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#### Editors’ Note

The year 2019 marks the 500th anniversary of the Leipzig Debate (or Leipzig Disputation). In Leipzig at the Pleissenburg Castle, Luther's colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt debated John Eck from June 27 to July 3 on grace, free will, and justification. From July 4 to 8, Luther took Karlstadt's place and debated with Eck especially on the question of whether the pope was established by God as head of the Church. Our first two articles commemorate this debate. They were presented originally at the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at CTSFW, which was held Jan. 16–18, 2019. They remind us of what was at stake, and what we still joyfully affirm: Christ as the head of the Church, and God's Word as the sole infallible authority.

## Reclaiming the Easter Vigil and Reclaiming Our Real Story<sup>1</sup>

Randy K. Asbury

The church's essential purpose and mission in this fallen world is to tell a story, but not just any story. The church's true and only story narrates humanity's lapse from God, plunging the human race and all of creation into sin, all manner of corruption, and even death itself. And then it speaks the life-giving, life-changing news of God's rescue, redemption, and renewal through his Son, Jesus the Christ. The church is called to tell this biblical, historical narrative both to the world for the life of the world (proclamation) and back to God in praise and worship (liturgy). This storytelling is none other than the faithful receiving and proclaiming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who by his death and resurrection forgives our sins and brings us into his life and salvation, now and into eternity.

In his article "How the World Lost Its Story," Robert W. Jenson explores how modernism has given way to postmodernism, specifically highlighting how the "realistic narratives" of modernism have given way to the different kinds of stories of postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> According to Jenson, modernism's "realistic narratives" could actually happen in the real world, whereas postmodernism's stories make sense only in and of themselves in their own fictional story worlds. In other words, it is impossible for them to occur in the real world. Jenson looks to novels of Jane Austen and James Baldwin, the histories of Gibbon, the local newspaper, and even soap operas as examples of "realistic narratives" that do or could really happen. For examples of postmodernism's stories that make sense exclusively within their fictional story worlds, we may consider the plethora of superhero or science fiction stories so popular on screens big and small.

Jenson's exploration of these divergent types of stories leads us to consider and return to the Scriptures as "[the] archetypical body of realistic narrative" and God himself as the "universal storyteller."<sup>3</sup> The experiment of the Enlightenment, Jenson argues, sought to maintain the realism of the world's story while simultaneously disconnecting humanity from God. "Modernity was defined by the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller."<sup>4</sup> Now, postmodernism has taken

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a reworked version of the author's presentation "This Is the Night: Introducing and Exploring the Easter Vigil," presented at the 2016 Good Shepherd Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things*, March 2010, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/how-the-world-lost-its-story> (originally published October 1993; accessed October 24, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story."

<sup>4</sup> Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story."

the next step of disconnecting humanity from its story line—and from reality itself—through its unrealistic stories. As Jenson notes, “If there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line. Neither you nor I nor all of us together can so shape the world that it can make narrative sense; if God does not invent the world’s story, then it has none, then the world has no narrative that is its own. If there is no God, or indeed if there is some other God than the God of the Bible, there is no narratable world.”<sup>5</sup>

How is the church to tell her God-given, absolutely true story in a world that has no common, real story and no “universal storyteller”? Since we can no longer presume a narratable world able to receive the historical, biblical narrative, Jenson suggests “the church must herself *be* that world.”<sup>6</sup> Jenson appeals to the church of antiquity, both Old and New Testaments, as the storyteller who brings God’s very own story into the world of meaningless chaos, particularly through her liturgy.<sup>7</sup>

This brings us to our consideration of the Easter Vigil and reclaiming it in our time. Of the many liturgical services in a congregation’s annual journey through the church year, the Easter Vigil excels at narrating the whole of God’s true biblical and historical narrative. While this service may seem a novelty to many Christians in our day, it actually has rich, deep roots in the Old and New Testaments and in the early centuries of the Christian church. Since the narrative(s) of God redeeming his lost and condemned creatures through Jesus Christ is foundational to our salvation and our being Christian, the Easter Vigil leads us to ponder that overarching narrative and relive it as our very own. Not only does the Easter Vigil serve as the climax to the liturgical days of Holy Week and the Holy Three Days (Triduum), it also serves as the apex of the entire church year. From this summit service and its retelling of God’s real story of salvation through Jesus Christ, we see clearly the import of the preceding time in the church’s year (Advent through Good Friday), and we can look out over the coming liturgical landscape (Easter through Sunday of Fulfillment) to see that our “story” is filled with genuine hope and purpose. God first makes known his story of salvation in Christ, and the church, in turn, lives and tells that story for the life of the world. The Easter Vigil leads us to put that whole story together so that we may both live it and proclaim it.

### I. Whence Comes the Easter Vigil?

In *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Fred Precht traces the Vigil back to the early fourth century.<sup>8</sup> Timothy Maschke traces the Easter Vigil back to Jewish-

<sup>5</sup> Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story.”

<sup>6</sup> Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story,” emphasis original.

<sup>7</sup> See Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story.”

<sup>8</sup> Fred L. Precht, ed., *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia

Christian customs of celebrating the Passover and recalling the accounts of God's deliverance at an evening service.<sup>9</sup> *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book* refers to the early centuries of the Christian church and defines "vigil" as keeping watch "through the night in expectation of Christ's return."<sup>10</sup>

We can see biblical roots of the Vigil service in the exodus of Israel from Egypt. As God stepped into human history to rescue and deliver his people, the Israelites were to gather at twilight, prepare and partake of the Passover meal, and await his mighty deliverance in the dark hours of night, when he would slay the firstborn of Egypt (Exodus 12). This evening Passover meal would also become "a statute forever" throughout their generations (Exod 12:17). The Passover was their very own deliverance, because "It was a night of watching by the Lord, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations" (Exod 12:42).<sup>11</sup> Forty years later, when Moses prepared the Israelites to enter the Promised Land, the succeeding generation—who had not lived through the oppressive slavery in Egypt nor the exodus from that land—were also to celebrate the Passover as their own story. Moses told them: "Observe the month of Abib and keep the Passover to the Lord your God, for in the month of Abib the Lord your God brought *you* out of Egypt by night. And *you* shall offer the Passover sacrifice to the Lord your God, from the flock or the herd, at the place that the Lord will choose, to make his name dwell there" (Deut 16:1–2).<sup>12</sup> When Moses instructed God's people to observe the Feast of Weeks

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Publishing House, 1993), 169: "After A.D. 313 the Easter Vigil was the prime time for baptisms of adults who had been instructed during Lent. It also ushered in the resurrection celebration. The Vigil thus focused on the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–5). By 400 in Africa and Northern Italy there was also a solemn celebration of light, since all lamps were customarily extinguished on Holy Thursday evening. The modern adaptation of this ancient service remembers the Exodus from Egypt, celebrates the death and resurrection of Christ, includes the sacrament of Baptism, looks forward to Jesus' return, and may conclude with the Lord's Supper."

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Maschke, *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 309: "Although a relatively new service among Lutherans, the Easter Vigil has a long and revered tradition. Perhaps dating to early Jewish-Christian practices of an evening service in preparation for Passover, the Vigil recalls the many accounts of God's deliverance of His people."

<sup>10</sup> *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 529. It also adds, "A vigil in expectation of Christ's return at Easter became a common feature of the celebration of His crucifixion and resurrection."

<sup>11</sup> All quotations from the Scriptures, unless noted otherwise, are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>12</sup> Emphasis added.

(seven weeks after the Passover), he said, “You shall remember that *you* were a slave in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes” (Deut 16:12).<sup>13</sup>

In the New Testament, all four Gospel writers explicitly connect our Lord’s final meal, his crucifixion, and his resurrection to the Old Testament Passover deliverance. The Synoptic Gospels all narrate Jesus’ institution of the Lord’s Supper in the context of the Passover meal, on the evening of “the first day of Unleavened Bread” (Matt 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–20). In John’s Gospel, the Feast of Passover marked the time “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). When Pontius Pilate summoned the crowd to behold their king, the apostle John specifically notes that it was “the day of Preparation of the Passover” (John 19:14; cf. 19:31, 42), the day on which our Lord Jesus Christ, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), was sacrificed on the cross. Later in the New Testament, the apostle Paul connects the Old Testament Passover story to first-century Christians as their own story. For example, 1 Corinthians 5:6–8, the traditional Epistle for celebrating the Resurrection of Our Lord, refers to “Christ, our Passover lamb” who “has been sacrificed” and exhorts believers to “celebrate the festival” as they “cleanse out the old leaven that [they] may be a new lump.” Thus God tells his Passover salvation story in order that his people may receive it, live it, and proclaim it.

Early Christian writers often viewed God’s once-for-all act of delivering his people from sin and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as the ultimate Passover. We see this in earlier writers such as Justin (*Dialog with Trypho*), Melito of Sardis (*On the Pascha*), and Irenaeus (*Against the Heresies*), as well as in later church fathers both East and West, including Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus of Rome, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, and Augustine of Hippo.<sup>14</sup>

In this context of the Passover story being the Christian’s story, we also see evidence of the Easter Vigil in early Christian writings. Chapter 20 of the *Apostolic Tradition* (perhaps third century) discusses those who are to receive Baptism at the end of Lent. First, the bishop would exorcise the candidates for Baptism. Then he would “sign them” with the cross on their foreheads, ears, nose, and heart. Then, in the Arabic, we receive this exhortation: “And let them spend the whole night

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<sup>13</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> See Raniero Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church: An Anthology of Jewish and Early Christian Texts*, trans. and ed. James M. Quigley and Joseph T. Lienhard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993).

listening to readings and preaching.”<sup>15</sup> The *Canons of Hippolytus* (early fourth century) offers this parallel: “They are to spend all their night in the sacred Word and prayers.”<sup>16</sup> The *Testamentum Domini* (fourth/fifth century) gives this context: “In the forty days of Pascha, let the people abide in the temple, keeping vigil and praying, hearing the Scriptures and hymns of praise and the books of doctrine. But on the last Saturday let them come early in the night, and when the catechumens are being exorcised till Saturday midnight.”<sup>17</sup>

Egeria’s *Travels in the Holy Land* (late fourth/early fifth century) recounts her visit to the Holy Land circa 383 and provides a detailed description of Jerusalem’s observance of the Holy Three Days (Triduum). Egeria observed “normal services” at nine o’clock and midday on Holy Saturday, but then noted a ceasing of services at three o’clock “because they are preparing for the paschal vigil in the Great Church, the Martyrium.” She then compared the vigil in Jerusalem to that with which she and her readers were familiar in the Western church, saying that those in Jerusalem kept the Vigil “like us.” Egeria also noted one addition that occurred in the Jerusalem Vigil: “As soon as the ‘infants’<sup>18</sup> have been baptized and clothed, and left the font, they are led with the bishop straight to the Anastasis.”<sup>19</sup>

## II. Why the Easter Vigil Now?

Charting the centuries-long practice of celebrating the Easter Vigil, examining the Western church’s gradual moves of celebrating the service at earlier daytime hours on Holy Saturday—thus abandoning the keeping watch through the night—and exploring the general abandonment of the Easter Vigil until recent times are all beyond the scope of this paper. We do know that in the twentieth century, churches began to reclaim the Easter Vigil. Paul Bosch explains that the Vigil is an ancient order that is being newly reclaimed. Among Roman Catholics, that reclamation has taken place since World War II, when Pope Pius XII officially reinstated it. Anglicans, Lutherans, and others have been reclaiming the Vigil even more recently.<sup>20</sup> Edward T. Horn III in *The Christian Year* claims that the Easter Vigil fell

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<sup>15</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 106.

<sup>16</sup> Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 107. The authors also comment on the frequent use of vigils in the early church: “Evidence for vigils other than at Easter may be sparse for the first three centuries of the Christian era, but it is not completely absent (see, e.g., Tertullian *Ad uxor.* 2.4; Pontius *De vita et passion Cypriani* 15; and canon 35 of the Council of Elvira). Later evidence indicates that vigils on other feasts (e.g. Pentecost and Epiphany), Sundays, at the tombs of martyrs, and on other occasions were common and widespread” (111).

<sup>18</sup> Latin: *infantes*, common term referring to the catechumens just baptized.

<sup>19</sup> Egeria, *Travels in the Holy Land*, 35–39; see Cantalamessa, *Easter in the Early Church*, 103.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Bosch, *Church Year Guide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 38–41.

out of use in Protestant circles “largely because of their aversion to the blessing of things, rather than for any serious doctrinal difficulties.”<sup>21</sup> Horn also sees some similarity between the Easter Vigil in the Western church and the Easter Eve custom of the Eastern church, thus attesting to the catholicity of the service.<sup>22</sup>

Reclaiming the Easter Vigil among Lutherans, however, must have a greater purpose than mere rediscovery and repristination of an ancient rite. Our twentieth- and now twenty-first-century reclamation of this ancient service is indeed a rediscovery of a precious jewel, dusting it off, and resetting it into the necklace of our liturgical life. We do this, however, in order to enhance our reception and telling of God’s story of saving us sinners and making us his people through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Reclaiming and celebrating the Easter Vigil dovetails quite well with the rationale given in the Lutheran Confessions for maintaining church ceremonies, specifically the Divine Service (“the Mass”). In Article XV of the Augsburg, we confess that “ceremonies and other practices that are profitable for tranquility and good order in the Church (in particular, holy days, festivals, and the like) ought to be observed.”<sup>23</sup> To this, we may add the statement from AC XXIV extolling the Mass: “Therefore, the Mass was instituted so that those who use the Sacrament should remember, in faith, the benefits they receive through Christ and how their anxious consciences are cheered and comforted. To remember Christ is to remember His benefits.”<sup>24</sup> As we will see below, the Easter Vigil service in general and the Service of Readings in particular amply lead us to remember Christ and his benefits—that is, to receive, learn, and tell his story.

The reformers went to great lengths to clarify and confess that we keep ancient traditions that do not seek to merit the forgiveness of sins. “No tradition was set up by the Holy Fathers for the purpose of meriting the forgiveness of sins, or righteousness. Rather, they were instituted for the sake of good order in the Church and for the sake of peace.”<sup>25</sup> Celebrating the Easter Vigil by no means merits

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<sup>21</sup> Edward T. Horn III, *The Christian Year* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 127.

<sup>22</sup> Horn, *The Christian Year*, 129: “Some idea of the ancient practice may still be found in the Eastern churches. There the vigil is still observed with the last devotions of Lent—the people prostrating themselves before the tomb set up in the front of the church. Just before midnight the procession forms to go out of the church, with the clergy and people bearing the sacred vessels, books and banners. While the procession perambulates the church to the accompaniment of the church bells, the tomb is removed, candles replaced and the altar dressed for the first mass of Easter, which begins with the triumphant entry of the procession at midnight.”

<sup>23</sup> AC XV 1; Paul Timothy McCain and Edward Engelbrecht, eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 39.

<sup>24</sup> AC XXIV 30–31; *Concordia*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Ap XV 13; *Concordia*, 190.

forgiveness, nor does it earn salvation. It does, however, promote the good order of the church as it anchors us in the centuries-long practice of living and proclaiming the story of Christ's death and resurrection. This service also benefits the body as it gives us a more sensory experience than we may be accustomed to the rest of the year—gathering in the dark, the light of Christ piercing the darkness, unhurriedly hearing and meditating on God's Word, experiencing the joyous burst of light once Christ's resurrection is proclaimed. "The Fathers celebrated human rites for the body's benefit" too.<sup>26</sup>

Apology XXIV says that "ceremonies should be celebrated to teach people Scripture, that those admonished by the Word may conceive faith and godly fear, and may also pray."<sup>27</sup> The Easter Vigil does this plenteously in the Service of Readings as the congregation hears the overarching story line of God's salvation from the Garden of Eden to the empty tomb. Apology XXIV also speaks of ceremonies that are received by faith: "A ceremony is a sort of picture, or seal, as Paul (Romans 4:11) calls it, the Word making known the promise. Therefore, just as the promise is useless unless it is received through faith, so a ceremony is useless unless faith, which is truly confident that the forgiveness of sins is here offered, is added."<sup>28</sup> The Easter Vigil is rich with ceremony, much of it not experienced through the rest of the liturgical year. This ceremony can be received with faith and for the benefit of faith—the light of Christ piercing the darkness as the paschal candle processes into the nave, like the Old Testament pillar of fire; patiently waiting, hearing God's Word, meditating and praying in semi-darkness; being renewed in our Baptism; bursting forth in joy upon hearing that Christ is risen; and receiving his holy body and blood that give eternal life.

Even as the Easter Vigil is being reclaimed in our time, some may still wonder why they themselves should consider it. Despite the biblical and historical roots of the service and how it fits with our Lutheran Confessions, some may still ask, "Why?"

One question that often arises is this: Why would we choose to celebrate Easter early, that is, before Easter Sunday morning? Congregation members and fellow pastors may express concern that the Vigil could remove, or at least downplay, the "surprise" of Easter Sunday. Three responses are appropriate. First, there really is no "surprise" to our Easter celebration. We in the church already know the story, because it is a historical event and has been told for nearly two thousand years. We intellectually know what happened and how God worked his salvation through the

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<sup>26</sup> Ap XV 20; *Concordia*, 191.

<sup>27</sup> Ap XXIV 3; *Concordia*, 220.

<sup>28</sup> Ap XXIV 70; *Concordia*, 231.

death and resurrection of his only-begotten Son, the Word made flesh. When we celebrate the Vigil, we go beyond what we already know. Once again, we place ourselves into that story as our story. This is *our* Passover from death to life, from sin to forgiveness.

Second, we can look at the timeline and timing of the Vigil. The Easter Vigil is intended to be a time of waiting, preparing, and watching for the celebration and a time of reliving the story about to burst forth. In the tradition of the Eastern Church, the waiting, watching, and processing begins late on Saturday. Then, at midnight—now “Easter Sunday”—the *bona fide* celebration kicks into high gear, going into the wee hours of the morning. More beneficial would be considering the Easter Vigil from the ancient reckoning of time, the historical context whence it comes. In the ancient reckoning of time (Jesus’ day and into the early church), the day actually began at sundown on the evening before. We recall the order from creation: “There was *evening* and there was *morning*, the first day” (Gen 1:5, emphasis added). While we may celebrate the Easter Vigil on Saturday evening by our Western time reckoning, it is also—and already—Easter Sunday by biblical and ancient time reckoning.

Third, consider what we are celebrating. On Easter Eve, we celebrate the biggest, most profound event that changes us, our lives, indeed all of human history—namely, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hence the church sets aside not merely one Sunday to celebrate Easter, but an entire week of Sundays—seven weeks, fifty whole days. This is the church’s way of saying, “This resurrection thing is so big that we cannot contain all the joy and all the celebration in just one Sunday.” Likewise, the Easter Vigil, on the front end, is the church’s way of saying, “We simply cannot wait to get that celebration underway!” Perhaps it helps to think of a child at Christmastime. Despite mother’s repeated commands not to, the child may frequently sneak under the Christmas tree to shake the presents in an effort to discern what rattling sounds they give and what clues those sounds may proffer. Children are eager to get to the celebration of the story. In the same way, Christians are eager to get to the celebration of their God-given story, their new life in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Speaking of Christmas, we may also connect the Easter Vigil with this more commonly accepted, and rather expected, celebration in the church year. Most Lutheran congregations celebrate our Lord’s incarnation on both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. (And pastors do wish that congregation members would take part in *all* the services to receive the full message and meaning of the story, not merely pick and choose the service time that fits into their family traditions.) The traditional Christmas “candlelight service” serves as a telltale sign of a vigil, or keeping watch, at Christmas. When this Christmas Eve service is celebrated as a midnight service,

even beginning at 11:00 p.m., it functions in the same manner as the Easter Vigil prior to Easter Sunday morning. Why start celebrating Christmas *before* Christmas Day? Why gather at such an odd hour, when little ones are sleepy and come to church dressed in their “church pajamas,” as one worshiper once phrased it? The answer is simple: we are holding vigil, keeping watch, for Christ’s coming at Christmas. First, on Christmas Eve, we wait and watch by hearing the story of our Lord’s Nativity (Luke 2). Then on Christmas Day, we actually celebrate and plumb the depths of meaning that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). We may consider such a Christmas Eve service to be something of a “vestigial vigil.” This vestigial vigil at Christmas, by analogy, can help us introduce and celebrate the Easter Vigil itself. Both are essential parts of the story that God himself narrates for us and through us.

### III. What Is the Easter Vigil?

Now we take a look at the “beating heart” of the Easter Vigil. What is the overall thrust of the service? How does the service move and flow in bringing us God’s story of salvation to receive, live, and proclaim?

#### Its Beating Heart

The Easter Vigil is designed to be celebrated in the dark hours of the evening of Holy Saturday, the evening before the joys of Easter burst forth in full bloom.<sup>29</sup> Here we keep in mind that the service is about two things: (1) Easter itself, the narrative of our Lord’s resurrection victory over death, and (2) keeping watch (vigil) that we may receive, be immersed in, and relive that biblical, historical story.

The term “Easter” draws us back to the great Hebrew *pesach* (in Greek, the *pascha*), that is, the Passover. Celebrating the Old Testament Passover was no mere hasty mental recollection of what happened a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Rather, it was ancient Israel’s way of “reenacting” or “participating in”—even “owning”—the reality of God’s salvation given in his mighty works of rescue and his meal of deliverance. In Deuteronomy 6, Moses exhorted the second generation of post-Egypt Israelites: “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand’” (Deut 6:20–21).<sup>30</sup> Note the first person plural pronouns. Not just “they,” but *we* were slaves

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<sup>29</sup> With appropriate adaptations, it could also be used in the predawn hours of Easter Sunday morning, for the traditional “Easter Sunrise” service.

<sup>30</sup> Emphasis added.

in Egypt. The Lord delivered *us*, not just “them.” The second generation and all future generations, who had *not* experienced firsthand the slavery nor the Lord’s mighty deeds in the exodus, were to celebrate the same rescue and the same meal as their very own. This is the same thrust in the Easter Vigil. The story of Christ’s *pesach/pascha/Passover*—God’s salvation by the Word made flesh, from beginning to end, from creation to crucifixion and resurrection and beyond—is our story. We own it because, by God’s gracious gift and free forgiveness, he makes it our very own.

This story becomes our very own, and ours to tell, most powerfully and fittingly in vigil—in patiently waiting, in eagerly watching, in joyously taking our time to rehear and relive the whole story of Christ’s salvation from beginning to end. Speaking pragmatically, the Easter Vigil is our time to ignore our clocks, watches, and electronic gadgets that keep us enslaved to a schedule, at least for one evening. Pastors and parishioners need to be prepared for and embrace a longer service, and intentionally so. We twenty-first-century Americans readily and eagerly sit motionless for a two- or two-and-a-half-hour movie that portrays a fictional story. We can certainly manage to carve out a couple of hours to rehear and relive our most authentic, most meaningful, most historical, most biblical, and most true-to-life “real narrative” of being recipients of God’s rescue in Christ Jesus. All of this is to say that “vigil” means both “keep watch” and “be ready to take your time in keeping watch.” There is no need to rush through what God himself delights to proclaim and give over and over again through time and into eternity.

Paul Bosch describes the beating heart of the Easter Vigil as keeping watch with the Lord himself as we celebrate the faith in the present. “The Vigil is an evening service, when the church keeps watch (in ancient times, through the night, right up till Easter dawn!) with its Lord, recalls its holy history, reaffirms its baptismal faith, and celebrates the first Communion of Easter. So the Vigil may be said to contain the fullness of paschal faith: a veritable catechism of faith’s meaning and a breath-taking reenactment of faith’s dramatic journey, anticipated, affirmed, and fulfilled.”<sup>31</sup> Philip Pfatteicher describes the beating heart of the Easter Vigil by highlighting the ritual actions and gestures, initiated long ago, that draw us into “replaying” the Christian story of salvation. He writes, “Space is transcended: the act of remembering takes place at a grave, but the grave is anywhere the event is recalled. The church building and with it the congregation moves from darkness to light, and in the font the baptized move from death to resurrection, boldly challenging the threatening powers of darkness and death. Time is transcended: ‘this is the night’ the Exsultet sings again and again, for the Passover and the Resurrection

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<sup>31</sup> Bosch, *Church Year Guide*, 38–39.

and the church's celebration of Easter all merge and become contemporary events." Pfatteicher explains that in the Vigil service the original event lives again. "What happened once *in illo tempore* (at that time) is repeated again and again *hic et nunc* (here and now) as an experienced reality. It is a re-creation of what happened in the archetypal event, newly activated in the here and now of each celebration. The fullness of the Christian faith is found in the Vigil..."<sup>32</sup>

### The Movement of the Easter Vigil

How does the Easter Vigil move and flow as it delivers God's story of salvation for us to receive, live, and proclaim? The rite in *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book* gives a six-part outline to the Vigil.<sup>33</sup>

#### *The Service of Light*

Ideally, the Service of Light begins in a place other than the nave, preferably outside, after sundown (weather permitting, of course) and moves us step by step from darkness into light. A fire may be built outside, on the ground or in a brazier, to symbolize the light penetrating the darkness and to facilitate the lighting of the paschal candle. "As at creation light came into the darkness, so at the beginning of the celebration of the new creation a fire is kindled in the darkness."<sup>34</sup> The paschal candle serves as a sign of the presence of Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, bringing the splendor of his resurrection into the place of worship and the world. It also draws our attention back to the children of Israel as they were led through the wilderness and into the Promised Land by the pillar of fire. For us Christians, this pillar of light in the paschal candle leads us out of the slavery of sin and into the joyous new life of being God's children, anticipating the ultimate promised land of our Lord's new creation.

After the opening address and prayer, the paschal candle is lit according to the detailed rubrics in the *Altar Book*. The ritual actions of tracing the Alpha and the Omega, placing the year on the candle, and inserting the five nails are salutary ceremonies that, done well and not rushed, communicate the focal point of the whole service: Christ crucified and risen is coming to bring us out of darkness into his most marvelous light.

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<sup>32</sup> Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 258–259. Pfatteicher seems eager to connect the Vigil service—the specifically Christian Passover—with the general religious experience of all of fallen humanity, but we can appreciate what he says specifically related to the “beating heart” of the Vigil itself.

<sup>33</sup> *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book*, 529.

<sup>34</sup> Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 328.

Following a prayer, the Service of Light continues with the Entrance. The paschal candle leads the procession into the church, followed by the choir, the baptismal and confirmation candidates, other worshipers, and finally the assisting ministers and the presiding pastor. As the paschal candle proceeds down the center aisle, worshipers light their candles from it and then pass the light to others. The semi-dark sanctuary becomes slightly more lit from the candles, but not yet at full light. As the procession enters, one choir member sings, “The light of Christ,” and the congregation responds, “Thanks be to God.” These lines are repeated until all candles are lit and all are in their places.

Then the Exsultet—the song calling for all of creation, including us, to rejoice in God’s ultimate redemption and deliverance—is sung. Following the Exsultet comes the greeting and the proper preface, akin to what we hear and sing during the Communion liturgy on Sundays. This proper preface, however, repeats the phrase, “This is the night” and recounts the story of God’s salvation, explicitly tying Christ’s atoning work to the story of the exodus. Following the Exsultet, the congregation extinguishes the candles and places them on the floor.

#### *The Service of Readings*

For the second portion of the Vigil, *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book* gives twelve potential Scripture readings, with appropriate psalms or canticles that may be used for sung reflection on each portion of God’s Word after it is heard. “It is not expected that all twelve readings will be read,”<sup>35</sup> the *Altar Book* evangelically notes. In Gospel-centered Christian freedom, the pastor will carefully choose readings based on both the guidance in the *Altar Book* and his congregation’s ability to endure more and longer readings. This endurance can certainly increase after years of offering the Easter Vigil service. The *Altar Book* does give three readings that are always read: (1) The Creation (Gen 1:1–2:3); (2) The Flood (Gen 7:1–5, 11–18; 8:6–18; 9:8–13); and (3) Israel’s Deliverance at the Red Sea (Exod 14:10–15:1). When a fourth reading is added, it is to be The Fiery Furnace (Dan 3:1–30). When other readings are added or rotated in and out, all of the readings chosen are read in the order in which they are listed in the *Altar Book*.<sup>36</sup>

The point of the Service of Readings is not how many readings are used or which ones are chosen beyond the three or four, but that the entire scope of God’s saving work in Christ Jesus may be read, heard, marked, learned, and inwardly digested. Remember, we are holding vigil. We are waiting. We are watching for Christ’s coming in his resurrection. There is no hurry, no rush. Rather, we are delighting to gather together, to hear God’s Word, to be comforted and reminded

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<sup>35</sup> *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book*, 530.

<sup>36</sup> See *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book*, 530.

of our real story in Christ. When it comes to the pastor's preaching task at the Vigil, the multitude of readings provides bountiful material for a brief homily, not in thorough, expository preaching, but in weaving together key themes and pointing them all to their proper fulfillment in Jesus' victorious bursting forth from the grave.

In keeping with the patient waiting of vigil and in order to allow for meditation on the portions of God's Word that are heard, silence for meditation is kept after each reading. For congregations new to the Vigil, thirty seconds is sufficient; for those more accustomed to silent reflection on God's Word, sixty seconds is very doable. Such times of silent meditation on the Word of God allow us to ponder anew what God has done for us and how he makes Jesus' story our story. The pastor will want to prepare his people in advance for this part of the service. Sung meditation on the readings may also be included, using the suggested psalms or canticles. Here again, however, the congregation need not be overburdened by too much taking place, especially if the Vigil is still new. If five or six readings are selected, only one or two psalms/canticles would suffice. Care should also be taken that the congregation can sing the selections with confidence and ease, especially in the dimly lit space.

The Service of Readings gives us the bird's-eye view of the scope of God's creation and his redemption of us sinners. Far from being randomly ordered Scripture passages, these readings immerse us in our real narrative, written and carried out by our "universal storyteller," the triune God. Here we rehearse and relive the centuries-long flow, from beginning to end, of God's work of redeeming us from sin and rescuing us from eternal death.

- The Creation story (Gen 1:1–2:3) recalls not only God's original will for us and his world, but also reminds us how we humans have sinned and fallen short of the glory he intended for us.
- The Flood story (Gen 7:1–5, 11–18; 8:6–18; 9:8–13) proclaims God's judgment upon human sin and evil as well as his salvation through the floodwaters, specifically pointing us to our Baptism (see 1 Pet 3:20–21).
- The Testing of Abraham account (Gen 22:1–18) prepares us to anticipate and expect the sacrifice that God himself would make of his only-begotten Son.
- The narrative of Israel's Deliverance at the Red Sea (Exod 14:10–15:1) ties our deliverance from sin and death to God's deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt. As they followed the pillar of cloud and fire to their safety, we follow our risen Savior into eternal life.
- The prophetic passages, Isaiah 55:1–11 ("Salvation Offered Freely to All") and Ezekiel 36:24–28 ("A New Heart and a New Spirit"), both invoke the prophetic

witness to the coming Savior, who freely offers his salvation that creates a new heart and spirit in us.

- In Deuteronomy 31:19–30, we hear the narrative of God’s Faithfulness to Israel and us as we learn, sing, and teach the song of his salvation as a witness to him.
- The Valley of Dry Bones story (Ezek 37:1–14) illustrates how God breathes his new life, achieved in Christ’s death and resurrection, into us through the work of his Holy Spirit.
- The account of Job confessing the living Redeemer (Job 19:20–27) leads us to confident trust in the One who has conquered death itself and promises bodily, fleshly resurrection for us.
- The story of Jonah preaching in Nineveh (Jonah 3:1–10) proclaims both Jesus’ three-day rest in the grave and the victory we have in baptismal repentance, daily dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ.
- The Gathering of God’s People in Zephaniah 3:12–20 provides a much-needed remedy to the individualism and self-centeredness of our age: our salvation in Christ crucified and risen ushers us into the joys of God’s community, the body of Christ, together rescued from our oppressors of sin, death, and devil.
- Finally, the Fiery Furnace narrative (Dan 3:1–30), the capstone of the readings, shows us that not only does our risen Savior accompany us in the fiery trials of this fallen world, but through his death and resurrection he also preserves and delivers us.

When we gather in vigil, we gather to wait and watch for Christ’s Easter coming. As we wait, we hear again the real story of God’s salvation for sinners and restoration of creation through his Son, again making the story our own and reliving it. The Service of Readings allows us to unplug from our twenty-first-century digital craziness and distraction, and such unplugging does no one any existential harm. In fact, it might just give the peace and the joy that so many people so hastily clamor to discover.

#### *The Service of Holy Baptism*

After the Service of Readings comes the Service of Holy Baptism, a slightly abbreviated form of the regular Rite of Baptism in *Lutheran Service Book: Pew Edition*. The Service of Baptism is always used, whether candidates for Baptism are present or not. The exhortation includes Romans 6 and Luther’s “Flood Prayer,” both most appropriate for celebrating our Easter *Pascha*. If there are candidates

for Baptism, they joyously receive God's gifts of forgiveness and life through water and his word. If there are no candidates for Baptism, the congregation still delights to remember the joys of Baptism once again. Again, this is our Christian Passover story being enacted and relived in our midst.

The Rite of Confirmation comes at this point in the service, when there are catechumens to be confirmed. The Easter Vigil is perhaps the most fitting annual time when the congregation confirms those who have been instructed and examined in the faith. After all, it was in this liturgical context in the early church when catechumens were first catechized during Lent, then baptized and led to confess the faith on Easter Eve, then to proceed to the altar for their first Communion at the Christian Passover.

#### *The Service of Prayer*

The Service of Prayer is comprised of a litany centered on the theme of our Lord's resurrection and may be prayed by the pastor or an assisting minister from their regular seats in the chancel. The *Altar Book* notes that in the interest of shortening the Easter Vigil this service may be omitted. This is advisable when introducing the Vigil to a congregation. Once the congregation is accustomed to the longer duration of the Easter Vigil, the Service of Prayer may be added.

#### *The Service of the Word*

At this point in the Vigil service, we are quite ready to burst forth in joy and praise. Moving into the Service of the Word, the presiding minister acclaims, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" and then the congregation joyously shouts back, "He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" The lights come up and the congregation sings, preferably, "This Is the Feast" for the first time after a six-week fast from the Hymn of Praise. The candles are lit. The Table is prepared for the Lord's Holy Meal. And all is set right. Darkness has finally given way to full light. Death is fleeing. Life is ours. The Easter Gospel from either Mark 16 or John 20 is read. A brief homily is proclaimed.

#### *The Service of the Sacrament*

Finally, the Service of the Sacrament, as is customary on Sunday mornings, comes in all its glorious Passover and Easter fullness. Somehow, the length of the Vigil service does not seem to matter once God's redeemed people begin singing joyous Easter hymns such as "At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing" (*LSB* 633), "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today; Alleluia" (*LSB* 463), and "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice and Sing" (*LSB* 475). After all, this is *our* Passover. The risen Lord has just delivered *us* and given us our story to live and proclaim to the ends of the earth.

#### IV. Conclusion

Robert Jenson wrote:

To be a real world for her members, and not just a ritual illusion, the church must pay the closest attention to the substance of her liturgical gatherings and to their constitutive language. If the church's interior drama is not fiction, this is because the subject of that drama is a particular God, the Creator-God who authors all reality. If liturgy is not to be sickly pretense, if it is to be real presence of reality's God, everything must enact the specific story Scripture actually tells about that particular God.<sup>37</sup>

In our world where stories are no longer “real narratives” that can actually happen, dislodging us from reality itself, we human creatures desperately need stories—a story—that provides authentic meaning, identity, and security. The Easter Vigil ushers us into the real story of the real and only God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is much more than some narrative theology; this is reality and history itself. Because of our Lord's historical crucifixion and resurrection, his Passover from death to life, we have a new life, a new story. The overarching narrative of God redeeming his lost and condemned creatures through Jesus Christ is foundational to our salvation and our being Christian. The Easter Vigil leads us to ponder this overarching narrative and relive it as our very own, just as generations of Israelites after the actual events of the exodus claimed the Passover celebration as their very own. When we reclaim the church's age-old Easter Vigil, we reclaim our real story in a most potent manner, for here we ponder the stories—the story—of Christ's atoning, life-giving work for us.

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<sup>37</sup> Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story.”