

From Pastor Conradt's Desk

Is it Lutheran? The Easter Vigil

Spring is here. The death of Winter is replaced with new life. The same is true for church year. Lent and Jesus' death on Good Friday will give way to the new life on Easter.

Within the Missouri Synod and many other Lutheran denominations there has been a rediscovered zeal for traditional Lutheranism and liturgical renewal in the last 30 years or so. For many it is a desire to go back to the way things used to be. One of the things that have been reintroduced is the Easter Vigil. Maybe you have never heard of it, that's okay.

It might sound new. Rev. Dr. Burnell Eckardt Jr. serves in Illinois and is an editor of the *Gottesdienst* magazine. He has also served as guest professor at the Lutheran seminary in Russia. He writes:

"There was no Great Vigil among Lutherans in the early 20th century. The recovery of this ancient and venerable tradition has been a key ingredient in the rediscovery of liturgical beauty and importance for Lutherans. But still there is resistance, particularly among people who hadn't grown up with the tradition, and for whom therefore it represented something new. Actually it's something very old, which, like many venerable traditions, fell into disuse between the 17th and 19th centuries when Rationalism was on the rise. The recovery of Confessional Lutheranism has brought with it an awakening of liturgical piety, and a renewed appreciation for the Great Vigil."

Okay so what is it? The Easter Vigil is a service on Holy Saturday evening. It actually begins at dusk. It is part of what is called the Holy Triduum which is a three day service. Beginning on Maundy Thursday the Holy Triduum continues through Good Friday and ends with the Vigil on Holy Saturday. As it is a three day service there is no benediction on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday.

Rev. Dr. Eckardt mentioned that the Easter Vigil service is very old. In fact it is at least 1700 years old. In the early church they did strenuous catechesis during the season of Lent for those adults who desired to be baptized. According to *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, "After A.D. 313 the Easter Vigil was the prime time for baptisms."

In the early church people would gather to hold vigil all night until the sunrise on Easter, they gathered

for prayers, readings, and psalms, as they waited for the celebration of Christ's resurrection. While there are still some churches where people do this, most of the Lutheran Churches that have reintroduced the Vigil celebrate it just at night.

There are four main services within the Vigil. The Service of Light begins outside at sunset where a fire is kindled. The paschal candle is the main focus for this. On the candle the cross, the letters Alpha and Omega are traced. The five wax nails are put in and it is lit from the fire. Everyone outside lights their own candles from the paschal candle and they process into the sanctuary in candlelight. The paschal candle is set in place and the Easter Proclamation (*Exsultet*) is sung.

The Service of Readings is next which is a series of Old Testament readings foreshadowing Christ are read (between six to twelve). After each reading is a collect (prayer). The Song of the Three Men in the furnace concludes this section.

The Service of Holy Baptism begins with a pastoral address. While baptisms can be performed during this section, even if there are none, it is recited to point all people back to their Baptism. This is also a time where the rite of Confirmation can be performed.

The Service of Holy Communion begins with the greeting, "Alleluia. Christ is risen./He is risen indeed. Alleluia." All the paraments and items that were taken out on Maundy Thursday are replaced with Easter paraments, the pastors change into their communion vestments and we receive communion as the first celebration of Christ's resurrection.

The Easter Vigil is considered the highest point of our worship year. So I invite you to join me at Lutheran Chapel of the Cross (LCMS) in Mt. Pleasant on Holy Saturday at 7:30pm where I will be assisting in their service. If you would like to see the service it is in our Altar Book (I have my own copy) and I would be happy to share with you. God's richest blessings.

In Christ,

Pr. Conradt