

The Great Vigil of Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
St. Francisville, Louisiana

26 March 2016

For Americans, 2016 has been the year of preoccupation with politics. The primary process has captivated us, has kept us glued to television sets, and it has angered, worried, and excited us. It is inescapable. There is no place to hide from it. Magazines, news media, cable television, radio, and social media all are filled with scenarios, warnings, forecasts, and various prognostications of what will happen in the next few months. Two hundred years ago in 1816, there was another set of preoccupations and worries. For those alive in many parts of Asia, in Northern Europe and in the North East of America it was pretty evident that the world was coming to an end in the summer of the year 1816. There were signs everywhere: the temperature over most of Europe and North-America were between 30 to 40 degrees cooler that summer, roads were frozen, crops never grew out, there was overwhelming hunger, and the cholera epidemic was beginning to move faster and wider than it had before. The most overwhelming sign of the end, however, was darkness. Historians call 1816 as the year when the sun never came out. Dropping temperatures, worldwide famine, and absolute darkness were for many signs of Judgment day. To make matters worse, scientists found various sunspots on the surface of the sun, so large that they could be seen by the naked eye.

The London Chronicle reported on the panic: “The large spots... have given rise to ridiculous apprehensions and absurd predictions. These spots are said to be the cause of the remarkable and wet weather we have had this Summer; and ... is represented to announce a general removal of heat from the globe, the extinction of nature, and the end of the world” (Vail, Jeffrey. "the Bright Sun was Extinguished': The Bologna Prophecy and Byron's 'Darkness'." Wordsworth Circle 28: 183-92.) A scientist in Bologna Italy predicted that the sun would go out on July 18, 1816, which caused riots, suicides, and religious fervor all over Europe. A famous story of this era narrates how when a regiment of cavalry passing through the town of Gent during a thunderstorm blew their trumpets, most in the town rushed out of their homes and dropped on their knees in the streets, thinking they had heard the seventh trumpet of the book of Revelation (Ibid, 187). It was during this time, in 1816, that the poet Lord Byron, who at the time was living in Geneva, wrote his famous poem “Darkness”.

Lines of that poem read, “I had a dream, which was not all a dream. The bright sun was extinguished, and the stars did wander darkling in the eternal space... Morn came and went--and came, and brought no day, And men forgot their passions in the dread of this

their desolation; and all hearts were chilled into a selfish prayer for light.” The overwhelming darkness threw the entire world into chaos. Unbeknown to all living at this time, the dark clouds which shielded the sun and caused icy terror around the world were caused by the great eruption of Mount Tambora on the island of Sumbawa, Indonesia in the Fall of the year 1815. Ashes from the volcano erupted for over six months and hung over many parts of the world that summer, shielding the light of the sun.

Darkness is dangerous. Darkness is uncreated life. We are told in Genesis today that before life was created the darkness covered the face of the deep. Darkness is a symbol of death, and we call the place of the dead the nether-world, the place of darkness and shadows. When we enter a space that is dark we are unable to see the contours of objects, we are unable to see the places of danger, we walk tentatively, ensured of our own steps and movements. Instinctively most of us are afraid of dark places, we tend not to go down dark alleys, and we make provisions for light at times of storms because we know that without light life has no chance of survival. Light and the energy that light produces cooks our meals, warms our homes, allows food in abundance to grow, illuminates our roads, and allows us to find our way home. It is for this reason that God himself spoke into that darkness of un-creation and with a mighty word declared that there should be light, and there was light. Light then separated the day from the night and allowed all other life to emerge.

Spiritual darkness is as dangerous or perhaps even more dangerous than physical darkness. When we live in darkness we live not as free children of God but as slaves of our own sin and our own brokenness. Spiritual darkness is the condition of the friend who betrays his master for thirty pieces of silver. Is the condition of those who deny the Lord of the universe and claim they don't know him. Spiritual darkness is the place of apostasy and betrayal. It is the condition of those who killed Jesus because he got in their way. It is the place of those who engage in genocide around the world because entire villages happen to be of a different ethnic make-up. Spiritual darkness is the place of arrogance and self-sufficiency of those who proclaim that they have no need for God. It is the place of those who don't care about the needs or rights of others and treat their brothers and sisters as objects and not as human beings. Spiritual darkness is the place of despondence and meaninglessness, the place of hopelessness and absence of creativity, it the place of bitterness and resentment, the place of envy and malice, it is the sterile place where nothing that is life-giving has any chance to grow. In short, Spiritual darkness is the place of sin and death.

Our God is Master and Lord over all darkness, physical and spiritual. He conquered darkness in creation and on this most holy night, our Lord Jesus conquered the darkness of death with the light of the resurrection. Today, Christ gives his people the

brightness of his light. Today, the light of Christ conclusively, definitively, and powerfully destroyed forever the power of darkness. Today, like on “the night, when God brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land”, we too are brought into freedom from spiritual slavery, sin and death.

This truly “is the night, when we who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.” This truly “is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.” This night is truly a remarkable night, a night we call “wonderful and beyond our knowing”. This night is truly the night when God’s mercy and lovingkindness is most apparent, most radiant, and most deeply felt. Tonight “God gave a Son to redeem a slave.” Tonight “wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. This night restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. This night casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord.”

How truly “blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and man is reconciled to God.” How blessed is this night when the light of Christ was given in baptism for the first time to many around the world. How blessed is this night when all of us, pilgrims on this earthly journey, are forgiven of our sins, large and small, and are welcomed back into the household of God. Tonight we are adopted as his children and become heirs of his Kingdom. Tonight, we too have been risen with Christ, and are no longer doomed to live in darkness. Tonight we too have become children of the light. We are forgiven, we are loved in a way that is incomprehensible to us, and we are rescued from our sin.

Let us give thanks to God for the incredible love he has shown to all of us on this most amazing of nights. Let us in gratitude exclaim, Alleluia, Christ is Risen,

All: The Lord is Risen indeed, Alleluia!