

Easter Vigil 2010

With what seems like a surprisingly quick return, the Great Vigil of Easter has arrived, and with it, one of the more exotic services in this church. I'm not sure what other people are doing on this rather balmy Easter Eve – pressing their new Easter outfits, perhaps, or doing last-minute cleaning for tomorrow's guests, or already basting the Easter ham – but we're gathered here in what suddenly seems a rather large church for such a small congregation to be the first to welcome the day of Jesus' resurrection.

Now being first at the vigil isn't at all like being first to get tickets to rock concerts down at the Q or the latest gizmo from Apple or even, as we did in a former day, the latest installment of our generation's great epic, Harry Potter.

We're not camped out on the sidewalk with our sleeping bags and packed meals waiting to rush inside at the first flicker of fluorescent light or the first sound of a key turning in a lock.

We didn't rush in this evening – there was no need to. We didn't have to worry about getting a seat – there was no crowd. We didn't have to hunt for a parking place – the lot had plenty that were open.

Those of us who wait to be the first to welcome Easter do things differently than those who wait to be first for other things, and that's just as it should be. Christians are supposed to do things differently; I've told you that many times. And here we are – doing it.

The vigil in this church, and in many churches, is a small, gentle, subdued affair, the intimate prelude to the glorious mash of tomorrow's breakfast and service. This is the service for the hard-core among us, those who prefer their Midwestern Protestant Christianity with a dash of drama and flair. This service is to the liturgical year in our church what Tobasco sauce is to scrambled eggs. We could certainly get by without it, but our worship life is infinitely richer with it.

This service is also for those who don't mind that a certain amount of their worship goes unexplained. There are smells – the new fire of Easter that Brother Dave Holtz regularly kindles for us out in the Holy Hibachi – there are bells that peal to announce our Death and Resurrection in Jesus Christ when we read the Epistle, there is movement, there is water, there is bread, there is juice, there are flowers, and there are lots of readings from Scripture – lots and lots of Scripture.

Now for some folks, I realize, hearing the Bible read in church is the signal for them to switch off their attention and discretely switch on some electronic device that doesn't twitter or beep so that they can check their messages. For these folks, the Bible is boring and vaguely unintelligible and, truth be told, largely a waste of their time.

But for those of us who attend this service, with its multiple readings that span the whole story of salvation, all those readings help to remind us how rich the tradition is that gives rise to Christianity in general and to this service in particular.

Those readings direct us to the center of the Christian faith – the story of our redemption through Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from that death – and they help to provide the vast context in which that great drama of redemption continues to take place.

This is the service when we try to get the whole story into the frame at once – the Spirit of God hovering over creation, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Israelites, Isaiah and the exiles in Babylon, Jesus and Paul and the Roman Christians and us – all of us in this great big tent called Christianity – including many of us who could not by any stretch be considered Christian – and all of it in one service.

So perhaps you can see why the Vigil takes a bit longer than many services – there's a lot of theological ground to cover – but I hope you can also see why it's worth the wait. Through darkness and light, movement and silence, music and prayer, Word and Sacrament, we take the occasion of this unusual and lovely service to open ourselves up to hear what our still-speaking God may have to say.

This is the vigil, the Easter vigil, and there's a reason we call it great.