EASTER VIGIL (HOLY SATURDAY)

LECTIONARY #41

READING I Genesis 1:1—2:2

Genesis = JEN-uh-sihs

A reading of one of the most familiar passages in all of Scripture. Because the language in this reading is so grand, you will be tempted perhaps to dramatize your proclamation. No need: the language is so finely wrought, if you read at a measured pace, its glories will come through in your recitation.

The word "and" appears repeatedly in this reading. It's one of the main sources of its power. It functions almost like a verb. Let the word do the work for you as you proclaim.

Pause ever so slightly after "first day." You will repeat this slight pause five more times.

Pause slightly after "second day."

A reading from the Book of Genesis

[In the **beginning**, when God created the **heavens** and the **earth**,]
the **earth** was a formless **wasteland**, and **darkness** covered
the **abyss**,
while a **mighty wind** swept **over** the **waters**.

Then God said,
"Let there be **light**," and there was **light**.
God saw how **good** the light was.
God then **separated** the **light** from the **darkness**.
God called the light "**day**," and the darkness he called "**night**."
Thus **evening** came, and **morning** followed—the **first** day.

Then God said,
"Let there be a **dome** in the **middle** of the **waters**,
to separate one **body** of water from the **other**."
And so it **happened**:
God **made** the dome,
and it separated the water **above** the dome from the water
below it.
God called the dome "the **sky**."
Evening came, and **morning** followed—the **second** day.

Then God said,
"Let the **water** under the **sky** be gathered into a **single basin**,
so that the **dry land** may appear."

There are options for today's readings. Contact your parish staff to learn which readings will be used.

The vigil of Easter Sunday is a time for us to meditate on God's gracious deeds on behalf of humanity and the rest of the created order throughout the story of salvation from the beginning of time to the death and resurrection of Jesus, who is the Christ. Seven readings are taken from the Old Testament books of the law and the prophets. Seven is a perfect number representing fullness or wholeness. The eighth reading is taken from Paul's Letter to the Romans and the Gospel is taken from Matthew's story of the resurrection of Jesus.

READING I The first reading, taken from the Book of Genesis, is not intended to be a science or history lesson about the creation of the world. Rather, it is a theological narrative about the nature of God and God's relationship to humans. In contrast to the origin stories of the Israelites' neighbors, which were often violent and chaotic, this story celebrates the sovereignty of God almighty, who creates everything by the power of his Word and declares all God's creation to be good. As the scene opens, we are told that the earth was uninhabitable—"a formless wasteland" is the translation of the Hebrew *tohu wabohu*—covered in water and enveloped in darkness. Ancients might have thought of this as a frightening and chaotic

And so it **happened**:
the **water** under the **sky** was gathered into its **basin**,
and the **dry land** appeared.
God called the dry land "the **earth**,"
and the basin of the water he called "the **sea**."
God saw how **good** it was.

Almost even stresses on the words in this line, with "good" receiving a little extra emphasis.

Then God said,
"Let the **earth** bring **forth** vegetation:
every **kind** of plant that bears **seed**
and every **kind** of fruit tree on **earth**
that bears **fruit** with its seed **in** it."
And so it **happened**:
the **earth** brought forth every **kind** of plant that bears **seed**
and every **kind** of fruit tree on **earth**
that bears **fruit** with its **seed** in it.
God saw how **good** it was.
Evening came, and **morning** followed—the **third** day.

Pause slightly after "third day."

Then God said:
"Let there be **lights** in the **dome** of the **sky**,
to separate **day** from **night**.
Let them mark the **fixed times**, the **days** and the **years**,
and serve as **luminaries** in the **dome** of the **sky**,
to shed **light** upon the **earth**."
And so it **happened**:
God **made** the two great **lights**,
the **greater** one to govern the **day**,
and the **lesser** one to govern the **night**;
and he made the **stars**.
God set them in the **dome** of the **sky**,
to shed **light** upon the **earth**,
to govern the **day** and the **night**,
and to separate the **light** from the **darkness**.
God saw how **good** it was.
Evening came, and **morning** followed—the **fourth** day. »

The passage that follows, describing the fourth day of creation, includes a series of oppositions to emphasize the separation of night from day. Stress the words that indicate these oppositions.

Pause slightly after "fourth day."

scene, except for the next phrase, which some translate as "a mighty wind" but which also can be translated as "the spirit of God," hovering over the water. Even from the very beginning, God is in charge!

The dramatic imagery of this opening sentence, along with its poetic word play, should alert us to the literary quality of the rest of the account. The narrator marks out each day of creation with the phrase "evening came, and morning followed," and each day follows the structure of "Then God said. . ." and "God saw how good it was." This is the power of God's word; it is a power only for good. Notice also that God names the various elements of creation. In the ancient world, to name something was to have authority over it.

The first three days of creation are focused on separation: On the first day, God separated light from darkness. On the second day, God separated the waters above from the waters below. On the third day, God separated the waters below from the earth.

The latter three days of creation are focused on populating creation: On the fourth day, God created the sun, moon, and stars to illuminate the earth. Notice the parallel with day one. On the fifth day, God populated the water below, the seas, with sea creatures and the dome that held up the water above, the sky, with birds. These God blessed and told them to be fertile and multiply. Notice the parallel with day two.

Then God said,
"Let the **water teem** with an abundance of **living creatures**,
and on the **earth** let birds fly **beneath** the dome of the sky."
And so it **happened**:
God created the great **sea monsters**
and all kinds of **swimming creatures** with which the water **teems**,
and all kinds of **winged birds.**
God saw how **good** it was, and God **blessed** them, saying,
"Be **fertile**, **multiply**, and **fill** the water of the **seas**;
and let the **birds** multiply on the **earth**."
Evening came, and **morning** followed—the **fifth** day.

Pause slightly after "fifth day."

Then God said,
"Let the **earth** bring **forth** all kinds of **living creatures**:
cattle, **creeping things**, and wild **animals** of all **kinds**."
And so it **happened**:
God made **all kinds** of wild **animals**, all **kinds** of **cattle**,
and all **kinds** of **creeping things** of the earth.
God saw how **good** it was.

Keep an even pace through this line.

This passage repeats the word "kinds" four times. These "kinds" anticipate the image of "humankind" shortly to come.

Then [God said:
"Let us make **man** in our image, **after** our **likeness**.
Let them have **dominion** over the **fish** of the **sea**,
the **birds** of the **air**, and the **cattle**,
and over **all** the wild **animals**
and **all** the creatures that **crawl** on the **ground**."
God created **man** in his **image**;
in the **image** of **God** he created **him**;
male and **female** he created **them**.
God **blessed** them, saying:
"Be **fertile** and **multiply**;
fill the earth and **subdue** it.
Have **dominion** over the **fish** of the **sea**, the **birds** of the **air**,
and **all** the living things that **move** on the earth."

Don't treat the appearance of humankind at this point as a break, as something separate; rather, treat it as part of a continuum. The tone and pitch of your proclamation does not need to change here.

On the sixth day, God populated the earth with every kind of creature, wild and tame, big and small. Also on the sixth day, God created human beings in God's image (Hebrew, *tselem*, also meaning "likeness or resemblance") and told them to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the rest of the created world. Notice the parallel with day three.

Thus, human beings are depicted as the crowning event of God's creation. But what does it mean to be created in God's likeness? Perhaps it lies in the phrase "have dominion over or master." This is God's role in creation—to bring everything out of chaos and make it ordered and fruitful—and now this role is extended to humans to maintain into the future. Notice that God makes no allowance for killing, even for food. Then God rested on the seventh day, creating the foundation for the Jewish practice of Sabbath rest.

READING II The second reading in this series of seven Old Testament readings focuses on Abraham, often called the father of Judaism, and God's request that he sacrifice his only son. Knowing some background to the story will

God also said:
"**See**, I give you every **seed-bearing** plant all over the **earth**
and every **tree** that has seed-bearing **fruit** on it to be your **food**;
and to all the **animals** of the land, all the **birds** of the air,
and all the **living creatures** that crawl on the **ground**,
I give all the green plants for **food**."
And so it **happened**.
God looked at **everything** he had made, and he found it
very good.]

Pause slightly after "sixth day."

Evening came, and **morning** followed—the **sixth** day.

For these concluding lines of this reading, which describe the sabbath, you can allow your proclamation to relax a little without overdoing it.

Thus the **heavens** and the **earth** and all their **array**
were **completed**.
Since on the **seventh** day God was **finished**
with the **work** he had been **doing**,
he rested on the seventh day from all the work he
had undertaken.

[Shorter: Genesis 1:1, 26–31a (see brackets)]

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 104:1–2, 5–6, 10, 12, 13–14, 24, 35 (30)

R. Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.

Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord, my God, you are great indeed!
You are clothed with majesty and glory,
robed in light as with a cloak.

You fixed the earth upon its foundation,
not to be moved forever;
with the ocean, as with a garment, you
covered it;
above the mountains the waters stood.

You send forth springs into the watercourses
that wind among the mountains.
Beside them the birds of heaven dwell;
from among the branches they send forth
their song.

You water the mountains from your palace;
the earth is replete with the fruit
of your works.
You raise grass for the cattle,
and vegetation for man's use,
producing bread from the earth.

How manifold are your works, O Lord!
In wisdom you have wrought them all—
the earth is full of your creatures.
Bless the Lord, O my soul!

Or:

help us to understand how significant it is for both Jews and Christians. The account of the interaction between God and Abraham, then called Abram, begins in Genesis 12, where he is told by this God whom he does not yet know to go to the land that God would show him. He is also told that God would make him a great nation and a blessing and that in him "all the families of the earth will find blessing" (Genesis 12:2–3). This promise is reiterated two more times, at least in part, first in Genesis 15:2–7 and again in Genesis 17:3–10, even as Abraham faces numerous challenges and setbacks along the way, many of his own making.

At the beginning of Genesis 22, the phrase "Some time afterward" (Genesis 22:1a) is used to transition to the story we hear in this second reading. It is referring to the period of time after Abraham had settled a dispute over a well that he dug at Beer-sheba and after he made a covenant of mutual support with the Philistine King

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 33:4–5, 6–7, 12–13, 20, and 22 (5b)

R. The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.

Upright is the word of the LORD,
and all his works are trustworthy.
He loves justice and right;
of the kindness of the LORD the earth is full.

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made;
by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as in a flask;
in cellars he confines the deep.

Blessed the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he has chosen for his own inheritance.
From heaven the LORD looks down;
he sees all mankind.

Our soul waits for the LORD,
who is our help and our shield.
May your kindness, O LORD, be upon us
who have put our hope in you.

READING II Genesis 22:1–18

Genesis = JEN-uh-sihs
Moriah = moh-RĪ-uh

A reading of another very familiar story from Scripture. Its elements, including its conclusion, are universally known, something that in no way diminishes its power. A passage such as this one is already so inherently dramatic, your task is to proclaim as clearly as you can. Even though there are several exclamations in this passage, you will not need to raise your voice any more than you normally do when proclaiming.

Case in point: the first exclamation. There is an aura of otherworldly silence around Abraham's name. No need to shout.

The great literary critic Erich Auerbach describes this passage as "fraught with background." a delicious phrase. He means that while the action is spare, the scene itself is filling with tension. When you proclaim "On the third day," you are skipping over two full days of traveling.

A reading from the Book of Genesis

[God put **Abraham** to the **test**.
He called to him, "**Abraham**!"
"**Here** I am," he replied.
Then God said:
"Take your son **Isaac**, your **only** one, whom you **love**,
and **go** to the land of **Moriah**.
There you shall offer him up as a **holocaust**
on a **height** that I will point **out** to you."]
Early the next morning Abraham saddled his **donkey**,
took with him his son **Isaac** and two of his **servants** as well,
and with the **wood** that he had cut for the **holocaust**,
set **out** for the place of which **God** had told him.

On the third day **Abraham** got sight of the place from **afar**.
Then he **said** to his servants:
"**Both** of you stay here with the **donkey**,
while the **boy** and I go on over **yonder**.
We will **worship** and then come **back** to you."

Abimelech (Genesis 21:25–32). This is the beginning of Abraham's claim on the promised land. The story that precedes this reading, the birth of Isaac, is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise that Abraham would have "descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore." Therefore, as we enter this second reading, Abraham and Sarah are safe and secure and are settled in the land. But this is where the story gets very complicated, and we see a true threat to the fulfillment of the promise that God made to Abraham that he would have numerous descendants. To make matters worse, it was not Abraham who was interfering with the fulfillment of the promise, as he had done so many times before, but now it appeared that God himself is standing in the way!

The narrator of this story describes the sacrifice of Isaac as a test instigated by God, who tells Abraham to take his son, Isaac, and go to Moriah and sacrifice him on the mountain. Pay careful attention to how Abraham is portrayed in this scene. Clearly, he understands what God is asking

Thereupon Abraham took the **wood** for the **holocaust**
and laid it on his son Isaac's **shoulders**,
while he himself carried the **fire** and the **knife**.
As the two walked on together, Isaac **spoke** to his father Abraham:
"**Father**!" Isaac said.
"Yes, son," he replied.
Isaac continued, "**Here** are the **fire** and the **wood**,
but **where** is the **sheep** for the **holocaust**?"
"Son," Abraham answered,
"God **himself** will provide the **sheep** for the **holocaust**."
Then the two **continued** going forward.

[When they **came** to the place of which **God** had told him,
Abraham built an **altar** there and arranged the **wood** on it.]
Next he tied up his son **Isaac**,
and put him on top of the wood on the altar.
[Then he **reached out** and took the **knife** to **slaughter** his son.
But the Lord's messenger **called** to him from **heaven**,
"**Abraham**, **Abraham**!"
"**Here** I am," he answered.
"Do **not** lay your **hand** on the **boy**," said the messenger.
"Do **not** do the **least thing** to him.
I know **now** how devoted you are to **God**,
since you did not **withhold** from me your own **beloved** son."
As Abraham looked about,
he spied a **ram** caught by its **horns** in the **thicket**.
So he **went** and took the **ram**
and offered it up as a **holocaust** in place of his **son**.]
Abraham named the site **Yahweh-yireh**;
hence people now say, "On the **mountain** the Lord
will **see**." »

Second exclamation: Don't shout.

"Continued": This word is "fraught with background."

Take note of the details. Abraham is preparing an altar for sacrifice.

Third exclamation: Don't shout.

Yahweh-yireh = YAH-way-YEER-ay

him to do, and the narrator is keen to tell us about Abraham's affection for Isaac, but Abraham is unflinching in his resolve to obey God's word. Even as he and his son climb the mountain together and Isaac asks about the animal to be sacrificed, the only thing he says is "God himself will provide." Notice also the several times in which Abraham is described as saying, "Here I am." This is a phrase indicating openness and availability to respond to the speaker. Having arrived at the mountain, Abraham goes so far as to bind Isaac, place him on the wood that was set upon the altar, and raise his knife to slaughter him, before God's messenger intervenes and tells him not to harm his son, adding, "I know now how devoted you are to God." The Hebrew word translated here as "devoted" has the connotation of reverence or respect for God's authority. Abraham's devotion to God is confirmed, and God's angel appears again to renew the promises of land, descendants, and a blessing, because Abraham obeyed God's command.

One of the ways that early Christians made sense of stories like this one was to

Though an angel of God is relaying these words, it's God himself who speaks here. Set off the phrase "declares the Lord" in such a way to make it clear that God is speaking.

[Again the LORD's **messenger** called to Abraham from **heaven**
and said:
"I **swear** by myself, **declares** the LORD,
that **because** you acted as you **did**
in not **withholding** from me your beloved **son**,
I will **bless you** abundantly
and make your **descendants** as **countless**
as the **stars** of the **sky** and the **sands** of the **seashore**;
your **descendants** shall take **possession**
of the **gates** of their **enemies**,
and in your **descendants** all the **nations** of the earth shall
find **blessing**—
all **this** because you **obeyed** my command."]

[Shorter: Genesis 22:1–2, 9a, 10–13, 15–18 (see brackets)]

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 16:5, 8, 9–10, 11 (1)

R. You are my inheritance, O Lord.

O LORD, my allotted portion and my cup,
you it is who hold fast my lot.
I set the LORD ever before me;
with him at my right hand I shall not
be disturbed.

Therefore my heart is glad and my
soul rejoices,
my body, too, abides in confidence;
because you will not abandon my soul to
the netherworld,
nor will you suffer your faithful one to
undergo corruption.

You will show me the path to life,
fullness of joys in your presence,
the delights at your right hand forever.

see them as a *type* or pattern or example of something greater to come. Abraham's willingness and resolve to sacrifice his son, who is described as his only one and the one whom he loves, is a type of God who offers up his beloved son, Jesus, for the salvation of humanity. Similarly, the ram caught in the thicket, a dense group of bushes or trees, is a type of Jesus on the wood of the cross. Finally, this story contains an etiology, which in this case is a story that explains why the place of sacrifice was called "Yahweh-yireh" in some translations. It means "It will be provided of God" or "God will see to it." This is what Abraham said to Isaac, when Isaac asked about the animal to be sacrificed. Some biblical scholars suggest that Moriah is not a historical place name but another reference to the idea that God will provide, because it contains the same Hebrew root *ra'ah*, which means "to provide." In other words, this is a story of total and steadfast trust in a God who provides.

READING III Tonight's third reading is the story of Moses parting the Red Sea and the Israelites' exodus into the wilderness. This, too, is a story about trust in a God who provides. The chapters of Exodus that precede this story recount the ten plagues, an extended contest between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the Egyptian pharaoh, who thought himself to be a god on earth, but clearly was not, because he lost every single bout of the contest and ended up with

READING III Exodus 14:15—15:1

Exodus = EK-suh-duhs

Another very familiar story, this reading is full of action, with occasional instruction by God himself. But mostly action. Its drama will come through your proclamation if you allow the details of the action to be voiced. Let the words of the reading speak for themselves.

Here, God instructs Moses on how to perform a miraculous act. He's a little impatient, but he's also providing the details of a carefully considered plan.

A reading from the Book of Exodus

The Lord said to Moses, "**Why** are you crying **out** to me?
Tell the **Israelites** to go **forward**.
And **you**, lift up your **staff** and, with **hand** outstretched
over the **sea**,
split the sea in **two**,
that the **Israelites** may pass through it on **dry land**.
But I will make the **Egyptians** so **obstinate**
that they will go in **after** them.
Then I will **receive glory** through **Pharaoh** and all his **army**,
his **chariots** and **charioteers**.
The **Egyptians** shall know that I am the Lord,
when I receive **glory** through **Pharaoh**
and his **chariots** and **charioteers**."

The passage that follows includes many vivid details.

The **angel** of God, who had been leading Israel's **camp**,
now **moved** and went around **behind** them.
The column of cloud **also**, leaving the front,
took up its place **behind** them,
so that it came **between** the camp of the **Egyptians**
and that of **Israel**.
But the cloud now became **dark**, and thus the night **passed**
without the rival camps coming any **closer together** all
night long.
Then **Moses** stretched out his **hand** over the **sea**,
and the Lord swept the **sea**
with a **strong east wind** throughout the night
and so **turned** it into **dry** land.
When the **water** was thus **divided**,
the Israelites **marched** into the **midst** of the sea on dry **land**,
with the **water** like a **wall** to their **right** and to their **left**. »

nothing but a hardened heart (Exodus 7:8—11:10).

After celebrating what came to be known as the first Passover, and after the pharaoh finally let Moses and the Israelites leave Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness for a bit until God directed them toward the Red Sea by means of a column of cloud during the day and a column of fire at night, but they were fearful, because they could see the Egyptian armies coming after them. These terrified refugees complained to Moses about being brought out into the desert to die. What a disaster! But, to paraphrase God's word in today's vernacular, God tells Moses to stop whining and get his act together. This is where today's reading begins. Moses is told to ready the people to move out, and God tells Moses to lift his staff and raise his hand to divide the sea.

About now, people of a certain generation might be imagining Charlton Heston's portrayal of Moses parting the sea in the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*. Tall and handsome, almost god-like in appearance, he commands everyone's attention and makes the water do his bidding. But in the Book of Exodus, God is clearly the hero. Moses does what he is told, but God controls the sea and even the hearts of the pharaoh and his armies, eventually drowning every one of the Egyptians. Why? "The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I receive glory through Pharaoh his chariots and charioteers." In other words,

Again, vivid details. Give your voice to them.

The **Egyptians** followed in **pursuit**;
all Pharaoh's **horses** and **chariots** and **charioteers** went
after them
right into the **midst** of the **sea**.
In the **night watch** just before **dawn**
the LORD cast through the **column** of the fiery **cloud**
upon the Egyptian force a **glance** that **threw** it into a **panic**;
and he so **clogged** their chariot wheels
that they could hardly **drive**.
With that the **Egyptians** sounded the **retreat** before **Israel**,
because the LORD was fighting for them against the **Egyptians**.

God speaks, once again instructing Moses on how to perform another miraculous act, one that parallels the earlier act.

Then the LORD told Moses, "**Stretch** out your hand over the **sea**,
that the **water** may flow **back** upon the **Egyptians**,
upon their **chariots** and their **charioteers**."
So Moses stretched **out** his hand over the **sea**,
and at dawn the **sea** flowed **back** to its normal **depth**.
The Egyptians were fleeing head **on** toward the **sea**,
when the LORD **hurled** them into its **midst**.
As the **water** flowed back,
it covered the **chariots** and the **charioteers** of Pharaoh's
whole army
which had followed the **Israelites** into the **sea**.

Don't overly dramatize the doom that comes to Pharaoh and his army. Let the grim details speak for themselves.

Not a single **one** of them **escaped**.
But the **Israelites** had marched on **dry land**
through the **midst** of the **sea**,
with the **water** like a **wall** to their right and to their **left**.
Thus the LORD saved **Israel** on that day
from the **power** of the **Egyptians**.

this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob establishes with full certainty that he is sovereign and that no forces of evil will defeat him. It also reveals that God is the faithful and steadfast benefactor and protector of God's people. In concluding the story, the narrator expresses how the people now viewed God, that they revered God and trusted in the one who provides. After such a dramatic scene, an acknowledgement of God's graciousness is warranted and, thus, we hear how all the Israelites began to sing an ancient song of thanksgiving with these words: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is gloriously triumphant; / horse and chariot he has cast into the sea" (see the following responsorial psalm).

As you reflect on this reading and try to follow the plot of the story, you might find yourself a bit confused. For example, how exactly was the Egyptian army destroyed? Did they get scared when their chariots got stuck in the bottom of the sea and run away, or did the walls of water crash down on them, swamp their chariots, and drown the soldiers? We see these oddities in the text elsewhere in the Old Testament, but this example is worth noting. Biblical scholars have determined that bits and pieces of several versions of this story have been woven together to create the version that we are reading today. While the final result might appear somewhat choppy, it speaks to how pivotal this event was in Israel's identity formation that communities in different locations and time periods had their own versions of the story and that the final redactor decided that none of the details should be lost.

"Power": Its manifestation defines this reading.

When Israel saw the **Egyptians** lying dead on the **seashore**
and beheld the great **power** that the Lord
had **shown** against the **Egyptians**,
they **feared** the Lord and **believed** in him and in his
servant **Moses**.

The reading concludes with the words of a song. The song is triumphant, but its contents are a little grim. The entire song is sung as the responsorial psalm.

Then **Moses** and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:
I will **sing** to the Lord, for he is **gloriously** triumphant;
horse and **chariot** he has **cast** into the **sea**.

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Exodus 15:1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 17–18 (1b)

R. Let us sing to the Lord; he has covered himself in glory.

I will sing to the Lord, for he is
gloriously triumphant;
horse and chariot he has cast into the sea.
My strength and my courage is the Lord,
and he has been my savior.
He is my God, I praise him;
the God of my father, I extol him.

The Lord is a warrior,
Lord is his name!
Pharaoh's chariots and army he hurled into
the sea;
the elite of his officers were submerged
in the Red Sea.

The flood waters covered them,
they sank into the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, O Lord, magnificent
in power,
your right hand, O Lord, has shattered
the enemy.

You brought in the people you redeemed
and planted them on the mountain of your
inheritance—
the place where you made your seat, O Lord,
the sanctuary, Lord, which your
hands established.
The Lord shall reign forever and ever.

READING IV Isaiah 54:5–14

Isaiah = ī-ZAY-uh

A reading in which the prophet speaks on behalf of God to the people, seeking to intensify the intimacy between them.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

The core of the reading is this simile comparing the people ("you") to a forsaken wife whom God, as the husband, wants back. The conflict described and the strife implied in this passage should be familiar to many in the assembly. Don't get too dramatic with your proclamation, but don't shy away from its implications.

The **One** who has become your **husband** is your **Maker**;
his **name** is the Lord of hosts;
your **redeemer** is the **Holy One** of Israel,
called **God** of all the **earth**.
The Lord calls you **back**,
like a **wife** forsaken and **grieved** in spirit,
a wife **married** in youth and then **cast off**,
says your God. »

READING IV Our fourth reading is part of an oracle from Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55) that dates to the period of the Babylonian Exile, when Judea and the Jerusalem Temple were destroyed and the people taken away to exile in Babylon. In the verses preceding this passage, we hear the prophet is telling the people that they will be able to sing a joyous song, because Zion or Jerusalem will once again be filled with her children. Jerusalem is personified as God's wife through much of this oracle, but this is not to be taken literally. Rather, it is a metaphor for the quality of God's covenant love for the people of Israel.

The reading begins with an intimate and tender statement about God's relationship to Jerusalem: "The One who has become your husband is your Maker." Notice how God—metaphorically, the husband of Jerusalem—is given four additional attributes or titles: the Lord of hosts, Zion's redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, and God of all the earth. The fact that this God chose battered and insignificant Israel to be his bride is amazing! Also remarkable is the hint of regret that the prophet attributes to God, after seeing how grief-stricken Jerusalem and the exiled people of Judea are in their current state of abandonment. The prophet asserts that God had a right to be angry with his chosen people, who, like an adulterous wife, broke covenant with God, but he also acknowledges that God's love is so steadfast and that the tenderness God feels for his beloved is so great that God quickly overcomes his "outburst of wrath" and calls Israel back into covenant relationship in mercy and without rebuke.

The prophet utilizes a second metaphor to describe God's change of heart

For a **brief moment** I **abandoned** you,
but with **great tenderness** I will take you **back**.
In an **outburst** of wrath, for a **moment**
I hid my **face** from you;
but with enduring **love** I take **pity** on you,
says the LORD, your **redeemer**.
This is for me like the **days** of Noah,
when I **swore** that the waters of Noah
should **never again** deluge the **earth**;
so I have **sworn** not to be **angry** with you,
or to **rebuke** you.
Though the **mountains** leave their **place**
and the **hills** be shaken,
my **love** shall never **leave** you
nor my **covenant** of peace be **shaken**,
says the LORD, who has **mercy** on you.
O **afflicted** one, storm-battered and **unconsoled**,
I lay your **pavements** in **carnelians**,
and your **foundations** in **sapphires**;
I will make your **battlements** of **rubies**,
your **gates** of **carbuncles**,
and all your **walls** of precious **stones**.
All your **children** shall be **taught** by the LORD,
and **great** shall be the **peace** of your **children**.
In **justice** shall you be **established**,
far from the **fear** of **oppression**,
where **destruction** cannot come **near** you.

God promises peace, despite previously turbulent times.

Many jewels. The names of jewels are appealing to say and hear.

carnelians = kahr-NEEL-yuhnz = red semiprecious stones

carbuncles = KAHR-bung-k*lz = bright red gems

The peace God promises is like the jewels: enduring, precious, and consoling.

toward Zion, namely, the story of Noah and the flood, which opens with the narrator telling us that God observed all of the evil in the world that was brought upon by humans, and "the LORD regretted making human beings on the earth, and his heart was grieved" (Genesis 6:6). This is the reason given for the flood that was intended to wipe away all evil from the earth and return everything to the way it was before creation, without form or shape, and covered with water (Genesis 1:1). "But Noah found favor with the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). Thus, when the rains stopped and the waters receded, Noah and his family were permitted to leave the ark, along with the other creatures Noah had rescued. When God received Noah's offering he made this vow that we hear about in this passage from Isaiah: "Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, since the desires of the human heart are evil from youth; nor will I ever again strike down every living being, as I have done" (Genesis 8:21). Thus, despite knowing what God knows about the failings of the human heart, he recreates the world as an act of love.

The final metaphor that the prophet brings into this oracle of salvation is that of a beautifully adorned and securely walled city, the new Jerusalem. The prophet does not tell us the significance of the various jewels that adorn the city, its streets, and its gates, but we can say, at least, that they signify a place that is worthy of God's presence (see also Revelation 4:1–6 and 21:9–21). The learning that takes place in this city will be divinely inspired, and the city will be established in God's justice (Hebrew, *tsedaqah*, meaning "righteousness"). When applied to God, "justice" describes how God

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 30:2, 4, 5–6, 11–12, 13 (2a)

R. I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.

I will extol you, O Lord, for you drew
me clear
and did not let my enemies rejoice
over me.
O Lord, you brought me up from
the netherworld;
you preserved me from among those going
down into the pit.

Sing praise to the Lord, you his
faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger lasts but a moment;
a lifetime, his good will.
At nightfall, weeping enters in,
but with the dawn, rejoicing.

Hear, O Lord, and have pity on me;
O Lord, be my helper.
You changed my mourning into dancing;
O Lord, my God, forever will I give
you thanks.

READING V Isaiah 55:1–11

Isaiah = ī-ZAY-uh

A reading in which God through the voice of the prophet Isaiah promises forgiveness. The message of this reading is direct and should be relatable to many in your assembly.

"You who have no money": Even in affluent parishes, there are people who have felt this pinch. God is speaking directly to these people.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

Thus says the **Lord**:
All **you** who are **thirsty**,
come to the **water**!
You who have no **money**,
come, receive **grain** and **eat**;
come, without **paying** and without **cost**,
drink **wine** and **milk**!
Why spend your **money** for what is not **bread**,
your **wages** for what fails to **satisfy**?
Heed me, and you shall **eat** well,
you shall **delight** in rich **fare**.
Come to me **heedfully**,
listen, that you may have **life**.
I will **renew** with you the everlasting **covenant**,
the **benefits** assured to **David**. »

acts in keeping with God's nature as goodness itself and as being in eternal covenant with God's people. Thus, Israel has no need to fear for its well-being.

READING V Our fifth reading is the culmination of Second Isaiah, which began with chapter 40, and which contains a number of the themes that we find repeated here, such as the invitation to come and eat, the call to covenant relationship with God, the efficacy of God's Word, and the new exodus, which appears in the section immediately following this reading. Second Isaiah was written during the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BC. Thus, many of its oracles are oracles of consolation.

This reading begins with a number of imperatives directed at the poor and needy, inviting them to attend God's banquet, which is a theme commonly used in the Bible's wisdom literature to describe God's desire to care for humanity. For example, the language is very similar to Proverbs 9:1–5 and Sirach 24:18–24, in which Lady Wisdom invites those who wish to be wise to come to her banquet. Wisdom is not a deity separate from God but rather a power or attribute of God. Notice that there are no social or ethical restrictions on who can come to the banquet. One needs only to be thirsty for God and willing to listen to God's voice. Notice also that the covenant agreement made with David has now been extended to this wider audience: to be "a witness to peoples, a leader and commander of nations." This is an everlasting covenant, meaning that it extends back-

As I made him a **witness** to the **peoples**,
a **leader** and commander of **nations**,
so shall you **summon** a nation you knew **not**,
and **nations** that knew you not shall **run** to you,
because of the **LORD**, your **God**,
the **Holy One** of Israel, who has **glorified** you.

"Seek the Lord while he may be found": This command speaks to the hope inherent in this reading. We hope it's true, that God may be found, especially when we call him.

Seek the **LORD** while he may be **found**,
call him while he is **near**.
Let the **scoundrel** forsake his **way**,
and the **wicked man** his **thoughts**;
let him **turn** to the LORD for **mercy**;
to our **God**, who is generous in **forgiving**.
For my **thoughts** are not **your** thoughts,
nor are your ways **my** ways, says the LORD.
As **high** as the heavens are above the **earth**,
so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts.

Forgiveness. This is the heart of this reading.

For **just** as from the **heavens**
the rain and snow come **down**
and do not **return** there
till they have **watered** the earth,
making it **fertile** and **fruitful**,
giving **seed** to the one who **sows**
and **bread** to the one who **eats**,
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.

Even stresses on the words in this line.

ward and forward in time without end. Moreover, God's steadfast loyalty promised to David now encompasses all peoples. The "nation you knew not, and nations that knew you not" is most likely the Persian empire under King Cyrus the Great (reigned 559–530 BC). He is the one who released the Judeans from their exile (see Isaiah 45:1, 13–14). Here, it is generalized to emphasize Israel's leadership role in the world.

The second half of this reading issues a similar imperative to the people of Israel using a type of Hebrew poetry called synonymous parallelism, in which the second line of text repeats, but in different words, the content of the first line. The imperative is to "Seek the LORD . . . call him" to find mercy and forgiveness, which is followed by two arguments for why God's people should act on this command. The first argument is an assertion that God is utterly transcendent such that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, but yet God is so near to us as to be touched by our sinfulness and wants to heal us. The second argument is about the efficacy of God's Word. It comes upon us like a gentle rain or unexpected snow to water the thirsty soil and make it produce fruit for those who have need. God's Word does not dissipate in the wind, but rather it accomplishes everything that God wants it to accomplish. We can count on this because God is ever faithful.

READING VI The sixth reading of this Easter Vigil celebration is part of a longer poem in praise of personified Wisdom taken from the Book of Baruch. According to the first-century AD Jewish historian Josephus, Baruch was a scribe for the prophet Jeremiah from the sixth century BC (see Josephus' *Antiquities*

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Isaiah 12:2–3, 4, 5–6 (3)

R. You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.

God indeed is my savior;
I am confident and unafraid.
My strength and my courage is the Lord,
and he has been my savior.
With joy you will draw water
at the fountain of salvation.

Give thanks to the Lord, acclaim his name;
among the nations make known his deeds,
proclaim how exalted is his name.

Sing praise to the Lord for his
glorious achievement;
let this be known throughout all the
earth.
Shout with exultation, O city of Zion,
for great in your midst
is the Holy One of Israel!

READING VI Baruch 3:9–15, 32—4:4

Baruch = buh-ROOK

An exhortation on wisdom, personified in this reading in her ancient feminine principle. A powerful reminder.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Baruch

Hear, O Israel, the **commandments** of life:
listen, and know **prudence**!
How **is** it, Israel,
that you are in the **land** of your **foes**,
grown **old** in a foreign **land**,
defiled with the **dead**,
accounted with those **destined** for the **netherworld**?
You have **forsaken** the fountain of **wisdom**!
Had you **walked** in the way of **God**,
you would have **dwelt** in enduring **peace**.
Learn where prudence is,
where **strength**, where **understanding**;
that you may know **also**
where are length of **days**, and **life**,
where **light** of the eyes, and **peace**.
Who has found the place of **wisdom**,
who has entered into her **treasuries**? »

The reading makes use of rhetorical questions. Use these questions—this first one stretches over several lines—to organize the pace of your proclamation.

Take note of the questions here.

of the Jews 10.9.1). However, this book that bears his name is generally thought to be an edited collection of smaller works by various unknown authors written in the style of the prophets and dating to the second century BC. After a brief introduction from the narrator of this book (Baruch 1:1–14), we find a confession of sin attributed to the exiles in Babylon and addressed to those who were left behind in Jerusalem and Judah (Baruch 1:15—2:10), in which they attribute their sorry situation to their refusal to listen to God and their failure to follow God's precepts (Baruch 1:18, 2:10). This confession is followed by a prayer to God that Israel might have a change of heart during the time of its exile and return to a life lived in obedience to God's law (Baruch 2:11—3:8).

This reading, a poem in praise of Wisdom, is addressed to Israel and it continues the theme of obedience to God's law. It begins with a call to heed the commandments of life and know prudence. The Greek *phronesis*, translated here as "prudence" has a range of meanings, including intelligence, good judgment, and practical advice or action. Thus, wisdom is equated with the law. This invitation is followed by a rhetorical question, which could be restated like this: "How did you get into such a mess?" The poet's answer: "You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom!" If Jewish law is equated with wisdom, then the fount of wisdom is God. The exiles in Babylon were "defiled with the dead" insofar as they lived in the diaspora, among Gentiles who were destined for death because they did not follow Jewish law. Had Israel not abandoned the fountain of wisdom, the nation would be experiencing long life, peace, and "light of the eyes" (per-

"Her" refers to Wisdom, *Hokhmah* in Hebrew, *Sophia* in Greek, always personified in feminine form in the ancient imagination.

The One who knows all things **knows** her;
he has **probed** her by his **knowledge**—
the One who established the **earth** for all time,
and **filled** it with four-footed **beasts**;
he who **dismisses** the light, and it **departs**,
calls it, and it obeys him **trembling**;
before whom the **stars** at their posts
shine and **rejoice**;
when he **calls** them, they **answer**, "**Here** we are!"
shining with joy for their **Maker**.
Such is our **GOD**;
no **other** is to be **compared** to him:
he has **traced out** the whole way of understanding,
and has **given** her to Jacob, his **servant**,
to **Israel**, his beloved **son**.
Since then she has **appeared** on **earth**,
and **moved** among people.
She is the **book** of the precepts of **GOD**,
the **law** that endures **forever**;
all who **cling** to her will **live**,
but those will **die** who **forsake** her.
Turn, O Jacob, and **receive** her:
walk by her light toward **splendor**.
Give not your **glory** to another,
your **privileges** to an alien **race**.
Blessed are **we**, O Israel;
for what **pleases** God is **known** to us!

Wisdom's divinity—the part she plays in God's creative imagination—is implied in this closing passage.

haps meaning insight; ancients believed that people could see because of the light that dwelt within them).

The next section of this poem (see Baruch 3:15–23), which is not fully included in the lectionary reading, begins with another rhetorical question: "Who has found the place of wisdom?" The answer is clear. No human can find wisdom through their own abilities. The poet notes that not even kings with great powers over the created world can find wisdom, nor can those who amass great wealth or scheme to acquire it. And later generations are no better off. Whatever else they achieve in their lifetimes, they have not discerned the path to wisdom or found her. The poet notes that even the ancient seats of human knowledge —Phoenicia (here called Canaan) and Edom (including Teman)—did not know wisdom. Likewise, the descendants of Hagar—the tribes that trace themselves back to Ishmael, son of Abraham—did not find wisdom.

Why can no human find wisdom? The poet expounds on this question next, beginning with a statement about vastness of God's dwelling and the scope of God's authority. Only the one who knows all things (i.e., God) knows wisdom, because "she is the book of the precepts of God," and "the law that endures forever." The poem concludes with an admonition to walk by wisdom's light and a somewhat veiled threat that God will give Israel's glory and privilege to another nation, if it refuses. Finally, at the end, there is a blessing! Although no one can secure wisdom on their own, God is pleased to make her known to God's people through the giving of the law.

READING VII The last in the series of seven readings for medi-

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11 (John 6:68c)

R. Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul;
the decree of the LORD is trustworthy,
giving wisdom to the simple.

The precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the command of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eye.

The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true,
all of them just.

They are more precious than gold,
than a heap of purest gold;
sweeter also than syrup
or honey from the comb.

READING VII Ezekiel 36:16–17a, 18–28

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel

Ezekiel = ee-ZEE-kee-uhl

A challenging reading. Challenging because the tone of this passage is largely wrathful and accusatory. The language in this reading is so charged, the wrath will come through. It consists almost entirely of the words of God spoken to Ezekiel.

Here the tone is clear: the words "fury," "defiled," and "profane" set that tone.

The **word** of the LORD **came** to me, saying:
Son of man, when the **house** of Israel lived in their **land**,
they **defiled** it by their **conduct** and **deeds**.
Therefore I poured **out** my fury **upon** them
because of the **blood** that they poured **out** on the **ground**,
and because they **defiled** it with idols.
I **scattered** them among the **nations**,
dispersing them over foreign **lands**;
according to their **conduct** and **deeds** I **judged** them.
But when they **came** among the nations wherever they **came**,
they served to **profane** my holy **name**,
because it was **said** of them: "**These** are the **people** of the **LORD**,
yet they had to leave their land."
So I have **relented** because of my holy **name**
which the **house** of Israel **profaned**
among the **nations** where they **came**. »

tation on this Easter vigil comes from the Book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet of the sixth century BC, who ministered to the exiled Judeans in Babylon. In this section of the prophet's writing, Ezekiel uses the Babylonian Exile as the historical reference for his theology of God's plan of salvation. It is written in the form of an oracle delivered to Ezekiel, who is addressed as "son of man," meaning "a human being," most likely to contrast with the utter transcendence of God. God is the speaker.

The oracle opens with a condemnation of the house of Israel for defiling the land with their behaviors and actions that are contrary to the covenant God had made with them. God charges them with idol worship and offering sacrifices to idols, which, in the prophet's mind, would be considered an extreme act of dishonor toward God. Therefore, God is justified in responding to their actions by scattering the people across the lands. Israel's dispersion (scattering) further dishonors God because the nations, to which Israel was scattered, question the power of a God who cannot maintain the people in their own land. Therefore, God decides to show his holiness by withdrawing the punishment on Israel and promising to regather Israel and bring them back to their own land. But God states clearly, "Not for your sakes do I act, house of Israel, but for the sake of my holy name, which you profaned among the nations to which you came."

Further, God says that he intends to perform a ritual cleansing for Israel in order to remove the impurities of their idolatry. From this point on, the vocabulary is highly covenantal, but this covenant is new and different. God says that he will give Israel a new heart and a new spirit. Ancient people

God is so worked up, he begins quoting himself!

Therefore say to the house of Israel: **Thus** says the Lord GOD:
Not for **your sakes** do I act, house of Israel,
but for the **sake** of my holy **name**,
which you **profaned** among the **nations** to which you **came**.
I will **prove** the holiness of my great **name**, profaned among the **nations**,
in whose **midst** you have **profaned** it.

Note the shift into the future tense. The tone doesn't change significantly, but from here to the conclusion of the reading, God is speaking about the future.

Thus the **nations** shall know that **I** am the LORD, says the Lord GOD,
when in their **sight** I prove my **holiness** through **you**.
For I will take you **away** from among the **nations**,
gather you from **all** the foreign lands,
and bring you **back** to your own land.

God wants to cleanse the future of its impurities.

I will **sprinkle** clean water upon you
to **cleanse** you from all your **impurities**,
and from **all** your idols I will **cleanse** you.

And give people a new heart.

I will give you a new **heart** and place a new spirit **within** you,
taking from your bodies your **stony hearts**
and **giving** you **natural** hearts.
I will put my **spirit** within you and make you **live** by my statutes,
careful to observe my **decrees**.

God's hope: this is his covenant.

You shall **live** in the land I **gave** your fathers;
you shall be my **people**, and I will be your **GOD**.

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 42:3, 5; 43:3, 4 (2)
WHEN BAPTISM IS CELEBRATED.

R. Like a deer that longs for running streams, my soul longs for you, my God.

Athirst is my soul for God, the living God.
When shall I go and behold the face of God?

I went with the throng
and led them in procession to the house of God,
amid loud cries of joy and thanksgiving,
with the multitude keeping festival.

Send forth your light and your fidelity;
they shall lead me on
and bring me to your holy mountain,
to your dwelling-place.

Then will I go in to the altar of God,
the God of my gladness and joy;
then will I give you thanks upon the harp,
O God, my God!

Or:

understood the heart to be the seat of thinking and loving. The prophet says that God will remove their hearts of stone and give them a fleshly or human heart. The new spirit that God will give is described further in the next oracle, the vision of the dry bones, where God's spirit or breath gives new life to the community of Israel. Thus, God restores God's honor by returning the people to their land and reaffirming that he will be their God and they will be God's people. What can we say in response? God's faithfulness endures, even in spite of our sin.

EPISTLE The structure of the Easter Vigil liturgy is different from our normal Masses, as evidenced by the number of readings we have. Another unique element of it is that the Gloria is sung before the Epistle reading, rather than before the first reading. This joyful hymn leads us into this reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans, where we are reminded of the meaning of baptism, the foundation of our faith, and the reason for our joyful songs and celebrations. Hearing Paul's theology of baptism is extremely significant for this Easter feast because it grounds our participation in the sacrament of baptism in the paschal mystery, the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection for our salvation. Prior to this reading, Paul had been writing about the efficacy of God's justification of sinful humanity. The word "justification," also translated as "righteousness," has legal overtones and involves acquittal of the charges brought against humanity, where God is the judge and humanity is the accused. Be aware that acquittal in a court of law is not the same as being declared innocent. Humanity cannot earn justification. It is purely and in every way grace,

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Isaiah 12:2–3, 4bcd, 5–6 (3)
WHEN BAPTISM IS NOT CELEBRATED.

R. You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.

God indeed is my savior;
I am confident and unafraid.
My strength and my courage is the LORD,
and he has been my savior.
With joy you will draw water
at the fountain of salvation.

Give thanks to the LORD, acclaim his name;
among the nations make known his deeds,
proclaim how exalted is his name.

Sing praise to the LORD for his glorious achievement;
let this be known throughout all the earth.
Shout with exultation, O city of Zion,
for great in your midst
is the Holy One of Israel!

Or:

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 51:12–13, 14–15, 18–19 (12a)
WHEN BAPTISM IS NOT CELEBRATED.

R. Create a clean heart in me, O God.

A clean heart create for me, O God,
and a steadfast spirit renew within me.
Cast me not out from your presence,
and your Holy Spirit take not from me.

Give me back the joy of your salvation,
and a willing spirit sustain in me.
I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners shall return to you.

For you are not pleased with sacrifices;
should I offer a holocaust, you would not accept it.
My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit;
a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn.

EPISTLE Romans 6:3–11

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

A short reading focused on baptism. Because the Easter Vigil often includes the baptism of the elect, you should imagine you are speaking directly to those about to be baptized.

Paul begins by making a connection between Baptism, life and death, and resurrection. These are the terms that define this passage from his letter to the Romans.

Brothers and **sisters**:
Are you **unaware** that **we** who were **baptized** into Christ **Jesus**
were **baptized** into his **death**?
We were **indeed** buried with him through **baptism** into **death**,
so that, **just** as Christ was **raised** from the dead
by the **glory** of the Father,
we **too** might live in **newness** of life. »

that is, a gift from God. But, of course, someone will ask, "Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound?" to which Paul says, "Of course not!" (Romans 6:1).

Paul then likens a Christian's baptism to being baptized into Christ's death. The Greek verb *baptizó* means "to dip, immerse, or submerge" into Christ, which means that the Christian is also buried with Christ. And because baptized Christians are immersed into Christ, they can also hope to be raised from the dead "as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father." This word "glory" is important. In the Exodus stories, miracles are attributed to God's glory (see Exodus 15:7, 11; 16:7, 10). Likewise, Paul attributes the miracle of Jesus' resurrection to God's glory, which invests the risen Christ with life-giving power (Romans 1:4; see also 1 Corinthians 15:44).

But Paul has not forgotten that question about whether Christians can keep on sinning because God's grace abounds. Beginning with the notion that the Christian is united with Christ through baptism, he notes that it is our old self that dies when we die with Christ. Our old self, which was under the power of sin since the fall, is freed from its slavery to sin. Moreover, when Christ was raised from the dead, he would not die again because "death no longer has power over him." Rather, now Christ lives for God. So, too, those of us who are united with Christ in his death are no longer under the power of sin. Our new selves are "living for God in Christ Jesus."

To die with Christ is also to live with him, to be resurrected with him. Baptism is rebirth.

For if we have **grown** into union with him through a **death**
like his,
we shall also be **united** with him in the **resurrection.**
We know that our **old self** was **crucified** with him,
so that our sinful **body** might be done **away** with,
that we might no longer be in **slavery** to **sin.**
For a **dead** person has been **absolved** from sin.
If, then, we have **died** with Christ,
we **believe** that we shall also **live** with him.
We know that **Christ, raised** from the **dead, dies** no more;
death no longer has **power** over him.
As to his **death,** he **died** to **sin once** and for **all;**
as to his **life,** he lives for **God.**

Paul reemphasizes this point about resurrection in these concluding words.

Consequently, **you too** must think of yourselves as being **dead**
to sin
and **living** for God in Christ **Jesus.**

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 118:1–2, 16–17, 22–23

R. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his mercy endures forever.
Let the house of Israel say,
"His mercy endures forever."

The right hand of the LORD has struck
with power;
the right hand of the LORD is exalted.
I shall not die, but live,
and declare the works of the LORD.

The stone which the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
By the LORD has this been done;
it is wonderful in our eyes.

GOSPEL The Gospel reading for the vigil of the celebration of Christ's resurrection is from Matthew's Gospel. The synoptic Gospels' versions of the empty tomb story share a basic plot, but they differ quite a bit in the details. In Matthew's version, two women come to the tomb after the sabbath but before the dawn on the first day of the week, which would be a Sunday. The women are identified as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who is likely the woman mentioned in Matthew 27:55–56 and 61. These two are listed as witnesses to Jesus' death, the place of his burial, and also the empty tomb, but, under Jewish law, women were not considered to be reliable witnesses. The fact that they are mentioned here in all three places is significant, but the Gospel writer does not explain. What do you think? What meaning might you attach to this detail?

A consistent feature of first-century burial sites in Israel was the large stone used to cover the entrance to the tomb so that animals could not enter the tomb and devour parts of the body or so that it would be harder for grave robbers to steal the body and any items of value that were placed in the tomb. Matthew's Gospel notes that the Jewish religious authorities requested and were granted permission to have Roman soldiers placed at the tomb to prevent Jesus' disciples from stealing his body and claiming that he had been raised from death (Matthew 27:62–66). The period of their assignment was three days, because after that time it was believed that resuscitation was not possible.

We are also told that the women "came to see the tomb," but there is no mention of them coming to wash and anoint the body, as women would have

GOSPEL Matthew 28:1–10

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

The tone of this reading, which comes from the last chapter of Matthew, is conclusive. Its focus is on vision. The witnesses of this vision are women. State their names clearly.

After the **sabbath**, as the **first day** of the **week** was **dawning**,
Mary **Magdalene** and the other **Mary came** to see the **tomb**.
And **behold**, there was a **great earthquake**;
for an **angel** of the **Lord descended** from **heaven**,
approached, **rolled** back the **stone**, and **sat upon** it.
His **appearance** was like **lightning**
and his **clothing** was **white** as **snow**.
The **guards** were **shaken** with **fear** of him
and **became** like **dead men**.
Then the **angel** said to the **women** in reply,
"**Do not** be **afraid**!

Despite the exclamation point, the tone of this statement is soothing and calm.

I know that you are seeking **Jesus** the **crucified**.
He **is not here**, for he has been **raised just** as he **said**.

Slight pause between "raised" and "just."

Come and see the **place** where he **lay**.
Then go **quickly** and tell his **disciples**,
'He has been **raised** from the **dead**,
and he is going **before** you to **Galilee**;
there you will **see** him.'
Behold, I have **told** you."
Then they went away **quickly** from the **tomb**,
fearful yet **overjoyed**,
and **ran** to **announce** this to his **disciples**.

The tone of this reading overall is characterized by this line, "fearful yet overjoyed."

And **behold**, Jesus **met** them on their **way** and **greeted** them.
They **approached**, embraced his **feet**, and did him **homage**.
Then Jesus **said** to them, "**Do not** be **afraid**.
Go tell my **brothers** to go to **Galilee**,
and **there** they will **see** me."

The reading concludes on a note of vision/seeing.

done in a normal burial. Was it because they expected that the soldiers would not have allowed it? Certainly, they would have known that they could not open the tomb by themselves. Were they simply coming to mourn in a ritual way, as in later Jewish traditions such as *shiva*?

Imagine the women's surprise and terror when they arrive at the tomb and see an angel come down from heaven in a mighty earthquake to remove the stone and sit on it. But we might also imagine their curiosity at witnessing such a sight! The earthquake, the angel's lightning-like appearance, and radiant clothing are all signs of divine presence. The soldiers, likewise, are terrified, so much so that they become "like dead men." But now the angel's mission becomes clear. He comforts the women by telling them not to be afraid and showing them the empty tomb as proof of the resurrection. He also sends them on a mission: "go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.'" They leave immediately, we are told, "fearful yet overjoyed."

But here is another interesting detail in Matthew's story of the empty tomb. Jesus' disciples are not present at the tomb—this is not their finest day—and they will need to wait to see Jesus until they receive the message from the women to meet him in Galilee. But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who have no status as witnesses to the resurrection, will have a chance to greet the risen Jesus now! The women prostrate themselves and kiss Jesus' feet indicating that they recognize his divinity but also that they are not just seeing ghosts. Jesus has a real, resurrected body and he is truly raised from the dead. Alleluia!
C.C.