

In the name of God, Holy One, Holy Three. Amen.

Wow! What a night! A new fire, those fabulous Old Testament stories, spreading light, a cacophony of bells, the perfume of hundreds of flowers, an angel, an empty tomb, a risen Lord,—the whole story of God’s love affair with humankind laid out, for all our human senses; and baptisms, through which the newest members of our Christian family—Zachary, Dylan, Ethan and Will—find their place in God’s story, and remind us of our place, too. And how, I ask you, am I supposed to preach following all of that?

I think maybe the ones in this whole thing who have it right are the guards at Jesus’ tomb, who in awe and fear, trembled, and then became as still as death. What are my finite, human words compared to this infinite, divine pageantry?

And maybe that is exactly the point—the utter impossibility of words meeting the inexpressible, of the finite meeting the infinite, the creature meeting the Creator, what exists in time meeting the eternal. And yet, it has happened, and it is happening, right here, right now.

In the words of the Exultet, “*this* is the night.” This is the night when earth and heaven are joined. All of those moments when earth and heaven have touched, past, present and future are brought into the present with us, for us to see, hear, taste, touch and smell.. Right now, in this moment. Humanity is reconciled to God.

This is the night when, opposites touch, and we are brought face to face with God. Like matter and antimatter brought together, the old creation is annihilated and something entirely new springs forth.

Dark and light touch one another. The new fire is kindled out of Lenten darkness. The presence of God lights up the Egyptian night in pillar and cloud as the Israelites flee Pharaoh’s army. And light splits the darkness of the tomb when the stone is rolled away and the Marys find it empty. We share the place where their disbelief meets belief this night, and for this moment we, too, dare to believe that the light of Christ can touch the darkest places of our lives.

Fear and hope touch one another. Zephaniah whispers God’s tender words to a people beset by an occupying army, promising that disaster will be removed from them, that they shall lie in pastures where they shall never again be made afraid. We share the place where Israel’s disbelief meets belief this night, and for this moment, we, too, dare to believe, that whatever enemy forces occupy our lives right now, God will, in the end, turn them away, provide us a refuge, and gather us home.

Fire and water touch one another. The new fire is kindled, the paschal candle catches the flame. The sea opens, and the people of God pass through safely to the other side. With Zachary, Dylan, Ethan and Will, we enter those dangerous baptismal waters and we hear the waves close behind us upon whatever foes pursue us. We share the place where the Israelites’ disbelief meets belief this night, and for this moment we, too, dare to believe

that the fire of that new paschal candle will lead us through whatever dangers lie along our path.

Fast and feast touch one another. Our Lenten discipline of self-denial meets the feast of the world's redemption—Jesus' body and blood given for the life of the world—We share the place where the hungry multitude's disbelief meets belief this night, and for this moment we, too, dare to believe that as people come from north and south and east and west to share in God's banquet they will find welcome, and that there is enough for us all, and to spare.

Sin and salvation meet together. Ezekiel speaks of uncleanness washed clean, hearts of stone replaced by hearts of flesh, and the indwelling of God's Spirit. Paul echoes the refrain. Sharing in Christ's crucifixion and death, through our baptism, our body of sin has been destroyed, and we receive newness of life. We share the place where the first Christians disbelief meets belief this night, and for this moment, we, too, dare to believe that Christ has been raised from the dead, the power of death has been broken, and sin no longer holds us captive.

Death and life meet together. Pharaoh's army has drowned, idols lie smashed in the rubble of the stone that has encased rebellious hearts, old selves are crucified. In the dawn of that first Easter morning, two women disciples approach a tomb, expecting a dead body, and the end of a promise. Instead they find a living Lord, and the beginning of ministry and mission. We share the place where the disciple's disbelief meets belief this night, and for this moment, we too, dare to believe that Christ has been raised as he said, and that he goes before us, into the world. On this night, and in countless moments that now spread out before us, lit by the glow of the Paschal fire, we will see him, as earth and heaven meet. Now, and now, and now.

Yes, on this night when water and fire, captivity and freedom, slave and child, loud drama and whispered tenderness, fasting and feasting, sin and salvation, mourning and joy, death and life have met together, we stand, for a moment, as still as those Roman guards, struck dumb by the clash of opposites. And for a moment—and maybe just for a moment—we have witnessed the meeting of heaven and earth. We have passed through the waters of baptism, and we have glimpsed a new order, that place where things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and all things are being brought to their perfection by the one through whom all things were made.

How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and we are reconciled to God. Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

Preached by the Rev. Nancy B. Dilliplane at Christ Church, Rockville Maryland on the Easter Vigil, April 7, 2007