

Easter Vigil 2016 Sermon

We began this service in darkness, and then lit the Paschal Candle (“Paschal” comes from the word for Passover). The early Christians saw the Paschal Candle as the Christian expression of the Pillar of Fire leading the Israelites safely away from the Egyptian army through the dark of night. We followed that **Candle** through the darkness in the same way that the Israelites followed the pillar of Fire in God’s mighty act of **restoring** them to freedom in the Promised Land. The Great Vigil of Easter is our *Christian* Passover service.

In my sermon on Good Friday night, I suggested that we might see the Exodus event, which is at the core of the Jewish faith, as the central image for our *Christian* understanding of the Paschal Mystery, **our** passing over with Jesus from death to life. Just as the Jewish Passover is about restoration of God’s people from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land, so the Paschal Mystery of Christ is about the **restoration** of God’s people from the slavery of sin into the freedom of Risen Life in Christ.

Earlier, you heard me sing the ancient words of the Exsultet, which is laden with symbols of the Passover and of darkness being vanquished by the Light of Christ. “This is the night,” proclaims that ancient hymn, “when you brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land.” Then, immediately changing from the past tense to the present tense, the hymn continues, “This is the night, when all who believe in Christ **are delivered** from the gloom of sin, and **are restored** to grace and holiness of life.” There’s that word again: “restored.” The hymn continues: “How holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. It **restores** innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. It casts out pride and hatred, and brings **peace** and **concord**. How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are **joined** and man is **reconciled** to God.” **Restores** innocence and joy; *brings peace and concord*; **reconciles** humanity and God, **restoring** us to right relationship with God. That is the central theme of our Christian Passover, the Paschal Mystery, which we enact in this Vigil. Like the **Jewish** Passover, it is a theme of **restoration!**

I’d like us to focus for a minute on one phrase from the Exsultet: “**restores** innocence to the fallen.” It is an obvious reference to the Garden of Eden, where God had originally created humans, male and female in God’s image; creating them *innocent*. But then came what theologians call “The Fall,” when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and **lost** their innocence, being cast out of the Garden (which was the ORIGINAL Promised Land!), consigning their human descendants to exile from that Original Promised Land. According to the Exsultet, the Paschal Mystery **restores** fallen humanity to God’s originally-intended innocence, before the Fall, **undoing** the Fall of Adam, Eve, and all their human progeny, including us! The almighty power of God acting through the

Paschal Mystery – the death and resurrection of Jesus – restores humanity to innocence, to the Garden of Eden, the original promised land, **before** the Fall.

Now, Richard Rohr points out that the root meaning of the word “innocence” is literally “not wounded.” Not wounded! This implies that the Fall of Adam and Eve was a deep wounding. So when the ancient hymn talks about “restoring innocence,” this involves healing a wound. The restoration of humanity to God’s originally-intended state requires healing. As I mentioned in my Good Friday sermon, I find this to be a much more comprehensive way of understanding of what happens in the death and resurrection of Jesus than the most common theory of “penal substitution”, where Jesus’ death on the cross is understood as Jesus substituting himself for us and taking the punishment we deserve. I also find the idea of the Paschal Mystery as an act of restoration more consonant with the picture of God revealed by Jesus’ life and teaching, especially in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In short, the Fall of humanity is not simply a moral transgression wherein Adam and Eve disobeyed, breaking God’s law. In a far more comprehensive way, the Fall was a deep wound. Let me try to explain.

I have already pointed out that the word for “salvation” and the word for “healing” in the New Testament is the same word. But I’d like us to look at another New Testament word: sin. The word for “sin” in the New Testament Greek is “*hamartia*.” In ancient Greek society, the word was used **most** often in Greek tragedies, where it referred to that one fatal error, flaw or wound in an otherwise exemplary protagonist that eventually brings about his undoing, and often disaster across the board. According to Wikipedia’s article on the word “*hamartia*” as it was most commonly used in the ancient Greek tragedies, “What qualifies as the error or flaw can include an error resulting from ignorance, an error of judgment, a flaw in character, or sin.” This fatal flaw or error is often *unknown* to the protagonist. Oedipus, for example, did not know that the woman he married was his mother. The sin (the flaw, the wound) resulted not from **moral** failure on the part of Oedipus, but simply from not knowing. “Forgive us our sins, known and unknown,” we pray. Sin is not *always* a result of moral failure. Sometimes our tragic flaws and wounds are the result of being raised in an alcoholic family, or being abused as a child, which can sometimes result in the children becoming alcoholics or abusers themselves. (These are the sins that the Old Testament talks about being visited to the third and fourth generation – Ex. 20:5, 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deut. 5:9, etc.). Then there are structural sins – flaws and wounds in whole societies and cultures. Caste systems, sanctioned persecutions of races or religions, economic injustices, cycles of violence and reprisal, and on and on. All can be said to be *hamartia*: flaws, wounds, sins in humanity.

Now, the writers of the New Testament all wrote in Greek, so they were familiar with the way the word *hamartia* was most often used in the Greek language.

They understood that sin was tragedy of **all** stripes and colors: moral transgressions, yes; but also character flaws and personality quirks, societal injustice, accidents (like the tower falling on the 18 Jerusalem worshippers that Jesus mentions), illnesses such as leprosy or mental illness (“demon possession”), etc. All were *hamartia*.

Understanding what Jesus’ death on the cross accomplished as simply his suffering punishment in our place does not address the full extent of *hamartia*, sin, woundedness in all its complex and myriad forms. As I suggested in my Good Friday sermon, I have found it much more helpful to use the “medical interpretation” of the cross that was used by some of the Early Church Fathers, like Augustine. “By his wounds we are *healed*,” Isaiah wrote. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we are metaphorically (though rarely literally, as we will see shortly) restored to our original innocent – unwounded – state *before* the Fall of humanity in Adam and Eve’s act of eating from the tree. This reversal of woundedness comes from healing and restoration, not punishment; it is indeed a process of healing *hamartia*, healing flaw, error, and woundedness.

The ancient Christians were NOT speaking about a *literal* return to **absolute** innocence, of course! That would not be possible – nor, according to many theologians (including Augustine), even desirable. We will still sin, we will still be wounded, and we will still bear the scars of our wounds. Even the Risen Jesus bore the scars of the nails and the spear on his body. St. Paul was restored to wholeness in a powerful way, but that didn’t mean that God took away his thorn in the flesh. Healing and wholeness came to Helen Keller in a powerful way, but that did not restore her physical sight or hearing. In this sense, no one is ever totally “innocent” – unwounded. Nonetheless, participating in the Paschal Mystery of Christ restores us and heals us at the deepest level of our spirit, our mind, our consciousness, our being. We are reconciled with God in Christ, restored to the unity with God that God intended before the Fall.

All of this is just a little bit of, a little slant on, what we mean when we proclaim, “Alleluia! Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us! Therefore let us keep the Feast.”

AMEN