

EASTER VIGIL

But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that God will accomplish for you today.' Exodus 14: 15

And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." Matthew 28:10

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.

A holy night indeed. A night when our Jewish sisters and brothers are celebrating the fifth night of Passover, and, because it is a Saturday, many may be celebrating their big Seder. In that ceremonial meal, of course, they commemorate the liberation of the Jews from their slavery in Egypt, and pray for another liberation: next year in Jerusalem.

And a night when we celebrate the dawning of light after the darkness of winter, and Lent, and the deep darkness of Holy Week: Jesus' Passion and death. Liberation from slavery, liberation from darkness and death. Tonight we celebrate liberation, we celebrate freedom.

Freedom from what? Freedom from sin and fear. *We know that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin*, Paul tells us in the Epistle to the Romans we've just heard. Because Jesus has been released from death, so, Paul says, have we.

Now we know that this is not literally true. Jesus died literally. He died historically. The Gospels and all subsequent Christian theology are clear about this, if about little else. Jesus died. And we will die too.

So what we are freed from on this most holy night is not death. It is fear of death. My sister, in her days of intense Christian cult-dom, told me once *Death is the enemy*. She was quoting Paul on this, she said. But I think she got it wrong, and I said that to her. *Death is not the enemy*, I said, *fear is the enemy*.

A great Shakespearean critic wrote once that Hamlet is not afraid of dying, he is afraid of *being dead*. I think Hamlet is rather unusual in that regard. I think many of us, perhaps most of us, are not so much afraid of being dead as we are afraid of *dying*. We are afraid of physical and emotional pain, of loss, of our own cowardice, of being a burden to others.

But I know that's not true for everyone. Many people are afraid, like Hamlet, of *being dead*, and they are afraid, mostly, because they are victims of a theology of fear: fear of punishment, fear of hell. That fear has been strongly, indelibly indoctrinated in far too many poor souls. And I have learned in the course of my ministry that I can't take that theology away through argument or reason.

But if anyone were to ask me: *what should I most hope for as an outcome of following Jesus*, I would say, *freedom. Freedom from fear. Freedom from fear of eternal punishment. Freedom from fear of death.*

Tonight, Jews throughout the world celebrate freedom from bondage, the bondage of oppression, the bondage of persecution, the bondage of genocide. Tonight, Christians throughout the world celebrate freedom as well: the freedoms memorialized in the Passover Seders, but another freedom as well. Freedom from fear; freedom from fear of death.

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A holy night indeed. *Alleluia, Alleluia!* Amen

