

Rehearsing our Alleluias Easter Vigil 2006

Let's just face it: we Episcopalians are a strange bunch. Or maybe "quirky" is the word I'm looking for. One of our customs is that throughout the Lenten season we avoid saying or singing the word "alleluia." Or at least we try to do so. As in:

Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us;
Therefore let us keep the feast...allelu...oops.

I don't know if there is a very good reason for this practice other than that "we've always done it this way," which as you know in the Episcopal Church is a perfectly acceptable answer. But I remember one time (before Charles was here) that we somehow ended up with the hymn, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence" during Lent. (I honestly can't remember if it was me or the Minister of Music who made the choice but I'm ok with taking the blame.) In any case it's a perfectly lovely hymn and perfectly appropriate to Lent, until you get to that last verse where the six-winged seraph and the cherubim with sleepless eyes are all crying out with ceaseless voice: "alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, Lord most high!"

Now what happened when we got to that verse, as I remember it, was almost comical. It was like all these well-trained Episcopalians starting with the choir just kind of stopped singing, like we thought if we sang that word in Lent we might end up in hell or something. I'm pretty sure many people were blushing...

Now don't mis-hear me; I'm not criticizing the practice of burying alleluias during Lent. In fact, having grown up in a little white Protestant church I am very clear that part of what I love so much about the Episcopal Church is that we take the rhythms of the liturgical year seriously. We do some things differently in different seasons so we can pray in more attentive ways, and I think that's pretty cool. My point, though, is that looking at us from the outside other Christians must think we are a tad "precious" at times, and maybe even a little bit silly.

There is one exception to this notion of not saying or singing alleluia during Lent. And that is in the choir. For weeks now they have been rehearsing on Wednesday nights, on Thursday nights, on Sunday mornings—getting ready for this night and tomorrow morning. If you've never sung in a choir you have no idea how much time these folks have been giving through the course of Lent. And guess what? Their Easter songs include alleluias! So their preparation for Easter, throughout the Lenten season, has been *rehearsing their alleluias*.

Now I hope I'm not just preaching to the choir tonight. But I want to suggest that this metaphor is one for all of us: that the Christian life is about *rehearsing our alleluias*. That is to say, we have to prepare for Easter, so that when it comes our way we will recognize it.

Tonight's liturgy is about as "traditional" as it gets. You can feel it—for goodness sake you can even smell it! And even here at St. Francis (with our relatively low church leanings) this night connects us not only with the early church but with the global communion—especially with the liturgical traditions of the orthodox in the East. There is a mystical dimension, rooted in the mystery of Holy Baptism, where we die with Christ and are raised with him to a new life of grace. You can almost sense what it was like in Rome, or Constantinople, or Antioch when those first Christians came after a time of preparation to be baptized into what was still an underground movement: to claim Jesus as Lord of their lives and of the world in the midst of a decaying global empire.

Tonight's liturgy is as "traditional" as it gets. And yet, strangely, those who have called on the Church to remember the rock from which we have been hewn through liturgical renewal have also sensed that the challenges the Church faces in this time and place are oddly reminiscent of the early Church's experience. We are called not to nominal Christianity but to a deeper and more rooted experience of Christ that forms us and calls us to be light, and leaven, and salt in this time and place. This is why it is such a pastoral challenge for me when someone with almost no connection to the church, and no real desire to be connected, comes to me to ask if they can have the child "done" (baptized) as if baptism were just another thing on some parenting checklist like making sure the immunizations are up to date. I try to explain that baptism isn't "fire insurance"—but something much more central to the life of faith. It's a commitment to a way of life. I feel as if this entire liturgy is about unpacking just what that might look like in our world today.

Some have argued that our culture is increasingly hostile to Christian faith. That is not my experience—and I think there is some exaggeration quite frankly in making that claim. I don't think Christianity is under attack so much as we are trying to figure out how to live in an increasingly pluralistic world. The mosque on Mountain Road is a hard-to-miss example of what that is about right here in Worcester County. But more even than religious pluralism ours is a culture that is for the most part apathetic about and ignorant of religious practices of all kinds.

People like to joke about Christmas and Easter Christians—those who make a semi-annual pilgrimage to church. But the truth is, while there will be some of those here tomorrow morning, most of them will actually be spouses of people who are here far more regularly. Many of our neighbors simply no longer feel any sense of guilt or embarrassment about *The Boston Globe* on Easter morning; it's simply what they know. A colleague of mine told the story recently of celebrating the Eucharist last Easter and a jogger was running by the church when he paused to ask the priest, "hey, what's going on here?" He hadn't a clue. Increasingly this is the world I experience—not one hostile to the Church so much as unaware of it.

Hostile or apathetic, however, the days are gone when we can assume that the language of Christian faith is somehow in the water we drink, like some kind of fluoride additive. Our job, like that of the first century church, is to be missionaries who share the good news with others; sometimes with words.

We Episcopalians are indeed a quirky bunch. But one of our great gifts to the mission of the wider church is that liturgies like the one we celebrate on this holy night keep us grounded in the holy, catholic, and apostolic faith that goes back a lot further than last Tuesday. Tonight we go back even further than the first-century Church to the experiences of the children of Israel. The readings from salvation history that we heard earlier remind us first and foremost that creation is good—that God's intent for the world is blessing. Even when humans miss the mark, even when sin distorts that blessing, it is not abolished. You and I are created in the image of God, and that image is one of goodness and of life. In and through the resurrection God's original blessing is restored, and creation is made new again.

Second, we have been reminded tonight as we again heard the story of the Exodus that God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God not only hears the prayers of those slaves in Egypt but acts on their behalf. The hurling of Pharaoh's army into the Red Sea strikes our ears as unfair. But the claim is that God is not a passive observer of life's injustices. Slavery is an affront to God in all forms, and the only way you keep people enslaved is to lord it over them. The way of the cross has revealed to us the God who stands with the powerless, who leads them to a Promised Land, who

restores blessing. That claim is both political and personal: *God as liberator means that with God all things are possible and that we need no longer live as oppressed or oppressor, but as beloved children of God.*

Third, the promise made to the Babylonian exiles in Ezekiel is of a new day—of a law written not on stone tablets but on human hearts. Which I think is what we who are called to the vocation of parenthood try to do as well. Parenting is about more than teaching our kids the rules. If all we give them are rules then they will be ill-equipped to make it in the world as ethical people. The challenge is to teach them to think; to discern God’s will; to uncover the meaning underneath the rules. I think the new spirit and new hearts being promised to the exiles—and to us—is about relationship, about responding to the love of God by loving neighbor not because we are told we *have* to but because we quite honestly expect to see God in the face of our neighbor.

So there is “Easter” in all of these texts. That is a bold thing to say, and a peculiarly Christian thing to say. I do not mean to say the writers had Jesus in their sights: I don’t think they did. These are not even particularly messianic texts. I don’t mean that all readers of these texts will see Easter in them; and I think it would be the height of arrogance for Christians to tell Jews that is the only way to read them.

But for us gathered here, on this holy night, participating in this ancient liturgy—there is perhaps no other way to talk about them. For us the central metaphor—the lens through which we see the world, as Darrell reminded us again on Thursday night—is this paschal mystery:

Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

So one way to think about this liturgy tonight is that the choir leads all of us in rehearsing our alleluias. The doors are closed—like we are all in the choir room. We are here to sing tonight so that we can leave here and bring that song into the world. So that when a friend is dying, we can find the courage to stand at their bedside and feel all the sadness of grief and loss and still commend them to the God in whom we put our trust. *Alleluia*. So that as we watch our child going through a terrible divorce that we know is hurting our grandchildren, we can muster trust that the future belongs to God and find those ways that we can act as agents of God’s healing love even there. *Alleluia*. So that in a war-torn world as the casualties continue to mount in Iraq we can find ways to be instruments of God’s peace locally and globally by bearing witness to a kingdom where war is studied no more. *Alleluia*.

We are here to rehearse the song of baptism so that we can sing Easter into a Good Friday world. In so doing we sow love where there is hatred, we pardon where there is injury, we choose union over discord, faith over doubt, hope rather than despair. We shine light into the darkness and embody joy where there is sadness. Even at the grave we make our song: *alleluia, alleluia, alleluia*.

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