

**The Great Vigil of Easter
April 11, 2009
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson**

"Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation." Amen. (Ps. 111:1)

This is indeed a glorious evening, and one in which to give thanks. It's the time of triumph of light over darkness, of life over death. Christ, the light of the world, has made all things new. Our readings have helped us see the sweep of God's saving grace throughout the history of the world.

In the beginning, darkness covers the face of the deep. There is no existence except darkness. Then God creates light and sees that it is good. Then God creates life and sees that it too is good. These two themes, light and life, are repeated and expanded throughout the Bible. For in the beginning, God also creates humankind in God's image, and the Bible is the account of humanity's relationship with the Almighty, of seeking to overcome darkness and death with light and life.

The Exodus is the central saving act of the Old Testament. Here God's people are saved from darkness and death. In fear the Israelites call out to God as they camp by the Red Sea at night. The Lord hears them and the angel of God, the

pillar of cloud stands between the Israelites and the Egyptian army. “And so the cloud was there with darkness, and it lit up the night,” [Ex. 14:20]. The light of God is with them. And the next morning, the saving grace of the Lord smashes Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea allowing the Israelites to escape into freedom and life.

The Resurrection of Christ is the saving act of the New Testament. When Jesus rises victorious from the dead, life overcomes death. The new light of Christ overcomes the darkness, breaking into the world of sin and death. The tomb is empty and the women run to share the good news with “fear and great joy.” Fear because the balance of the universe has shifted and what isn't supposed to happen, does. And joy for the very same reason.

At our baptism, these stories are lived out. We become participants in God's saving grace as it has been experienced throughout history.

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that we, “who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death,” and therefore we “will be united with him in a resurrection like his,” [Rom. 6:3,5]. For “if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him,” [Rom 6:8]. Baptism is death, death to sin and death, and it gives us new life in Christ. Through our baptism, sin is washed away and grace is given. We participate in God's salvation and enjoy the fruits of

light and life.

In the same way, in the Eucharist, we become actually incorporated into Christ's saving acts. Physically taking the bread and wine makes us "very members incorporate in the mystical body of... Christ." [Prayer Book, p.339]. We are "living members of the Body of" Christ [PB, p.366]. The Eucharist continues what was begun in baptism. Grace is continually granted.

The Easter Vigil is the oldest service in the Christian church. It summarizes all our central beliefs in one holy night. This evening at St. Paul's when we carried in the Paschal Candle, it symbolized the light of Christ entering the darkness of the world. When we partook of that one flame and became many, it symbolized the light of Christ entering the life and heart of each person.

In a few moments we will renew our baptismal vows. Baptism is a celebration of the resurrection of the Lord, and our participation in that victory of life over death.

The receiving of grace in baptism is followed by the receiving of grace at the Eucharist. Baptism and communion are tied together. Communion shows that we are living members of Christ, the Son of God who lived and died and rose again, whose glorious resurrection we too now share.

Throughout the world this evening, from Jerusalem to Japan, from Paris, France to Paris, Texas, Christians are celebrating God's saving grace through Christ, proclaiming the resurrection and the triumph over death, sin and darkness, of light and new life. It truly is a night to give thanks! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!