Alleluias will sound forth again. The pinnacle of the entire Christian year.

But tonight, tonight is a night of rest, calmness. The work is done, the atonement accomplished. Death has done its worst. Tomorrow it will be defeated, once and for all.

And so tonight we gather in quiet anticipation, to think, to reflect, to meditate, on the significance of all that we have remembered this week, in the stillness of the night. We gather in vigil - not to remember the dead, but as the wise virgins awaiting their Bridegroom (Matt 25:1-13).

As we gather this night, we will take our place with the Old Testament believers. We will hear as they heard, of the work of Christ in, with, and under history. And in their stories, we will realize that we learn of Christ, and we will marvel at His work for us.

First we will hear of creation, and know that just as our Lord created all things, so tonight through His death and resurrection, He is re-creating all things, and making all things new. The light that shined forth at creation will shine forth again anew in the resurrection.

Then we will hear of the flood, and know that just as our Lord saved His small church of only eight people through water, so He saves His church today through the water of Holy Baptism, and that His Word and Church are the ark that keeps us safe still today.

We next will hear of Abraham and the almost-sacrificing of his son, Issac. And we will remember that while God stopped father Abraham's hand and spared the life of his son, He laid upon His own Son the sins of us all, and offered Him up on the wood of the cross as our substitute.

The fourth reading is God's rescue of His people at the Red Sea when the Egyptians were pursuing them, and we will see in that story how through the water of Baptism God rescues us from the enemies of sin, death, and the devil that are pursuing us and seek to take us captive.

Then we will hear from the prophet Isaiah - not a story, but a promise, of how the Lord has promised to provide for His people, food and drink that truly satisfy and which He will provide for us forever.

Next we hear from the prophet Jonah - He who spent three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, pointing us to the three days and three nights our Lord would spend in the belly of the earth. But when Jonah was released, his preaching changed the whole city of Nineveh. So too when our Saviour rose from the dead, the preaching of His triumph has changed the world.

And then finally, as every year, we hear the story of the three men in the fiery furnace, and know that just as the Son of God saved those youths from the flames of death and hell, so too has He saved us from those very flames. In Him, we have nothing to fear. In Him, we are safe.

And all this is true for as we will remember after the readings, we are baptized. And through baptism, joined to Christ Jesus in His death and resurrection, which means that all that He did and all that He has is yours. His triumph, your triumph. His life, your life. His peace, your peace.

And so tonight we sit in peace, by candlelight, for the news of the resurrection is but a small, flickering light as we are immersed in the mystery of the crucified and risen Lamb, who laid down His life for us. *At sunrise, all the world will know.* But tonight, we gather in anticipation. To hear the Word. For in this most holy night our Saviour, Christ the Lord, broke the power of death and by His resurrection brought life and salvation to all creation.

Let us praise the Lord, for He truly keeps His Word. The sun of righteousness has dawned upon us who have sat in darkness and in the shadow of death.

In Jesus' Name. AMEN