

Easter Vigil 2011 Sermon

Preached at St. Luke's Church: Romans 6: 3-11

By

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Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was one of the most powerful men in the world. As a Russian Communist leader he took part in the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. He was also the editor of the official Soviet newspaper, Pravda and a member of the Politburo. His work in economics and political science are still studied today.

I read a story about a trip he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a massive assembly of workers on the subject of atheism. He aimed the heavy artillery of his arguments at Christianity by hurling insults and proof against it. He went on and on for an hour effectively crucifying and killing our faith. When he was done he looked out smugly upon what he thought was the smoldering ash heap of the crowd's faith.

Bukharin demanded a reply to the silence. "Are there any questions?" As deafening silence filled the auditorium, for what seemed an eternity, a man approached the platform and the lectern standing near the

powerful communist leader. He surveyed the crowd scanning the silent faces from left to right. Finally, he shouted the ancient greeting known so well in the Russian Orthodox Church: “CHRIST IS RISEN!” En masse, the crowd rose to its feet and the response came crashing forth like the sound of thunder: “HE IS RISEN INDEED.”

I say to all of you this evening: “CHRIST IS RISEN!” “HE IS RISEN INDEED!”

This evening we look upon the very heart of our Christian faith and tradition repeated throughout the centuries all over the world to billions of believers like you and me in the beauty of this Easter Vigil liturgy.

This is Easter and as I stand in the pulpit of this beautiful church, before this congregation I love and serve, and proclaim to you those words at the center of our faith, I am deeply moved and emotional. We join the voices of that proclamation that have come forth from the silenced hearts and lips of our Christian sisters and brothers from ages and ages, long since past. We join that massive chorus this evening and we shout to a world darkened by its refusal to love, “CHRIST IS RISEN!” “HE IS RISEN INDEED.”

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead defines us and gives us our identity. The resurrection defines the Christian. We know

who we are. We know what we are, and we know to whom we belong. We are the disciples of the risen Christ. We are followers of the risen Jesus. As such, we have a mission and a duty to carry out and continue His work on this earth so that a world in darkness may see the beauty of this Easter light.

We have a wonderful opportunity and a great privilege this evening. In a few minutes, we are going to Baptize Ryan William Steadman, Braden Andrew Terry and his big brother, Jacob Andrew Terry. Their Baptism is not a new gift of Jesus Christ to these three boys. The lives of Ryan, Braden and Jacob are already a God given and sanctified gift made holy. This evening these three boys will become God's perpetual gift to the church of which they will soon become members. Baptism is a proclamation to the church and, through the church, to the world, that all of creation, from the very oldest person to the very youngest, all of creation lives and moves and has its' being in God. This is not a privilege acquired through Baptism. The church baptizes this evening because these children already have that privilege. They are made holy like all of God's creation because they are the recipients of God's grace. God has given them life through their parents whom God created. We, the church baptize them because they are God's holy and sanctified gift

to us the church and the world. Baptism takes its' rightful place in the middle of our Easter Vigil because it is based in the great hope and joy of the Easter message.

What I love most about children is that children embody our best hopes and dreams. I smile with joy because each precious young life brings with it such hope for the future of the world.

Baptism will give the boys their identity and as they grow and develop they will come to learn who they are, what they are and to whom they belong. This understanding, this identity will come about by the love and example of their parents, family and Godparents. But this understanding must also come from the love, prayerful support and example of their Christian family, their church.

In the late 1970s, I was in the United States Navy attached to the 6th fleet in the Mediterranean Sea. Our ship was fortunate in that we had a priest attached to our command for the duration of the cruise. When we anchored out in Naples, Italy, I went with him by train to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome where I saw the death door that was commissioned in memory of Pope John XXIII. The door for this great basilica was sculpted by the artist, Geacoma Manza depicting a series of death scenes. There was death by falling, death in war, the martyred death of

Peter upside down on the cross, and death by water depicted by one who was drowning.

At that time, I could not help but think this was a very odd theme to be sculpted into the door to one of the world's great church's. I often wondered what was in the mind of the artist to choose such a theme for his work. It wasn't until many years later that I understood what was behind the sculptor's theme. The theme was this; we enter the church through the door of death. By the waters of Baptism we enact our entrance into the life and death of Jesus Christ, and the body of Christ, his church. So, death by water is a challenging and authentic understanding of Baptism.

The early church even built its baptismal fonts in the shape of tombs. They filled the tomb with water and by full immersion into the waters the meaning of Baptism became very graphic. Baptism takes its' place at the heart of our Easter Vigil because the Easter Vigil looks at life as a God given and sanctified gift that continues forever in the spirit. Death is that necessary door through which every one of our lives must pass so that our spirit may be freed to continue on and develop in eternal life with God.

Our Baptismal Covenant which we will proclaim at the boys baptism this evening is a way of practicing to live and practicing to die through the life, death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Paschal mystery we celebrate at our Easter Vigil.

As you all know, the art of dying well does not just miraculously begin the hour before we slough off this mortal coil. It begins at the moment of our birth, which we express ritually at Baptism. With the sacrament of Baptism, we are able to line up our attitudes towards living and dying with our practices. We begin to find a connection between living and dying, between the events of our birth and death. Baptism brings the beginning and the ending of human life together with sacramental power. However, our incorporation in the church is only complete in our death. Our death in Jesus Christ is our final inclusion in the body of Christ. So our Baptism sees us into this world and out of this world, as well.

Tonight, as we welcome Ryan, Braden and Jacob we recall our own Baptism as we renew our promises, our covenant, with God and our church. This return to our Baptism forms and informs how we live our lives between the events of our birth and our death. Baptism becomes the very key to the door of how well we live and to how we can die well.

My dear friends in Christ, we are not spectators at this baptism. We are participants in this baptism. Tonight, we take up our own baptism once again, remembering who we, what we are, and to whom we belong. We remember that we began our lives as God’s sanctified and holy people. When we renew our baptismal covenant with God we also look and see to what degree we have kept the promises into which we were baptized. How firmly have we clung to the cross of Jesus the Christ upon which he died on Good Friday and rose on Easter Sunday morning making all things new for us? Did we die to our old selves on Good Friday so that like Jesus, we too can rise and make all things new in our lives once again this Easter?

In our reading from his letter to the Romans, Paul writes,

**“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too we might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in death in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. So I say to you
“CHRIST IS RISEN!” “HE IS RISEN INDEED!” SAY ALLELUIA,
SAY AMEN!**