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Night of nights

Roger Karban | Apr. 7, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

No liturgy is more important or more ancient than the celebration of the Easter Vigil. One hint of its age is that seven of its nine readings are from the Hebrew scriptures.

Scholars presume it took the early church a couple centuries before it placed the Christian scriptures on the same ?inspired? level as the Hebrew scriptures. Before then, the community revolved much of its faith understanding around the writings that had inspired the historical Jesus: the collection we once called the ?Old Testament.?

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Why do these specific books comprise our sacred writings? The late Fr. Dennis
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McCarthy best nailed the reason many years ago at a Catholic Biblical Association conference. ?These books are in our Bible because they?ve helped the most people over the longest period of time to understand their faith.?

Counter to popular wisdom, these books don?t give us our faith. Only after we begin having faith experiences do these particular writings kick in. They not only assure us ?we?re not alone,? they also help us delve into the implications of our faith. When forced to make a decision about what books to keep and what to discard, our ancestors in the faith hung on to these particular writings. Why? This is especially clear on this night of nights.

Even when well-meaning, but misinformed, presiders omit the majority of the Hebrew scripture readings from tonight?s liturgy, they?re obligated to proclaim at least the third passage: the Exodus 14:15-15:1 account of the crossing of the sea.

This miraculous event is the basis for all Jewish faith. Their sacred writings either lead up to it or flow from it. Yahweh is a God of life and freedom. If people of faith don?t experience both, they?d better start looking in a different direction. This specific act of God best demonstrates and offers this life and freedom.

No one had to tell Jesus? first followers to save this narrative. Like their faith ancestors, they had already agreed to step into a sea of death with their mentor. Just as faith in Yahweh strengthened the ancient Israelites to walk forward into the sea, faith in Jesus empowers Christians to walk forward with him into those daily walls of

death that engulf all of us.

It?s no accident that the Bible?s oldest words are in this pericope: ?I will sing to Yahweh, for he is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot he has thrown into the sea.? Even before written faith traditions came into existence, the Exodus experience of freedom and life was passed on by word of mouth. Every person of faith was able to understand it.

The Genesis 1 creation story is also an integral part of tonight?s celebration. This priestly narrative not only takes us back to the mythical beginnings of life, it emphasizes the dignity of every human being. We?re the epitome of creation, made in God?s image and likeness. While other ancient religions sported idols of their gods, Jews were forbidden to make an image or likeness of Yahweh. He/she was totally ?holy,? completely ?other? from anyone else. Yahweh couldn?t be limited by a single depiction. When anyone pressed Jews about their God, demanding to know what he/she was like, they simply replied, ?Look around. To know us, God?s creation, is to know our God. We?re the ?idols? of Yahweh.? No wonder Jesus died and was raised for us; we?re important.

Reading after reading hammers away at life/death situations and experiences. Isaac, at the last second, is saved by Yahweh (Genesis 22:1-18). And notice Deutero-Isaiah?s emphasis on God?s saving and freeing word. ?Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth ... so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth, my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it? (Isaiah 55:11).

In Good Friday?s darkness, we had only Jesus? word that life comes through death. Tonight we actually experience the life-giving power of that word.

Mark?s Resurrection narrative (16:1-7) is unique. His Gospel originally ended it with, ?The women went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.? For Mark, the risen Jesus is still ?out here somewhere.? There?s no ascension, no definitive way he appears to those who believe. His Gospel leaves things ?wide open,? leaving us to ask, ?How does the risen Jesus come to us?? Are we, like the women, afraid to deal with the suffering presence of someone who brings us from death to life?

What a night to start such a reflective process!

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/040712.cfm