

Planning for the Great Vigil of Easter

The Great Vigil of Easter is the liturgical highlight of the church year. Dramatically, it fills a need that the Easter Sunday does not. The sober days of Lent have led to the highlight of Jesus' ministry on Palm Sunday, followed quickly by the tragic event of Holy Week, commemorated on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Attending an Easter Sunday service after Good Friday somehow deprives the worshipper of actually experiencing the transition from despair to triumph. The Easter Vigil delivers that experience, however, and does it powerfully.

St. Paul's has been scheduling an Easter Vigil for quite a few years. It has always been a beautiful service, but attendance has been up and down. When the service is aggressively promoted, attendance soars. In the absence of much publicity, only the Vigil-groupies attend.

What follows is the text for the Great Vigil of Easter from the Prayer Book, along with marginal notes regarding its celebration this year at St. Paul's. I have been collecting information about how we have conducted this service in the past—we now have extensive and varied experience—as well as suggestions as to how the service might be improved. I hope this will help us to continue to make the Easter Vigil a moving and alive service. There is no better time to bring a visitor to St. Paul's than for the Easter Vigil, by the way.

Not all the notes are of the same nature. Some capture what we now do (and will likely continue doing), such as having the lighting low at the beginning of the service. Others suggest alternatives we have sometimes done or might do. Still other notes are questions to be answered. I have admittedly attended to certain aspects of the service more than to others, so I must warn readers that my notes may not be uniformly useful. I hope that others will help fill in gaps and correct errors.

We generally hold a rehearsal for the Easter Vigil on Saturday morning, following the baptism rehearsal. This is essential, particularly for clergy and acolytes.

For as long as I have been at St. Paul's, an Agape Feast has followed the Vigil. This is a wonderful way of ending the celebration and welcoming the newly baptized. Like the service itself, this event requires some planning. I believe that we have relied too heavily on voluntary contributions in the past, and I suggest that the Fellowship Commission take on the Feast as a major project. There should be wine, cheese, juice, fruit, bread, vegetables, dip, chocolate, and all manner of wonderful food. It has not been a part of our tradition, but champagne would be a lovely addition. The feast, lacking promotion and understanding, has been less celebratory in the past few years.

Lionel Deimel
March 14, 2008

Concerning the Vigil

This service has normally been scheduled for 7:30 PM. Apparently, some Roman Catholic churches schedule the service so that the Eucharist occurs around midnight, making this the first Eucharist of Easter Sunday, even by modern notions of when the day begins. The church, of course, should be dark. Unfortunately, in recent years, sunset has occurred after 7:30 PM on the night of the Vigil. Note that, according to the Prayer Book, the celebration takes place between sunset on Holy Saturday and sunrise on Easter Morning. St. Paul's has always begun the service with worshippers in the pews. Candle lighting has been an issue over the years, but has been consistent over the past few years. Four acolytes have followed the Paschal Candle, lighting pew torches and worshipper candles as they process. The acolytes split up at the crossing to light candles of the choir and people in the transepts.

We have not generally provided childcare. Should we?

A deacon should carry the candle, if possible. Doug Starr has chanted the Exsultet in recent years from somewhere near the Paschal Candle (see below).

Although members of the Confirmation Class have sometimes read the lessons, employing experienced adult readers is more appropriate for such an important service. Were we to use more lessons than has been common in the past (four), it would be reasonable to pick readers representing various groups, as is done at King's College, Cambridge, for the service of lessons and carols for Christmas. In any case, commitments from readers should be obtained well in advance. (Readers have sometimes been asked to read at the last minute.)

Here are a few general questions:

- 1. How is the kindling of the fire to be handled? It has usually been done outdoors. Doing it indoors would be dramatic.*
- 2. Where should the Paschal Candle stand and where should the lessons be read? In principle, lessons should be read near the Paschal Candle, but our architecture does not encourage this. A couple of years ago, we placed a lectern on the font side of the altar and had readers read from there, with torches on either side. In 2007, we moved the large stand for the Paschal Candle to the pulpit side of the altar and had readings done from the pulpit. This worked out well, and we left the Paschal candle in that place throughout the Easter season, a move that had not been planned, but which was suggested by many parishioners.*

The Great Vigil, when observed, is the first service of Easter Day. It is celebrated at a convenient time between sunset on Holy Saturday and sunrise on Easter Morning.

The service normally consists of four parts:

1. The Service of Light.
2. The Service of Lessons.
3. Christian Initiation, or the Renewal of Baptismal Vows.
4. The Holy Eucharist with the administration of Easter Communion.

It is customary for all the ordained ministers present, together with lay readers, singers, and other persons, to take active parts in the service.

The bishop, when present, is the chief celebrant, presides at Baptism and administers Communion, and normally preaches the sermon.

The priests who are present share among them the reading of the Collects which follow each Lesson, and assist at Baptism and the Eucharist. In the absence of a bishop, a priest presides at the service.

It is the prerogative of a deacon to carry the Paschal Candle to its place, and to chant the Exsultet. Deacons likewise assist at Baptism and the Eucharist according to their order.

Lay persons read the Lessons and the Epistle, and assist in other ways. A lay person may be assigned to chant the Exsultet. It is desirable that each Lesson be read by a different reader.

In the absence of a bishop or priest, a deacon or lay reader may lead the first two parts of the service, the Renewal of Baptismal Vows, and the Ministry of the Word of the Vigil Eucharist, concluding with the Prayers of the People, the Lord's Prayer, and the Dismissal.

A deacon may also, when the services of a priest cannot be obtained, and with the authorization of the bishop, officiate at public Baptism; and may administer Easter Communion from the Sacrament previously consecrated.

When the Vigil is not celebrated, the Service of Light may take place at a convenient time before the Liturgy on Easter Day.

As people enter the church, the room should be as dark as possible consistent with safety concerns. Bulletins and candles are distributed. Musicians and other participants (acolytes, priests, and readers) not needed to light the Paschal Candle and other candles should take their places in the chancel in an orderly fashion a few minutes before the service is to begin. Clergy wear black cassocks.

Normally, Easter flowers have been placed in the chancel but are covered when the service begins. Most liturgical furnishings—which were removed on Maundy Thursday—are still not in the church. There seems to be some question as to whether some furnishings are replaced before the service and, if so, which ones.

We light the fire with a match (this really should be a flint), using notes nailed to the cross on Good Friday. We need this to be both ceremonial and safe. Someone should have a fire extinguisher nearby. Ideally, the fire would be kindled in a brass brazier.

The celebrant (in a cassock) should be using a wireless microphone.

A taper should be used to light the Paschal Candle. Four candle lighters, held by acolytes, should be lit from the Paschal Candle.

Pew candles and individual candles need to be lit. The rubrics seem to imply that individual candles should be lit once the Paschal Candle has reached to front of the church. The last couple of years, we have had acolytes following the deacon, who light the pew candles and the candles of worshippers. This works well. The acolytes also need to light individual candles in the chancel. No pavement or altar candles are lit at this time.

The Great Vigil of Easter

The Lighting of the Paschal Candle

In the darkness, fire is kindled; after which the Celebrant may address the people in these or similar words

Dear friends in Christ: On this most holy night, in which our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life, the Church invites her members, dispersed throughout the world, to gather in vigil and prayer. For this is the Passover of the Lord, in which, by hearing his Word and celebrating his Sacraments, we share in his victory over death.

The Celebrant may say the following prayer

Let us pray.

O God, through your Son you have bestowed upon your people the brightness of your light: Sanctify this new fire, and grant that in this Paschal feast we may so burn with heavenly desires, that with pure minds we may attain to the festival of everlasting light; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The Paschal Candle is then lighted from the newly kindled fire, and the Deacon (the Celebrant if there is no deacon) bearing the Candle, leads the procession to the chancel, pausing three times and singing or saying

People The light of Christ.
 Thanks be to God.

If new pew candles are used, they can be lit easily by one acolyte. As explained above, we lately have had two acolytes assigned to light the pew candles behind the deacon and two to light individual candles. Two acolytes work the left side of the aisle and two work the right side. At the crossing, the acolytes handling the pew candles can split and go into the chancel to light individual candles. The other two acolytes can go to the transepts for the same purpose.

Note location. The Exsultet (S 69) could be chanted from behind the screen near the font, but, again, I suggest using the pulpit.

The Exsultet should not be begun until the Paschal Candle is in place. The stool is likely necessary to place the candle, and we may want to assign an acolyte (preferably a tall one) to help.

Since the optional text emphasizes the symbolism of the ceremony, it probably should not be omitted.

If candles have been distributed to members of the congregation, they are lighted from the Paschal Candle at this time. Other candles and lamps in the church, except for those at the Altar, may also be lighted.

The Paschal Candle placed in its stand.

Then the Deacon, or other person appointed, standing near the Candle, sings or says the Exsultet, as follows (the indicated sections may be omitted)

Rejoice now, heavenly hosts and choirs of angels,
and let your trumpets shout Salvation
for the victory of our mighty King.

Rejoice and sing now, all the round earth,
bright with a glorious splendor,
for darkness has been vanquished by our eternal King.

Rejoice and be glad now, Mother Church,
and let your holy courts, in radiant light,
resound with the praises of your people.

All you who stand near this marvelous and holy flame,
pray with me to God the Almighty
for the grace to sing the worthy praise of this great light;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with him,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

The Lord be with you.

Answer And also with you.

Deacon Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

Answer It is right to give him thanks and praise.

Deacon

It is truly right and good, always and everywhere, with our

whole heart and mind and voice, to praise you, the invisible, almighty, and eternal God, and your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; for he is the true Paschal Lamb, who at the feast of the Passover paid for us the debt of Adam's sin, and by his blood delivered your faithful people.

This is the night, when you brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land.

This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.

This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.

We have always included these optional paragraphs.

How wonderful and beyond our knowing, O God, is your mercy and loving-kindness to us, that to redeem a slave, you gave a Son.

How holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. It restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. It casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord.

How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and man is reconciled to God.

Holy Father, accept our evening sacrifice, the offering of this candle in your honor. May it shine continually to drive away all darkness. May Christ, the Morning Star who knows no setting, find it ever burning—he who gives his light to all creation, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Hand-held candles are usually extinguished here. Participants in the chancel should extinguish their candles, and, it is to be hoped, others will follow the lead without additional (and distracting) instruction. There should be an appropriate notation in the bulletin, of course.

It is customary that the Paschal Candle burn at all services from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost.

The Liturgy of the Word

The celebrant has presumably followed the acolytes with candle torches and has taken a seat before this part of the service begins. I do not know if a crucifer should precede the celebrant. The introduction and collects can be read from the altar, where enough light will be available for the celebrant to read.

The intention here is to tell the story of God's relation to His people before the coming of the Messiah. We have to decide which lessons to read, each of which also requires additional scripture, silence, and prayer. This section should run like clockwork, though without any obvious signs of haste. Doug will want much music here; we should not go overboard and should opt for as much scripture reading as possible. (Last year we read (1) the story of creation, (2) Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, (3) Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea, and (The valley of the dry bones. I recommend we add some variety this year.) Note: The Lessons are shown in their entirety in the appendix, which follows p. 295.

Substitutions are allowed for the particular psalms and canticles listed. Keeping this part of the service spare will emphasize the joyous nature of what is to come.

The Celebrant may introduce the Scripture readings in these or similar words

Let us hear the record of God's saving deeds in history, how he saved his people in ages past; and let us pray that our God will bring each of us to the fullness of redemption.

At least two of the following Lessons are read, of which one is always the Lesson from Exodus. After each Lesson, the Psalm or Canticle listed, or some other suitable psalm, canticle, or hymn may be sung. A period of silence may be kept; and the Collect provided, or some other suitable Collect, may be said.

The story of Creation

Genesis 1:1-2:2

Psalm 33:1-11, or Psalm 36:5-10

Let us pray. *(Silence)*

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The Flood

Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:8-18; 9:8-13

Psalm 46

Let us pray. *(Silence)*

Almighty God, you have placed in the skies the sign of your covenant with all living things: Grant that we, who are saved through water and the Spirit, may worthily offer to you our sacrifice of thanksgiving; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac

Genesis 22:1-18

Psalm 33:12-22, *or* Psalm 16

Let us pray. (*Silence*)

God and Father of all believers, for the glory of your Name multiply, by the grace of the Paschal sacrament, the number of your children; that your Church may rejoice to see fulfilled your promise to our father Abraham; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea

Exodus 14:10-15:1

Canticle 8, *The Song of Moses*

Let us pray. (*Silence*)

O God, whose wonderful deeds of old shine forth even to our own day, you once delivered by the power of your mighty arm your chosen people from slavery under Pharaoh, to be a sign for us of the salvation of all nations by the water of Baptism: Grant that all the peoples of the earth may be numbered among the offspring of Abraham, and rejoice in the inheritance of Israel; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

God's Presence in a renewed Israel

Isaiah 4:2-6

Psalm 122

Let us pray. *(Silence)*

O God, you led your ancient people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night: Grant that we, who serve you now on earth, may come to the joy of that heavenly Jerusalem, where all tears are wiped away and where your saints for ever sing your praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Salvation offered freely to all

Isaiah 55:1-11

Canticle 9, *The First Song of Isaiah*, or Psalm 42:1-7

Let us pray. *(Silence)*

O God, you have created all things by the power of your Word, and you renew the earth by your Spirit: Give now the water of life to those who thirst for you, that they may bring forth abundant fruit in your glorious kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

A new heart and a new spirit

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Psalm 42:1-7, or Canticle 9, *The First Song of Isaiah*

Let us pray. *(Silence)*

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all

who are reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The valley of dry bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 30, *or* Psalm 143

Let us pray. (*Silence*)

Almighty God, by the Passover of your Son you have brought us out of sin into righteousness and out of death into life: Grant to those who are sealed by your Holy Spirit the will and the power to proclaim you to all the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The gathering of God's people

Zephaniah 3:12-20

Psalm 98, *or* Psalm 126

Let us pray. (*Silence*)

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

The homily—the preaching should be kept short—in recent years has been moved after the Gospel and followed by baptism. (See p. 295.)

The logic in using the optional placement here is twofold. We avoid having to turn the lights up for baptism and down for what follows, and we place the sermon after the Easter Acclamation, where more exuberance seems in order. The Worship Commission has long been concerned about noisy babies at the Vigil, and we should consider whether they should only be admitted later in the service. Alternatively, we could explain that crying babies must be removed. We could set up a receiver in another room where people could still hear the service. (Is this too draconian?)

Skip to p. 294.

A homily may be preached after any of the preceding Readings.

Holy Baptism (beginning with the Presentation of the Candidates, page 301, and concluding with the reception of the newly baptized) may be administered here or after the Gospel. Confirmation may also be administered.

In the absence of candidates for Baptism or Confirmation, the Celebrant leads the people in the Renewal of Baptismal Vows, either here or after the Gospel.

The Celebrant may first address the people in these or similar words, all standing

Through the Paschal mystery, dear friends, we are buried with Christ by Baptism into his death, and raised with him to newness of life. I call upon you, therefore, now that our Lenten observance is ended, to renew the solemn promises and vows of Holy Baptism, by which we once renounced Satan and all his works, and promised to serve God faithfully in his holy Catholic Church.

The Renewal of Baptismal Vows

Celebrant Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil and renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?

People I do.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Father?

People I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

Celebrant Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?
People I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Celebrant Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?
People I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in
the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever
you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God
in Christ?
People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your
neighbor as yourself?
People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?
People I will, with God's help.

The Celebrant concludes the Renewal of Vows as follows

May Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and bestowed upon us the forgiveness of sins, keep us in eternal life by his grace, in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Amen.*

At this time, the church is reduced to near darkness while Altar Guild members replace liturgical furnishings and uncover and add flowers. (We have discovered that we can turn out all the electric lights and work by the light of the pew candles.) When everything has been prepared to continue the service, Doug presses the signal button that lights a lamp in the narthex. Alternatively, Doug could improvise at the organ softly as the "set change" takes place both to distract attention from it and to set a contemplative mood. Stopping the music would be the signal to proceed.

While the Altar Guild is working, acolytes, readers, and clergy exit quietly, dress for a full procession, and move to the narthex via the undercroft.

St. Paul's deviates from the Prayer Book here by adding a dramatic dialogue whose origin has not been determined, though it seems to have been the practice of General Theological Seminary, whether or not it originated there. Although we have used microphones for this dialogue in the past, that is undesirable, as it is helpful if the congregation can clearly distinguish the locations of the voices from within and without. Participants must, of course, make themselves heard.

From the narthex, someone knocks loudly at the door.

Inside, someone asks: Whom do you seek?

From the narthex: Jesus of Nazareth.

Inside: He is not here. Alleluia. Christ is risen.

Congregation: The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

At this point, the lights are instantly raised to their full intensity and music, including trumpets, is heard. We may want to encourage worshippers to bring their own bells. The Gloria follows an organ and brass fanfare.

The lights are usually kept at full intensity for the rest of the service.

Candles in the chancel are lit by acolytes after the lights come up.

At the Eucharist

The candles at the Altar may now be lighted from the Paschal Candle.

One of the following Canticles is then sung. Immediately before the Canticle the Celebrant may say to the people

Alleluia. Christ is risen.
People The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

The Canticles

Gloria in excelsis
Te Deum laudamus
Pascha nostrum

The Celebrant then says

The Lord be with you.
People And also with you.
Celebrant Let us pray.

The Celebrant says one of the following Collects

Almighty God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

or this

O God, who made this most holy night to shine with the glory of the Lord's resurrection: Stir up in your Church that Spirit of adoption which is given to us in Baptism, that we, being renewed both in body and mind, may worship you in sincerity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Epistle Romans 6:3-11

S 70 is traditional here, though we have never used it.

We sing a hymn here.

"Alleluia" may be sung and repeated.

Psalms 114, or some other suitable psalm or a hymn may be sung.

Gospel Matthew 28:1-10

The sermon goes here..

If a sermon or homily was not preached earlier, it follows here.

The Nicene Creed is not used at this service

The service continues with the prayer before baptism (p. 292). The service continues here after Holy Baptism.

Holy Baptism, Confirmation, or the Renewal of Baptismal Vows may take place here.

The celebration continues with the Prayers of the People.

Preface of Easter