

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Easter Vigil; 15 April 2017  
Epiphany Seattle

*In nomine...*

מָה נִשְׁתַּנָּה – What is different?

This week our Jewish sisters and brothers have been celebrating Passover. The central rite of Passover is a meal, commonly called a seder because it is a particular meal with a particular practice surrounding it. The central activity of this meal calls for the youngest child at the table who is capable of doing it to ask, “What is different?” Why are we doing things differently this night than every other night? The vegetables are bitter, the sauces are bitter, and instead of yummy challah, with beer and bourbon for the adults, we’re eating this tasteless, burnt matzah. What’s going on?

The meal is designed to call forth this question from the children, because the purpose of the Passover meal is to answer with a story. The story told at the Passover Seder begins like this: “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the L-rd, our G-d, took us out from there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm.” This is *the* ancient story: the story of God’s gracious love shown to God’s people.

What’s fascinating and important about the story told at the celebration of Passover is that it doesn’t begin with “Once upon a time...” There’s no “Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away...” Instead what do our Jewish neighbors say even today? “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” We were slaves! In other words, this is *our* story, not just that of our ancestors. This is who *we* are, this is what *we* have experienced, and this is *our* God who took *us* from a place of affliction with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. What one generation teaches the next is that you have been given an identity that transcends all external appearances!

Identity springs from the stories by which we know ourselves.

We all have lots of different stories we tell about ourselves. Some of those stories we learned from others and the stories they tell about us. Our parents, our siblings, our friends (whether they be the “right crowd” or the “wrong crowd”) all tell stories about who we are.

Diplomas hanging on our walls, performance reviews we receive at work, medals, uniforms, sobriety coins and medical diagnoses: all these tell stories about who we are.

We build our own stories around our bank accounts, our vocations, or the ups and downs of our children's lives.

Some stories have to do with goals accomplished, dreams achieved. Others reflect expectations that have gone unmet or spectacular mistakes we have made.

Some stories are good and we are proud of them. Some stories are less than flattering, and we are often ashamed of them. There are innumerable stories surrounding each of our lives, and often the key to living well lies in choosing which stories are worth paying attention to.

At the Passover Seder, year by year, Jewish children are taught which stories are foundational to their identity. "We were slaves, and God rescued us."

Our Christian practice of Passover, known as Easter, has exactly the same purpose: to re-tell the stories that are foundational to our identity. We were slaves, lost, directionless, uncaring, violent, exploitative, unloving, self-concerned. Sinners. Whatever words you want to use to describe it. And God rescued us.

God not only rescued us, God pursued us, chased us, wooed us. God surrendered those things about being God that we would most like to enjoy: power, respect, adoration. Because God wanted to draw near to us, God traded in God's advantages in order to be human. This meant becoming vulnerable to weakness, familiarity, and abuse. And when experiencing these evils that come to every human life, God did not give up on God's human quest. Because in the economy of the Kingdom of God, relationship is primary. By yielding those things that we mistakenly value, God invited us to join God in a way of living that, in the end, truly leads to a kind of life that is eternal in its quality as well as its quantity.

This is the story of Easter, of Passover. It is a way that leads through the floods of chaos, carrying us safely in the lifeboat of the church, sustained by the covenant of God which is symbolized in the rainbow. It is a way that leads us through the Red Sea, safely stepping where we never thought we could go, as a pillar of cloud stands between us and those who would

harm us. It is a path which offers us something money cannot buy, bread and wine without price, security in the sure promises of God. It is a way which promises to us, as we reflect on our own failings and our own disappointments, a new heart and a new spirit. God displaces the stories which harden and calcify our hearts: stories of disappointment, scarcity, and loneliness. In their place God gives us a heart of flesh, filled with stories of thanksgiving, abundance, and relationship.

Tonight, however, is even more special than that. We're here not only to tell a story to each other. We're here tonight to speak that story into four more lives who are being brought to us for baptism. Four more lives are being committed to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, the story of God's love for us, the story of God's love for them. One adult has come forward to say that he wants this story to be the core, foundational, defining story of his life. And the parents and godparents of three children have come to recommit *themselves* to this story, so that they might then claim that story for *their* children. Tonight as we celebrate the baptism of these candidates, we will be invited to renew our own commitment to a life shaped by this story where the fundamental reality is God's love for us. Old stories, death-dealing stories, are collapsing in upon themselves and being traded in. The oldest story, that of God's love and the eternal dynamic of the Holy Trinity, are being grasped onto instead.

Look around you tonight. What is different about tonight? Why do we bear candles instead of using those new-fangled *electric* lights? Why is the font up in the chancel? Why did we read so *many* lessons? (It was only four!) Why are we meeting late on a Saturday night instead of at a more civilized hour on Sunday morning?

It's because we have a story to tell. A story to remember. We have a story to write in the lives of four young people who are being presented for baptism. God is at work in this place. Death, sin, brokenness, sadness, alienation, disappointment, despair: these things are temporary, passing, and ultimately of little consequence. Because one story makes everything different.