

Easter Vigil
Carrying the Light of Christ into Creation
by the Rev. Stephanie M. Johnson

The Easter Vigil has always been one of my favorite worship services of the church year, for “on this holy night we are reminded of when Jesus passed over from death to life.” We gather outside the church in the darkness, on the lawn in front of a fire pit, awaiting the lighting of the paschal fire. There the first flames take hold of the kindling, sizzling and blowing, as the darkness of the Lenten season begins to lighten. The Paschal Candle is lit. Processing behind the cantor and the new light of Easter, we slowly go into the church, reminded at three separate stops that we are following “the Light of Christ.”

As we enter the darkened sanctuary, our own small candles are lit to guide us to well-worn pews, pews where for generations the story of the empty tomb and the promise of Resurrection has been spoken. Yes, the beauty of the service moves me as we tell again the story of our creation, our liberation from evil, and our redemption through Jesus Christ.

Our resurrection faith tells us that the light of God shines in the darkness and that the darkness shall not overcome it. The stories of the Easter vigil remind us that God is always with us. The covenant after the flood enacts God’s commitment to humankind and to all Creation, even if humanity drifts away from God’s love. The parting of the seas gives us confidence that God will be with us even if we are frightened and running for our lives. For too many years, I imagined that this retelling of our faith journey was a story only about us, the people of God.

But what if this is also a story about all God’s beloved Creation, a story about all the creatures that were created and that have evolved over eons? What if the faith journey of the Easter Vigil is not only about the salvation of humankind, but also about the salvation of God’s entire created order?

I began to imagine. Instead of taking the Paschal candle into the darkened, closed sanctuary, what if the procession continued to the seashore to proclaim the “Light of Christ” at the side of the ocean, where rising waters caused by climate change threaten the lives, homes, and livelihoods of millions upon millions of people today and in the future. In the light of the Paschal candle, we would also see the beauty of the crashing waves, and the glory of dolphins and whales leaping in the waters offshore.

What if we carried the Light of Christ to the edge of a forest, and could see the deforestation of many generations of trees, which had been growing long there before we walked this earth? In the light of the Paschal candle, we would also see many small creatures – birds and squirrels and chipmunks - frolicking under the canopy of trees.

What if the Light of Christ led us to the top of a mountain and we could see the destruction of the very foundation of God’s earth through the leveling of mountains for coal? In the light of the

Paschal candle, we would look up and be awestruck by the stars that twinkle at night, the moon that crescents in the night sky, and the vastness of space.

What if we brought the Light of Christ into fields and meadows, into wetlands and bogs, and perceived the rapid loss of species at a rate previously unknown in modern times? In the light of the Paschal candle, we would also savor the grassy meadows, watch wildflowers gently blowing in the breeze, and spot birds in formation flying low over the plains.

As we read during this Easter Vigil, the Psalmist (Psalm 98) says that “all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.” This song of hope proclaims that “all the earth should make a joyful news to the Lord, and let the seas roar and the hills sing together for joy.” These words remind us of what ancient people always knew – that God’s love and care is for all creation. The light of God has always been shining everywhere, though human beings have often failed or forgotten to see it.

Our invitation this Easter Vigil is to bring the Light of Christ to “all the ends of the earth” and to remember that God’s promise of redemption and salvation is intended not just for humans, but also for the whole creation. In the light of the Paschal candle, we are filled with gratitude and wonder. We see the preciousness of this living planet. We give thanks for its beauty and its intricate complexity.

At the same time, through the Light of Christ we dare to face the fact that human activity has assaulted and wounded God’s Creation. We recognize our shared culpability in diminishing that which God entrusted to our care. We acknowledge our longing to pass on to future generations a habitable and vibrant world, and our fear that we may not be able to accomplish this. However, the journey of our Easter vigil does not end with the pronouncement of the Good News of the resurrected Christ and the hope of salvation for all. Rather, after proclaiming that “the Lord is Risen indeed,” we are invited to take our place among the communion of saints, to reaffirm our commitment to God, and to renounce the forces of evil that tempt us. Our Baptismal Covenant stands as a testament of our willingness to go forth as the light of Christ into a world in need.

Last year, following a year of diocesan-wide conversation, study and theological reflection, the Episcopal Church in Connecticut adopted a resolution that recommends an additional question of commitment in the Baptismal Covenant: “Will you cherish the wondrous works of God and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?” This sixth question shows us a way to be “the light of Christ” for the natural world, as we celebrate the magnificence of the Earth and as we go forth with faithful action. A resolution has been submitted to General Convention 2015 to consider trial use of this additional question.

As Christians who are asked to love and care for all that God loves, we are invited to thoughtfully and frankly consider how our own actions contribute to the decline of Earth. When we affirm in the Baptismal Covenant our promise to “persevere in resisting evil,” we know that evil includes destroying God’s Creation. We commit to turning our lives around and to seeking a better path of living more gently on the Earth.

Easter is a season of rejoicing. Rather than continuing to sit in the darkness of the tomb, filled with despair and paralyzed by fear and hopelessness at the news of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, God invites us to shine forth as beacons of possibility and hope for all that God has created.

In one of the Easter Vigil prayers we say, “O, God, you have created all things by the power of your Word, and you renew the earth by your Spirit” (BCP, 290). God longs unceasingly to renew and restore God’s whole Creation, and invites us to join in that mission.

May we go forth filled with the power of God’s Word, illumined by the light of Christ, and joyful in the promise that God’s Spirit will renew the Earth.

Reverend Stephanie M. Johnson is the Assistant Rector at St. Paul’s Church, Fairfield, Connecticut, and convener of the New England Regional Environmental Ministries network.
