

April 16, 2022
Easter Vigil
United, Oak Park

Now We Get to Play

The thing that I most love about the Easter Vigil is that we get to play. Even if we happen to play a team sport or join together with a group of family members or friends for an evening of board games now and then, our moments of actual play may be few and far between, especially if we are adults.

But this night—the evening that is squashed in the middle of a busy week in the church between the solemn seriousness of Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, and the blaring trumpets of Easter morning—is a time for play.

The first thing that we did this evening was play with fire. While that can be a dangerous thing, our fire at the entrance was relatively tame and controlled. Though the fire itself is a sign of the light of Christ shining in the darkness, it's also symbolic of how people have gathered in the evening for centuries. When it gets dark and we want to gather with others, we light fires. Generations before electric lamps needed to

do this with logs in the fireplace or perhaps with bonfires in some large outdoor gathering place. More recently, gathering around a fire pit has become a popular activity for many people. It's a satisfying thing for us to light a fire in the evening when we gather with others. And when we gather with others we tell stories, much as we have done this evening as we have told some ancient stories from the Hebrew scriptures.

Our playfulness continued to our story time this evening as we imagined the beginning of creation, when all that God made was pronounced good. People who think of that passage in the Bible in a literal sense are missing the point. Undoubtedly the story existed for a long time as a tale that was told by some elder relative when multiple generations had come together, probably around a fire. The details and the precise ordering of elements in the story were only important insofar as they provided interest and drama.

The passover story, told at this time every year, has a great deal of drama as well as playfulness. The plagues crushing the Egyptians delight everyone who is cheering for the Israelites. Meanwhile the drowning of the Egyptian army is hard to forget, especially if you were

exposed to Cecil B. DeMille's version of it in the Ten Commandments movie.

But for sheer playful exaggeration, it's hard to beat the story of Jonah, the guy who went in the exact opposite direction to which God had been pointing him. When the sailors on the vessel in which he had been traveling threw him overboard, the story is really just getting started, and Jonah finds himself inside the belly of a big fish (or is it a whale?). What we sang in response to that story, based on the tune of an old sea shanty, only adds to the playfulness already present in the biblical text.

All of these enjoyable encounters are ways for us to know that God takes delight in us, and that we can take delight in the many ways that God continues to be with us.

This Night of Nights is a wonderful occasion. We have sung rapturously about the melting wax of this candle made by bees. Soon enough we will imagine ourselves playing in the water of our baptismal font, we will share in the first eucharist of Easter, and we will enjoy a party made glad with sparkling wine.

And yet the reason for all of this playfulness and merrymaking is because of the utter joy and gladness at this beginning of another 50-day season that marks Christ's victory over the powers of evil and death. Our exuberance only begins tonight. It will continue tomorrow morning as we again recall the grandest story of all: God raising Jesus from the tomb.

After all the drabness of winter, after two years of a dreadful pandemic, and after missing out on in-person Easter services since 2019, we now have some things to celebrate! Let's have fun with it!