

**A Sermon for Parish of the Epiphany
Winchester, Massachusetts
At the Great Vigil of Easter
April 23, 2011
by the Rev. Thomas N. Mousin**

The journey on which we embarked tonight as we stood around the new flame outside is not a new one. The journey I mean is not the one from the Cloister Garden here into Hadley Hall, though many generations of Epiphany members have made that one. Rather, it is the journey of this Easter Vigil, a path traversed by so many before, whose number we cannot count. Although this Vigil service is relatively new to many of us, parts of it are among the most ancient rituals of the church.

Ours are not the first, nor will they be the last voices to sing praises in response to the stories of God's saving actions amidst God's people. Early in the life of the Christian community, the Eve of the Sunday of the Resurrection became a time to gather and to remember all that God had done, starting first with the very creation of the world. It is a well-worn path we trod tonight, walked by countless Christians before us, listening to well worn words. And, as all of the readings remind us, our celebration tonight has its roots in the even older celebration of the Passover, as the Hebrew people crossed the Red Sea waters from slavery into freedom.

Well-worn places and well-worn words can be of great comfort and strength to us. Many years ago, while on a day hike in the White Mountains, I was descending a rather steep part of the trail when suddenly I tripped over a root. As I started to fall, I grasped out and reached the closest tree - whose trunk was just the right size to grab hold of. After I steadied myself, I noticed that the spot where I had grabbed the tree was burnished smooth. Mine was not the first hand to grab for that trunk, which means that I was not the first to trip up in that spot. The well-worn bark bore witness to the many who had come before me.

There can be enormous solace, then in walking the road we walk tonight, where so many have found strength before us. Our readings from scripture are not some random selection of texts to be endured, but rather sturdy reminders of the ways in which God has entered into human life to bring hope, renewal, and salvation.

But if there is comfort and reassurance in these familiar paths, there are also hazards. How easy it can become, when listening to familiar words, to think that we have heard this all before, that we have been this way before, and that there is really nothing more to learn from them. How easy it can become for the various avenues of our lives to become so familiar that they no longer surprise us or teach us.

We know the ways in which our lives can consist of all too much repetition along roads we have been before: these are not the paths of the pilgrim, but rather what, when we are mildly amused by them, we may call ruts. But they are also the ways in which we find ourselves continually trapped by old habits, old ways of thinking, old ways of responding to the challenges of life and old ways of seeing and perceiving reality.

Tonight though, we have an opportunity. For if we are attentive, and if we listen closely to what we hear God doing in these readings, then we realize the paradox of this night: as we listen to the old, old stories, and walk the familiar ways, we discover that God is always doing something new.

It is no well-worn path that the slaves of Egypt traverse this night, but ground on which no human foot has ever trod: the dry bed of a sea whose waters have been parted by mighty winds. And with each step they

take, a new community is being formed, a new covenant is being established, and a new people are being made. And all these things are beyond the imaginings of a people who have been enslaved for so long.

And when Ezekiel speaks to his people who, generations after their liberation have once again been taken into a foreign land where they are oppressed and have no sense of a future, he does not promise a return to something or somewhere old. No, instead he says this:

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you;
and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

For God is doing something new. And the reality is that we can never be truly prepared for that newness. Our ancient stories and our ancient rituals are like containers that hold great truth and meaning about who God is and what God has done. But they are not meant to hold us or to contain and confine our greatest imaginations or hopes. The truth we celebrate tonight is that God is always creating new meaning:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”

Something new is happening.

And so we will continue on this journey tonight. We will walk a well-worn path to the baptismal font. We will see the familiar ritual. We will hear the familiar words of the baptismal vows. But there, as Dylan is baptized, God will be doing a new thing. And the Body of Christ will be changed for eternity in ways we cannot imagine by the addition of this brother to the community of faith.

And we will continue on our way, both tonight and tomorrow, to a tomb. We may have walked there before. We may have heard the words before. But whether we have believed those words or doubted, been confused by them or even ignored them, may we hear them anew tonight. And when we feel beneath our feet the earth quaking as the great stone is rolled away, may we know that it is really an earth making: the new creation of Christ being formed in our hearts, in our community here this night, and indeed, in the whole of the world.

Amen.