

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

Easter Vigil
April 7, 2007
Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Transforming Spirit”

On this night, Christians gather to baptize those who were becoming Christians for the first time, in a service of light. Tonight we too gather to herald the Resurrection of the Lord and to baptize Leilanni, Olivia and Jonathon into the family of God and into this congregation.

In the Gospel story it is the women who are the first to witness and hear of Jesus being risen, and they are instructed to go and tell Jesus' disciples. Tonight, in our vigil service the whole of human salvation is re-enacted through the readings and the lighting of the Paschal fire of Easter.

Christians may well have stolen the imagery of the fire from early Pagan Festivals, but it fits now so well with what we are trying to say about how Christ broke through the darkness of death and the light of his Resurrection has brought us all new hope.

Resurrection is something that each of us experiences many times in our life. We do so at the birth of our child, or when we recover from a serious illness or injury. Even beginning a new job, recovering from divorce, or re-marrying fills us with that feeling that we can begin again and that we have something to live for.

Christianity is like that, it is about transformation and it is about Resurrection. When you think about it, this rag-tag group of people who followed a would-be Messiah-Jesus, should have had no expectation that they could survive against Judaism and the power of the Roman Empire. Yet, somehow they did. More, they went on to transform their world and the Roman Empire with it.

Bishop Paul is fond of saying: “Things change when they get wet.” Tonight we all get wet with the water of Baptism. That calls for change in our life.

Baptism is serious in our life, and allows the power of God free reign in that life. There is a sense, that when we do that our life is never again our own. Because when God enters our life, things happen. From the day the Holy Spirit enters the Apostles at Pentecost, nothing in their life remains the same. Their home, occupation, and even character changes. They become empowered so that people ask: “Are these not simple Galileans and fisherman who followed the teacher Jesus? Did we not know their parents, and brothers and sisters?”

Baptism does the same transformation in our life too. Oh we may not be aware of it in our early years, where the spirit seems to play a protection passive role, but as soon as we begin to renew our Baptismal vows and take them seriously; as soon as we begin to say “Come Holy Spirit-fill my heart.” I guarantee you, that nothing in your life can stay the same.

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

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Even if at times, you believe your faith to be a little shaky; the one day you drop to your knees and in heartfelt desperation cry: “God, help me. Send me your Spirit.”

Things in your life will change. Any of us who think that we can tap into the gifts of God’s power and his Spirit, which is the fruits of Jesus’ death on the cross, must have our motives pure. For God will not be fooled. St Paul warns us that we mess with the Holy Spirit at our peril.

Yet, isn’t it ironic in our life that we think we can solve every problem, cure every ill, balance every aspect of life and still remain sweet people. Show me someone who can micro-manage their life and I will show you someone who could not see a lake if they were sitting at the bottom of it, never mind seeing God’s poor, God’s handicapped, God’s sick, God’s lonely children in need.

No. We cannot use the Spirit to transform ourselves, but we can allow the Spirit to transform us and the results, effect and circumstances of that transformation will not be of our choosing.

In 1988 I was sitting at supper with other priests in my college when one of them named Brian Justice told me: “I see they are looking for people to go out to Liberia in West Africa again, why don’t you go?” I looked at him and replied: “with my father the age he is, I couldn’t think about it.”

Then I reversed the question on Brian who was a good fifteen to twenty year older than me. “Why don’t you go?” I said. “You’ve done everything here you ever wanted to do. You’ve taught high school, taught Philosophy at college, and been a Principal. There are few challenges left. Why not have a change as well as an adventure and go preach the Gospel in West Africa?”

Much to my surprise Brian left for Africa three months later. My school Principal cursed me for a month for losing him the best math teacher the school had ever had.

Brian has been in Africa ever since. That is 19 years of continual service, long after the time he should have retired. He first worked in war torn Liberia, but for the last 10 years has served in Tanganyika.

People shake their heads in amazement and say: “You are the last person on earth we ever thought would end up building schools and hospitals in Africa. Why on earth did you swap cricket, high school and tea for a life like that?”

The Holy Spirit operates in mysterious ways. Read these vows that we all renew tonight, seriously, and there is no accounting for what the Spirit has planned for each one of us. We

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may never have anything as dynamic as the transformation that took place in Brian's life, but we will be transformed and for the better.

Tonight as we hear the Gospel account of the empty tomb and the command to go and tell the Good News to others, we pray for Leilanni, Olivia and Jonathan as they set out on their Christian journey through life. None of us can predict what is ahead for them, but what we can promise is that they will always find a second home here among friends who truly care about them. May you all have a blessed Easter.

Amen+

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