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A Story Less Often Told: Towards a New Trajectory for the Easter Vigil

by Yme Woensdregt



The Easter Vigil is a rich and beautiful liturgical event. It is adaptable to many different contexts and situations, from larger cathedrals to smaller rural parishes. Like much of Anglican worship, it is a feast for the ear. As a People of the Book, we treasure words as a vehicle for telling the gospel story, and one of the four movements of the Easter Vigil is to tell the story of salvation. In liturgy and prayer and sermon, we craft our words carefully for we know that our worship does indeed form us as people of God.

But there is more to the Easter Vigil than words. It is one of the few services in the Church Year in which we consciously enact and embody the gospel. We begin the Service of Light by lighting the Great Fire.

We gather outside the church building in the spring evening around the flickering flames from which we light the Christ Candle. This primal image can often speak to us in language deeper and more profound than words.

Then we form a procession, following the light into the darkened nave. In the darkness, the familiar space seems somewhat less familiar, but the fragile light of the candle leads us into the tomb which will burst forth with glorious light to become the womb for the new community which is born from darkness into the light of Christ. We sing the Exsultet, that marvellously exuberant, extravagant, abundant hymn in which we align ourselves with heaven and earth, past and

present, here and there, singing the praise of God who has called us into freedom as sons and daughters of the divine. The liturgy assumes a cosmic dimension, in which all of creation is invited to join in praise of the God of life.

We tell our story in scripture and prayer, hymn and psalm. Then we celebrate our identity in the two great dominical sacraments. We celebrate. Surely on this night of all nights, the sacraments are a full celebration — baptism with copious amounts of water; Eucharist with rich bread and fine wine, a foretaste of the banquet laid out for us by our passionately loving, exuberant, abundant God. The Easter Vigil is rich in its imagery and action, drawing us into a vision of the new reality of resurrection life, of realized eschatological presence.

I serve a small parish in a small city in south-eastern British Columbia. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the Easter Vigil is the highlight of the church year, it is nevertheless faithfully attended by a steadily growing group of parishioners. It has become the primary baptismal service among us, and more people are coming to understand that the Vigil is the primary service of Easter. The sights, sounds, movement, and actions of worship speak deeply and powerfully to them. Many of those who were unsure about a long service on a Saturday night have been won over.

Over the last few years, however, I have started to become increasingly uneasy about the Scriptures chosen for reading in the Service of the Word. There is an undue emphasis on the might of God, on the image of God as warrior. I have the same unease about the undue emphasis which the prayers in the Book of Alternative Services place on the might of God; but that is another article.¹

In terms of the Vigil Scriptures, the readings which have been chosen for this night to tell the story of salvation show God in a rather more violent light. I understand the intention to tell the story of our creating, liberating God, but that is to view these readings in only the most positive light, as if to view them through rose-coloured glasses. We cannot close our eyes to the violent implications of these same texts. I am not alone in this concern. Others, theologians and faithful pastors and preaches, are becoming more attuned to the violent portrayal of God in the Scriptures, and doing some excellent theological work in addressing this issue.² We are seeking a way forward beyond the violence we see in Scripture.

Let me illustrate. The Easter Vigil begins with a reading of the wonderful Priestly narrative of creation in Genesis 1, ending with God's verdict that "it was very good". That's followed by an abridged reading of the narrative of Noah and the flood, a story of destruction and genocide. To be sure, the story delights in God's activity to deliver a family, and a pair of all the animals on the earth. Following Walter Brueggemann's exegesis, the story is a

story about a change in God's heart "which makes possible a new beginning for creation".³ But, in all honesty, we can only understand the story in this heuristic way by closing our eyes to the violence done to Noah's contemporaries, and to the earth itself, including all the other creatures beyond the pair of each kind taken into the ark. This story of destruction seems to arise from God's anger and the pain in God's heart.

The third reading is more explicitly violent. Genesis 22 begins with the divine command to sacrifice Isaac, the son of promise. It's a horrifying test, an imperative which offends us. What kind of God could command this kind of binding and murder, even if Isaac is released at the last moment? W. Sibley Towner has noted that "many interpreters have taken this story to be the Elohists' way of announcing the abolition of human sacrifice in Israel"⁴ even though it was certainly a practice among other ancient peoples in both hemispheres. Nevertheless, this story shocks and appals modern hearers who won't know the background of the story. In an era of massive Biblical illiteracy, narratives such as this can serve only to horrify modern listeners, particularly on a festival night of celebration such as the Easter Vigil.

Granted, the rubrics indicate that these readings are not mandatory. In preparing the service for this night, we are granted a measure of freedom. These readings may be omitted.

But we're given no choice about the fourth reading, the narrative of the night of the Passover in Exodus 14. The rubrics indicate that this central story of Israel's identity must be read: "Ten readings from the Old Testament are provided. At least three are to be read. The passage from Exodus 14 is never to be omitted."

What image of God does this story present? Does it ameliorate the picture of a violent God which we heard in the story of the flood and "Isaac under the knife"?⁵ To be sure, this story is one of liberation and freedom. God, moved with compassion for an enslaved people, chooses to set them free. The story tells in narrative form the oft-quoted refrain of liberation theology that God "has a preferential option for the poor".

As we delve more fully into the story we cannot ignore the fact that the freedom of the Israelites comes at great cost to the Egyptians. I do not wish to minimize the violence of the Egyptians in enslaving the descendants of Jacob. But the question remains as to whether perpetrating violence against the Egyptians is warranted as a measured and reasonable response to their initiating violence against Israel. This becomes even more problematic when the violence against the Egyptians (not to mention the violence perpetrated against the inhabitants of the "land flowing with milk and honey" which will occur as the story unfolds) is understood to be of divine origin.⁶

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The whole story of Passover is wreathed in violence. The violence of the Egyptians is noted explicitly in the text. It is the story of the enslavement of a tribe which had become too numerous, frightening the imperial Pharaoh (Exodus 1: 8–10). Within the larger story of violence, specific acts of violence are noted as well: Pharaoh's ruthless order that all Hebrew baby boys be killed (Ex. 1:16); the Israelite slaves are beaten by Egyptian taskmasters (Ex. 2:11); Pharaoh's command that the Israelites should build without proper building materials (Ex. 5: 6–9), and the penalty imposed for the failure of the slaves to meet their quota (Ex. 5: 15–19).

But the violence is not limited in this story to the Egyptians. It is not only Pharaoh who is violent. Pharaoh's increasing violence is met with increasingly incommensurate responses from God, with greater damage to the land, the water supply, the livestock, and finally, human life. The Egyptian water is tainted. Various plagues of insects plague the land, and the livestock is diseased. Even that's not enough. The people themselves are attacked with boils, and matters escalate until all the firstborn of Egypt are killed by the God of Israel (Ex. 7–11).

To add insult to injury, the modern congregation at the Easter Vigil is encouraged to respond to this reading with the Song of Moses (Exodus 15). We sing cheerfully that "the Lord is a mighty warrior" and "the horse and the rider he has hurled into the sea" (BAS, Canticle 1, p. 75). I have shuddered every time I've done that in the past.

In a Biblically Illiterate World ...

In a service such as the Vigil, which relies so strongly on action and story-telling, and which is already more lengthy than most modern worshippers are accustomed to, there is very little space or time (practically speaking) for homiletical exploration. We live among a Biblically illiterate people. Many no longer know the story, and most do not have the knowledge or the tools to fill in the background to these horrifying stories. Our postmodern age is also one in which image and story are once again gaining primacy. People will hear these stories as part of the grand sweep of the history of salvation, and will internalize an understanding of a violent God beyond what they can bear, without the interpretive tools to set that understanding in a broader theological framework. The story we tell at the Vigil is of a violent God who gets his own way (the masculine reference is deliberate) in the end, whether by geocidal drowning, human sacrifice, genocidal slaughter, or whatever means is needed for the goal of the freedom of the chosen few.

That's strongly stated, I know. It would be legitimate to ask if that's the case. But the more pertinent question is: Is it true?²⁷ There are ways to deal with these questions: extend the service and deal with the issues in the sermon; perhaps a Lenten Bible study (which would meet

the concern for a few people, but certainly not all those who attend the Easter Vigil). A further concern revolves around the scheduling of baptisms for this service, which means that unchurched people will often be present. Even more than those who attend worship regularly, they have no larger framework for these stories. The violent nature of these stories will often undo the real and warm benefits of any kind of evangelism that may be present in the rich sights and sounds of this service.

Beyond this portrait of a violent God, another objection is to be made about the choice of lessons read at the Easter Vigil. None of the chosen readings raise the central concern of Jesus, that is, the "kingdom of God", with its vision of justice and shalom and healing for all.

I am writing this essay just days after Glenn Beck (a commentator on FOX TV) raised a national furor with his comments encouraging churchgoers to flee from their churches if those churches preach the social gospel. The social gospel, he warns his listeners, is nothing more than a code word for communism and socialism. He encourages his listeners that if their priest or pastor preaches social justice, they should report him (or, God forbid, her) to the responsible church bodies to be disciplined. In such an environment, it becomes increasingly urgent for churches to make social justice texts an important part of the diet of worshipping communities on a regular basis. The absence of such central Biblical texts from the Easter Vigil readings is unconscionable.

I recognize that the intent of these Scriptures in the Easter Vigil is to rehearse the story of salvation. It is critical that we honour that intent of the readings. The story needs to be heard in its fullness, partly given our inclination as we follow the Revised Common Lectionary to chop that story up into small bite-size pieces. There is great value in telling the story whole, and the Easter Vigil is a primary opportunity to do so.

But is this story of violence really the story we want to tell? We must exercise great care and caution in choosing the story we tell, and the manner in which we tell it. After beginning with a narrative about a loving, creative God, do we really wish to follow that with stories of the God who destroys that creation in a fit of anger, then commands the sacrifice of a son as a test of faith, then a God who will kill as many Egyptians as it takes to set the chosen people free from the violent slavery of Egypt?

It continues in the readings from the prophetic literature. Isaiah 54 recaps the story of the flood as an object lesson, emphasizing the violence of it even as it highlights God's promise never to get that angry again. Zephaniah picks up on the image of God as warrior, a God who rescues through violence and destruction. And then, in complete contrast (and I suspect to some befuddlement), we pray "By the effectual working of your providence

(whatever that means for most people in our churches), carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation.” (BAS, 328)

So what is to be done?

Another Trajectory

Let me begin with a notion which has become a more prominent area of scholarly inquiry in the last 30 years or so. The Biblical narrative is not a single story. There are different trajectories to be found in the Bible, with differently nuanced themes. Faithful weekly preaching can highlight the different trajectories, an important part of forming a faithful gospel people.

Brevard Childs asks about

“the nature and direction of the biblical trajectories which comprise the witnesses of the Christian Bible to the kingdom of God ... I have tried to bring out, not only the diversity of the biblical testimony, but also the unity of the Bible’s witness ... It is essential that theological reflection takes place by seeking to penetrate through the biblical witnesses to the intended subject matter or substance.”⁸

Ronald Allen takes it a step further, noting that

“The Bible is one of the preacher’s most consistent conversation partners. The Bible is not a single book, but a library of interpretations of the presence and purposes of God from the perspective of different communities—e.g. Elohist, Yahwists, deuteronomists, priests, sages, apocalyptists and Hellenistic Jewish communities. While the different Biblical trajectories share important perspectives, they also put forward different nuances of understanding God and the world.”⁹

As faithful preachers and interpreters of the Bible, as faithful liturgists and presiders, we make choices as we prepare for worship. In this paper, I suggest that we make choices for the Vigil story as well. This time, however, the choice is not about which trajectory we will preach. This time the choice is about which trajectory we will read. The time is right to revise the Vigil readings. It is time to focus more intentionally on a less violent God and on the values of the kingdom which Jesus proclaims.

We have done the same in the past. We have excised scriptures which condone slavery, or the subjugation of women, from the lectionary we use. We are rethinking scriptures which have to do with the ordination of women and, currently, the struggle to recognize the full equality of our GLBT sisters and brothers. We can do the same with the Easter Vigil readings.

There are several possible approaches. One solution is to hold our noses and plunge ahead. These are the readings which have been chosen. These are the readings which

the church, in its wisdom, has used for years to celebrate the life of God in the life of the world. This is what we are given. This is what we must read. In the past few years, this is what I have done; but it is a completely unsatisfactory solution. We fail to make the faithful choices we are called to make.

A second solution is to preach the issues. But is the Easter Vigil really the time to spend on that kind of doctrinal, edificatory preaching? We send conflicting messages about the intent of the Vigil as a celebration of life if we drone on about Biblical exegetical details which have very little relevance to modern living, but which are necessary to properly understand these passages which are so patently offensive on the surface. The Easter Vigil is not the time to explain about Genesis’ concern to eliminate child sacrifice, or to deal with the question of why the ancient scriptures have such a violent portrayal of the divine, or the growth towards monotheism in a polytheistic era. This service is a time of celebration, of light, of washing and feasting and story-telling. It relies for its value as much on the actions of worship as it does on the words which accompany those actions. So this second solution won’t work either.

A third solution is to proceed as I have done this year (2012). I am aware that I can be accused of ignoring or flouting the wisdom of the wider church. That is not my intent. I hope that this paper causes the wider community to engage in constructive dialogue. I wish to open this matter for wider discussion and, if needed, for correction. I hope to encourage a thorough and comprehensive consideration of the issues I have raised. My intent is to engage us all in *praxis* followed by reflection.

Towards a New Vigil Story

In 2010, I chose a new set of readings for the Vigil. These readings rehearse the story of salvation with less of the violence, moving along a different trajectory which also honours the heart of the gospel, and which also seeks to be open to the movement of the Spirit in a new time. It is a story less often told. The scriptures I have chosen do not mark a radical departure from the traditional readings. It is still the story of salvation. It is the same story, but told from another point of view. This story begins with Creation and Exodus, moves through the prophetic call for right living in community, towards new images for our relationship with God, to the renewal of creation, and ending with the classic Pauline baptismal passage and the Gospel reading of resurrection.

The rest of this paper details the choices I made, with theological rationale for each choice. It is largely the same structure as the pattern found in the BAS, with the exception that I gathered several shorter readings together with brief periods of silence between the readings, primarily for practical considerations of time.

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The Service of the Word, including a brief sermon drawing the threads of the story together, took 28 minutes (as I explained it, the length of an average sitcom with commercials).

Introduction

Reading Genesis 1:26 – 2:3

Hymn God of the Sparrow
(Jaroslav J. Vajda, Common Praise 414)

Prayer

Reading Exodus 3: 1 – 15

Psalm 33: 1-11

Prayer

Reading Isaiah 58: 6 – 9a

(followed by a brief silence)

Micah 6: 6 – 8

72: 1-7

Psalm

Prayer

Reading Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34

(followed by a brief silence)

John 15: 12 – 17

Hymn Praise, I Will Praise You Lord

(Claude Fraysse, Common Praise 340)

The Collect of the Day

The Epistle Revelation 21: 1- 6

(followed by a brief silence)

Romans 6: 3 – 11

Holy Gospel: Luke 24: 1 – 12

The Sermon A Story Less Often Told

Genesis 1:26 – 2:3 // God of the sparrow. The creation narrative has been abbreviated. At a practical level, this will yield more time for several other short readings.

Theologically, I made this decision in order to focus people's attention on the theme of creation having been given into human hands so that we might be wise, faithful and responsible stewards. Following the lead of Douglas John Hall, the problematic word "dominion" was explicitly changed to "stewardship".¹⁰ This more relational concept places the emphasis on the partnership in creation between God and humans. The hymn by Jaroslav J. Vajda complements the theme of the interrelatedness of creation and its relational qualities in beautiful and hopeful ways. It also has the benefit of introducing themes which will occur in readings still to come.

Needless to say, the prayers appointed in BAS after each reading also needed reconsideration and rewriting. Following a brief discussion of each reading, I include the prayers I used.

Creating, playful, abundant God, creation is filled with beauty and delight, a sparkling blue and white jewel in the universe, filled with wondrous variety and colour.

All creation is a song of praise to you, our Maker.

Make us faithful caretakers of your goodness, deeply aware of the fragility of our precious life, joyful as we join the song of creation,

in the name of Jesus, who is the harmony of life. Amen.

Exodus 3: 1-15 // Psalm 33: 1-11. The story of the Passover is too important a part of the story of salvation to excise. But rather than selecting a part of the story of the escape from Egypt which contains the explicit violence, I chose the beginning of the story. Moses is called to lead the people out of slavery because "I have seen the misery of my people". God acts, motivated by the divine passion which mourns all human suffering and resolves to do something about it. The Psalm picks up both Creation and the theme of the righteous passion of God which brings forth praise from God's people.

God, who is known to us in the least of these, you hear the cries of your people, and your heart is broken by their suffering. Lead those who are enslaved home to freedom, set free those who are oppressed, and, in love, make us all your own.

Help us live with courage and compassion, rolling away the heavy stones which burden others, and building communities of hope; through Jesus, our life. Amen.

Isaiah 58: 6-9a // Micah 6: 6-8 // Psalm 72: 1-7. The prophets called the people to a life of shalom and justice, living in community so as to care for all, and particularly those who are at the bottom. These themes are at the heart of the gospel call to live as citizens of the kingdom of God in such very familiar readings as the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55) and Jesus' inaugural sermon as Luke records it in Luke 4, quoting from the prophet Isaiah. A further, although minor, advantage of this reading is that it echoes themes from Advent and Christmas: the theme of light is a strong theme in both the Incarnation and Resurrection cycles of the church year. It's a good link to make.

Micah reiterates the same theme, highlighting its importance in the story of salvation. It has the further value of negating the story of the sacrifice of Isaac story ("Shall I give my firstborn?") with a clearly implied



negative answer). Justice, compassion and humility are further highlighted in the enthronement Psalm, which emphasizes the ruler's role to serve the least, with hints of creation's participation in the renewed social equity.

O God, Source of our life,
 you fill our lives with goodness beyond measure;
 you give us hope beyond the power of despair;
 you fill us with life stronger than the power of death.
 Rescue those who suffer poverty, injustice or oppression.
 Open the ears of our hearts to hear,
 and quicken in us the fire to respond in love;
 that we may share your life with the world,
 doing justice, living with compassion,
 and walking faithfully and humbly
 with him who is the Source and Goal of our life. Amen.

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 // John 15: 12-17. In these readings, prophets and evangelists seek new images to describe the relationship between God and the people of God. Jeremiah proclaims that God's passionate love affair with the people will be internalized in the renewal of our hearts as they beat in sympathetic vibration with the heart of God. John's gospel goes even further, calling those who walk in the way of Jesus no longer servants, but friends. This is a daring and powerful shift of emphasis. The metaphors for the new relationship with God become more daring, more relational, more personal, more intimate. This is followed by the hymn "Je louerai Éternel", a hymn of praise pure and simple.

The Collect of the Day was changed to reflect these last two readings:

God, Lover and Friend,
 you renew our hearts in grace and compassion.
 May this time together renew our hope.
 May the stories we tell refresh our courage.
 May the songs we sing lift our spirits.
 May the words we speak renew our life in the Word,
 and make us more active in our faith.
 May the water of baptism cleanse us.
 May the bread of heaven and the wine of the new kingdom
 refresh our souls, mend our hearts and renew our love.
 Amen.

I chose an additional epistle reading, the vision of the consummation of creation coming at the end of the Apocalypse, forming an *inclusio* with the first reading from Genesis, and reinforcing the intimacy within which God transforms us and indeed, all of creation. God will live with us, among us, in an earth which has been made new. We will live mutual delight and companionship with our God, the promise of Emmanuel fulfilled in deep and abiding ways. I retained the reading of the baptismal passage in Romans 6, an important element of the Easter celebration, and, of course, the reading of the gospel.

Conclusion

The sermon was an opportunity to sketch out the story of salvation as told in these choices from Scripture. It sketches out a new trajectory in the story of salvation, the story of God's deep and profound passion for the world shown in creation; shown in God's passionate desire to release those who suffer from their oppression; shown in the enduring gospel imperative to care for the poor, the hungry, the naked, the least; shown in the daring new images used by prophets to proclaim not only the transformation wrought by God in individuals, but also God's hunger for the renewal and healing of the world; culminating in our baptismal participation in the life of Christ and the story of the church's experience of renewed resurrection life given through God's creative energies.

It is a story of healing and transformation. While it takes the reality of sin and exile seriously, this trajectory chooses to focus on the partnership into which God invites us as people and as a world which is being transformed by creative love. In the words I used to end the sermon, "That's the story we live. That's the story which Easter renews in us day by day: this world is precious and good and holy; God lives here with us and in us; God's gospel purposes, as we live them out, give life, shed light, produce hope, make shalom, and do it all in deep, profound and passionate love.

This is what we celebrate at Easter.
 This is what we celebrate in our baptism.
 This is why we feast at the table.
 Thanks be to God."

Notes

¹ *Book of Alternative Services*, Anglican Book Centre, 1985 (BAS). A quick study of the form of address to God used in the three prayers for each Sunday in the BAS (Collects, Prayers over the Gifts, Prayers after Communion) shows "Almighty God" is used almost 27% of the time. If we add the same address used in the Absolution every Sunday, the percentage rises to 37.5% — over 1/3 of the time this is the preferred form of address to God. If we add other forms of the word "power" or "ruler" or "Lord", the percentage rises from 27% to over 40%. Only 12.9% of the prayers use "mercy" or "compassion"; "faith", "grace", "hope" and "peace" account for 8.5%; "goodness" and "truth", 1%. If nothing else, this shows a paucity of theological imagination. However, I believe the issue to be more serious than the poverty of language or imagination.



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² Brian McLaren addresses the issue in *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That are Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne, 2010), and notes the work of other theologians and Biblical scholars such as Walter Brueggemann, N.T. Wright, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan and others. A new book by Eric A. Seibert addresses the question of *Disturbing Divine Behaviour: Troubling Old Testament Images for God* (Fortress, 2009). James Crenshaw also addressed the subject 25 years ago in *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence* (Fortress, 1984). Fascinating research is also being conducted into religion and brain activity by Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman. Michael Gerson reports in the Washington Post that “Contemplating a loving God strengthens portions of our brain—particularly the frontal lobes and the anterior cingulate—where empathy and reason reside. Contemplating a wrathful God empowers the limbic system, which is ‘filled with aggression and fear.’” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/14/AR2009041401879.html>), accessed April 7, 2010.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 73 (Interpretation Commentaries series)

⁴ W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 184 (Westminster Bible Companion series).

⁵ *ibid.* p. 184

⁶ This is a vexing question in the modern world as well, in the decade-long “war on terrorism”, genocidal wars in Africa and Eastern Europe, tension in the Middle East, the whole issue of cultural accommodation to a growing Muslim population in Canada, North America and Europe, as well as numerous other public policy discussions. It is no small matter that I am raising.

⁷ I leave aside the important question of whether it is God who is violent, or whether it is the authors of Scripture who describe their understanding of God in these violent terms. Mary Daly, the feminist theologian, considers that God is violent, agreeing with Tillich’s critique of theism that God has power over people, and thus becomes a tyrant (even though Tillich goes on to argue that God has overcome these violent tendencies). Girard, on the other hand, argues that traditional religion serves a mimetic purpose to bridle violence through violence that was ritually limited. I don’t take a position on this issue in this paper. Seibert, in the book mentioned in note 2, distinguishes between the “textual God” and the “actual God”, contending that the OT images of God are not divine portrayals, but rather human depictions of the divine which both “reveal and distort God’s character” (170). God, therefore, did not say and do everything the Bible says God did. My concern in this paper is not with that wider issue; my concern is how these clearly violent texts are heard by Biblically illiterate people in the context of the Easter Vigil.

⁸ Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, Fortress Press, 1993, p. 650

⁹ Ronald J. Allen, “Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation through Conversation” in *Purposes of Preaching*, Jana Childers, ed., Chalice Press, 2004; p. 5

¹⁰ Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004.



What Story Should We Tell?

by Peter C. Wall

Readers of *Liturgy Canada* will be greatly enriched by Fr Woensdregt's lead piece on the Great Vigil of Easter. His critical examination of the Vigil and its component pieces is an important addition to the body of work extant on the 'keeping' of the Vigil and is enormously helpful to all who plan, lead, and participate in this greatest of liturgical dramas.

I was very captured by his opening paragraphs describing the service. His evocative and moving description of the *event* and its symbols and significance is very important, and would be an appreciated addition to any parish community hoping to write about and introduce people to the Vigil. As someone who has spent virtually all of my ministry encouraging, cajoling, embarrassing, commanding, expecting, inviting and welcoming people to the Vigil, I also appreciate his candour about some of the issues around the service – its length, its - at times - inherent *heaviness*, its unfamiliarity in form to many, and the inescapable fact that, as the principal locus for baptism, it will often include congregants who do not count themselves among the 'regular churchgoers'. All of these worries, of course, are more than offset, in my experience, by the beauty, the pageantry, the mystery, the sensuousness, the profound use of symbols – water, light, bells, music, fire - and the sheer joyousness of the service which work together to create a most distinctive experience; one which, once experienced, quickly becomes an annual rite not to be missed! A gala party following the service never hurts!

Yme's central concern over the nature or the 'feel' of the readings, combined with his acknowledgment of the reality that much which might need to be said in helping understand some of these readings simply cannot find enough time in this service are both very real and shared concerns. How many times have I (and I am sure others) sat as *Presiders* as this service and inwardly cringed at the baldness of God's apparent violence, at the plight of those who didn't get on the Ark; on those who got 'caught' in the swirling waters of the Red Sea, to say nothing of poor old Isaac? It is difficult to hear these stories, perhaps made even sharper by their coming together on the night in which we are about to celebrate our own salvation. I find Yme's reflections on these readings, the potential issues they bring with them, and his suggested way forward, with a new set of readings, refreshing and interesting. Reading through his list of alternate readings, I found myself nodding and agreeing that all of these could be used, and used effectively. However much I would miss The Song of Moses or Psalm 46, I can see Yme's new *ordo* as being helpful and much gentler than what went before.

So far, so good. Having pointed out many of the difficulties surrounding the current lectionary for the Vigil, and commenting on the concern over a biblically illiterate world, Yme asks: *Is this really the story we want to tell?* I would counter with: *What is the story that we should tell?*

So, I guess that my discomfort with Fr Woensdregt's suggested new order is that I am not sure that we should jettison the 'tough' stuff quite so easily. I do want to acknowledge the great challenges to the liturgical planner and to the homilist in trying to negotiate all of these troubled waters. I also acknowledge very easily the paradoxes which this service in all its parts and pieces brings with it for those who have concern over what people are actually hearing and trying to follow.

I find my unease with Yme's thesis falling into two areas: first, and perhaps overly simplistically, I want not to lose those 'great' stories, even with their problems and inadequacies: I want us to hear the whole story of the creation myth from Genesis 1; I need to be reminded of the power and the wonder (and yes, the violence, too) of the flood narrative, to hear the story, with all its drama, of the Exodus as told in Exodus 14, replete with all the horsemen, and the charioteers, and all of that. I believe that these are seminal texts for us, and I also believe that in each of them one finds redemption, if one reads carefully and openly to the end of each pericope. I understand that plumbing these depths requires *much* of both the worshipping community and of the preacher!

My second, and perhaps somewhat more profound, unease is with the whole notion of *protecting* (my term, hence the italics) our folk from what we label as the *violence* of the Bible. Biblical texts are often difficult, confusing, even confounding. They are hard to hear in all sorts of ways. They confront us, week after week, day by day, with interpretive puzzles, historic muddle, and incredible truths. I want us to struggle with them, mightily, *especially* when they cause us the deepest of reactions. To many faithful Christians and to many who regularly find themselves as part of the worshipping community, religion (Christianity, too) is heavily imbued with violence – violence in the religious world of today, violence in our foundational documents, the acts of what we label as a vengeful or all-powerful God, punishments and crucifixions – all presented as part of our faith history. Salvation history is not easy or nice or gentle. God's work in the world is dramatic, ultimately loving, but also powerfully strong and overwhelming. I believe that we need to honour those parts of our story; challenging and difficult though that may be. I would feel impoverished and somehow sad to lose from the Easter Vigil those great and wondrous stories which have formed us. I pray that I and others have the grace to teach and preach in ways that form communities of justice and peace.

Starting the Conversation

We pray in the Exsultet, that: ‘the power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy’. In the story that perhaps we should tell, may this be true!



by John W B Hill

“A Story Less Told” introduces two critically important issues faced by the Church today: the challenge of biblical illiteracy, and the violence which the Bible seems to condone. Woensdregt’s proposal deserves careful attention for its informed assessment of these issues, and Liturgy Canada invites readers to offer their reflections and join in the conversation at www.liturgy.ca which is designed for this purpose.

Parts of Woensdregt’s solution may be disputed, but his pastoral insights should not be ignored. Active, faithful members of our churches have just enough biblical consciousness left to be offended by key biblical stories and write them off. Centuries of defining membership through baptism without any formation for discipleship has left us with no apparent pastoral option except a ‘lowest common denominator’ approach to the Bible.

The development of the catechumenate by the early church was a creative response to the challenge of incorporating new disciples who had no prior formation in the faith of Israel. New disciples learned to interpret the gospel through the lens of Hebrew scripture, and learned to find the ultimate meaning of those scriptures revealed in the gospel. But all that was lost when baptism-as-soon-as-possible became the norm.

The Revised Common Lectionary (of which the Vigil readings are a part) is certainly strong medicine for a biblically illiterate church, but if we expect the lectionary to solve the problem all by itself, we will be disappointed. The design of the lectionary presupposes hearers who recognize the larger context of those tiny selections who hear in the liturgy, and (more important) who recognize the relation of those readings to the gospel. If we have no strategy for cultivating that kind of hearer, we will be tempted to abandon the lectionary as a failure.

Meanwhile, we should consider Woensdregt’s criticisms of the Vigil readings (and we must not overlook the readings for the rest of ‘The Great Three Days’). It is true, as he points out, that the lectionary readings do not tell us much about God’s dream for this world, the ‘kingdom of justice and shalom.’ The reason, of course, is that we are celebrating ‘the Passover of the Lord’: the great *betrayal* of God’s dream, and God’s merciful and creative *response* to this betrayal. There is good reason for requiring the reading Exodus 12 (the first Passover meal) on Maundy Thursday and of Exodus 14 (crossing the sea) at the Vigil: Jesus was arrested and executed during the Passover festival. Should we suppress the violent details when violence is the issue *at the heart* of the Passion story?

Woensdregt is correct to describe the sequence of Vigil readings as narration of the ‘story of salvation,’ but only if we reject the popular notion of ‘salvation’ and stick to

the biblical one. Salvation (in the biblical sense) is not just 'getting to heaven when you die,' but the dawning of the kingdom of God. However, our age-old reliance on 'good violence' to eradicate 'bad violence' is absolutely opposed to the way Jesus envisions the coming of that kingdom. As long as we worship a violent god who demanded the death of his son so we could escape his wrath, we have missed the whole point of 'the Passover of the Lord.' It's about curing us of the violence which stands in the way of God's dream.

The three Vigil readings that Woensdregt sees as most problematic are very revealing, when read in the light of the Paschal Mystery. The story of Noah's flood, the story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son, and the story of the Hebrew's escape from Egypt have a lot in common — violence, especially. The story of the flood and the story of Abraham and Isaac are both told as stories about God's change of heart (do Christians really believe that God acts so impulsively and then repents?) The story of Abraham and Isaac and the story of the escape from Egypt are both stories about the sacrifice of first-born children (are we still in denial about the role that human sacrifice has played, since time immemorial, as a way to deal with social crises or guarantee the success of our social experiments?) One of the most astonishing characteristics of the Bible is that it does not attempt to conceal the dark side of human nature and its religious impulses. Salvation has to mean liberation from these violent delusions, but we need to *recognize* the delusions before we can *renounce* them.

A world that is "corrupt...and filled with violence" cannot be washed clean by drowning all the evil people; there has to be a better kind of 'washing.' The old myth of the great flood, updated with God's 'change of heart,' is a creative way of recognizing the futility of using violence to eliminate violence.

A social crisis is not averted by human sacrifice, but merely discharged onto a victim; there has to be a better way to resolve our rivalries and our wrath. It was not God who changed his mind but Abraham, who was coming to know the mind of God.

But these were lessons that ancient Israel never completely learned; killing a ram was better than killing Isaac, but it is still sacrifice. Joseph and Mary were still expected to take their first-born son to the Temple and 'redeem' him by sacrificing two young pigeons. The God who told Abraham not to slay his son knew only too well that we were not yet cured of our reliance on violence, so God risked the life of *his* Son — whom *we did* slay — to expose our self-justifying social consensus to rely on violence in a crisis, by which we *defy* God's gracious will for the world.

The Hebrew victims of systemic violence in Egypt had to learn that trusting God meant abandoning the security of the established order and walking out into the desert (where water would prove the means of their deliverance, not their destruction). The Egyptian army had to learn (the hard way) that its reliance on violence was a dead-end. (God did not kill the army; that was something they could do all by themselves, driving their chariots into the sea.)

In other words, what we confront in The Great Three Days is the supreme crisis (judgement) of our world, relying as we do on violence to solve our problems: God sent Jesus to show us a better way, and we crucified him! "And this is the judgement, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light..."

That is why we cannot afford to suppress the violent stories that have played such a huge role in the traditions of our faith; they are there for a reason. We take offence at them only because we have not yet come to terms with the truth about ourselves that God has exposed through the story of Jesus. His submission to crucifixion and his resurrection on the third day is God's ultimate play to remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh.

That, at any rate, is how I hear the readings which the lectionary appoints for the Easter Vigil. But what shall we do about the apparent hearing loss of the typical congregation?

How to Respond...

Our web-site redesign is a work in progress. If you have been touched, stimulated, informed, angered, inspired, confused or otherwise affected by this issue, please send us your thoughts and reactions. Your responses are most welcome!

Send to liturgycan@gmail.com. Responses will be edited as necessary and posted on the Liturgy Canada website (www.liturgy.ca)

We Plan to Go Digital!

Send your email address to liturgycan@gmail.com. We have begun the steps to becoming an online publication. As our mission statement says, "Our ministry is to provide resources on our liturgical life which focus the debate, inform our practice and evaluate our experience."

To Get the Discussion Going...

Here are some questions which might spur you on to more conversation.

In what ways have you experienced the Easter Vigil as “the womb for the new community which is born from darkness into the light of Christ”? (p. 1)

....[T]he readings which have been chosen for this night to tell the story of salvation show God in a rather more violent light.” Do you agree or not? Why? What other light is possible that does not involve seeing “through rose-coloured glasses”? (p. 2)

The writer points out that there are three ways to deal with the violent nature of the chosen Easter Vigil readings: deal with the issue in the sermon; conduct a Lenten Bible study on the readings; or replace the readings with those that proclaim God’s reign of justice and compassion. What other alternatives do you see? (p. 4)

What do you make of the alternative Scripture passages chosen? Can you suggest others?

What good things would be lost if we no longer used the current readings at the Easter Vigil? Should the banned passages be removed from the entire lectionary?

(And to be completely outrageous: Many Palestinian Christians and others think the Church should not use the Old Testament at all in worship. Was Marcion right?)

Or another way of saying basically the same thing: How do we need to change our use of and our preaching and teaching about the Hebrew scriptures as a whole?



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Saturday, April 27, 10 am—4 pm, at St John’s Church, Dixie, 719 Dundas Street East, Mississauga.

Sponsored by Liturgy Canada, the Kanata Centre for Worship and Global Song, and the Renison Institute of Ministry.

For more information, please feel free to contact Marilyn Malton at: mmalton@uwaterloo.ca.

We will again be offering a conference at the Renison Institute on November 2, 2013 from 10 am to 4 pm.



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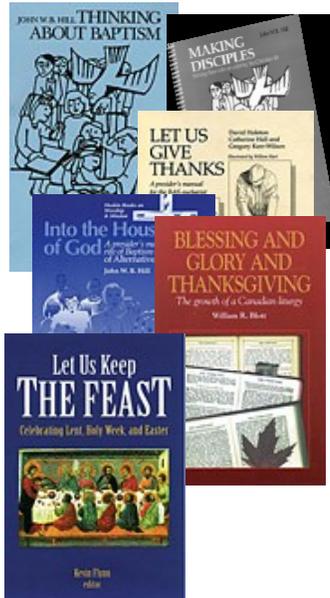
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