

Holy Saturday Vigil 2024

We praise you 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.

Amen.

Can you imagine all of your burdens just being carried away?

As far back at 2400 BC archeologists have evidence that people in religious services, through sacramental prayer would symbolically transfer the sins of the community onto an animal.

Then the community would gather, and they would release the animal into the wild, watching it run away and taking all their sins with it, never to be seen again.

This practice continued for thousands of years and is described in the book of Leviticus 16:22. "The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness. "

Released. Running far away. Never to be seen again.

"For He is the true Paschal Lamb, who at the feast of the Passover paid for us the debt of Adam's sin."

Now, perhaps the word sin brings up some feelings for you. If so you would be in good company. Sin is a word and concept that has been used to shame us, blame us, condemn us. I get it. That word alone can make our hearts harden.

But for a moment, I want to invite you to suspend judgement. Just let that word Sin sit in the air and notice how it feels in your body to consider sin.

Now, what if we further defined the word sin; to include brokenness, or failures, or weaknesses. Perhaps addictions, or disease, or hurt feelings, or anger, or broken relationships, or war, or separation from anything you deeply love.

Notice, how does considering sin in that way feel in your body?

Does considering sin deeply right now in this space, in this in between time, before the light returns. While we reflect on the crucifixion and our theology that somehow Jesus died for our sins. How does that feel?

Maybe it feels like a heaviness in your chest, or a weight in your stomach? Can you hold that feeling and just give it a breath? Without judgement?

Now, I want to invite you to imagine transferring all of your sins, all your brokenness, all of that heaviness and weight onto something else, anything, an animal, a stone, a piece of paper...whatever it is, imagine that thing carrying all your sins and then, imagine that thing which is carrying all your sin, is sent far away and it just disappears, never to return. Gone, forever. And all the sin goes with it.

As you imagine that, can you notice how your body feels when you think of all your sins leaving you and never, ever coming back.

After years of being a therapist and a priest, I have come to see sin as that which so burdens our hearts that it can separate us from the love of God.

And, I don't know anyone who would not want to release that kind of burden.

We aren't so different really from those humans as far back as 2400 BC, we too are seeking a way to unburden ourselves from that which separates us from the love of God, whatever word we use to describe it, we would all, I think like to release that burden.

That is what makes this season of Lent and Holy Week and Easter so deeply relevant to all of us.

And perhaps we aren't even conscious of our need, our fundamental human desire to unburden ourselves from the weight of sin.

But our bodies tell the story of our deep desire to be free from sin.
Our bodies tell us about this burden we all carry from time to time. That burden can make us sick, depressed, or anxious or isolated.

And, our bodies and our hearts long to be free from burdens. We long to be free of our burdens so that we can be connected to one another and to God.

And so we come to this moment, the most holy of nights, when we remember this lamb of God, the final sacrifice for our sins, Jesus.

Jesus lifted his arms in obedience on the cross, offering himself a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

This is our story. As odd as it may really be. This is what we believe to be true.

In this story of Jesus, he is the final sacrifice, and we are actually invited to lay down all our sins, all of the brokenness of the human condition onto Jesus, for him to carry away.

All our burdens, all our brokenness, all the things which separate us from love, Jesus has offered to carry all of that away, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

Now, some part of you, may feel guilt at the thought that Jesus would carry all your burdens and take all your sin.

Perhaps part of you doesn't feel worthy of that kind of sacrifice. But here is the crux of the story. Jesus takes our sins, not just for us to live free from our burdens in our own small private lives.

Quite the opposite, Jesus invites us to release all our burdens, so that our hearts and minds and bodies can be open and free and light, so that we can love others.

Imagine what we might be capable of doing, if we truly released all our burdens, if our bodies and hearts and minds were free of that weight?

How might our lives change if we truly believed that our brokenness and sin could be carried away and that we could be fully accepted and completely loved, just as we are.

Think of the extra energy we would have if we gave up the need to be good, and right and perfect. And just accepted that indeed we are totally loved, imagine the burden that would lift from our hearts.

Jesus, just like the goat or the lamb, has done this, invited us to release all our burdens, offered to carry them away into the wilderness, so that as freed people, we would be capable of going out into the world and capable of loving as Jesus loved us.

Loving fully, God, self and neighbor. Because that is what truly free people do, they love freely.

Jesus invites us to release all the sins that separate us from love, so that we can each turn back towards love.

Jesus freed us, so we can and free others.

Friends, on this Holy Night, as the light returns to us and we renew our baptismal covenant, on this eve of resurrection, imagine fully releasing the burdens of your sin, your brokenness, your anger or resentment, imagine with me, Jesus easily and willingly and lovingly carrying them away into the wilderness and imagine, reclaiming the love of God fully and freely.

Let that love wash over you, like the waters of baptism, cleansing you as you release all that burdens you.

Because we know what happens soon enough. We know love is stronger than death.

We know, God is creating in you a new heart, freed to be an Easter people.

That is resurrection, which is available to each of us, offered by the true paschal lamb, who carries away all our sins and teaches us how to walk in love, together and free.

Amen.