



Julianne Turé photo

The *Exsultet* and the blessing of the font during the Easter Vigil at Church of the Advent in Boston.

Waiting for the LIGHT

By Beth Maynard

I often tell people that the best liturgy I ever witnessed was an Easter Vigil at Boston's Church of the Advent in the early 1990s. Friends were having a baby baptized, and I arrived at the church with only the instructions to come look for them somewhere "up front." The nave was pitch black, fearfully so, and I vividly remember groping my way up the center aisle, pew by pew, hoping that my eyes would adjust to the darkness in time to glimpse some face I recognized before there were no more pews for me to cling to. It was the most bizarre and off-putting way I had ever had to get into a church service, and I remain grateful for it to this day.

As the rite began its movement through salvation history, it became clear that those in charge were in no hurry to relieve our predicament. The Vigil unfolded at a very measured pace, the organ silent for the whole first part, with the liturgical leadership relying on only the tiniest, most workmanlike slivers of light briefly switched on when they absolutely had to consult a text to sing or speak. The rest of us sat in blackness and did our best. I found myself beginning to think about the word "vigil": It means you

wait. It means you are inconvenienced. It means you can't have what you want.

Eventually candles led us to the font and back, bobbing up and down as they were carried by people whom one could not really see, but trusted knew what they were doing. In the middle of the movement, new Christians were born. When, after what seemed like hours, the announcement of the resurrection made the lights blaze on, the organ come alive, and the "Alleluias" of "The Strife is O'er" explode through the building, Easter enveloped us, body, soul, and spirit. I remember embracing people I barely knew. I arrived home ecstatic, only to find that a few friends had dropped by for a glass of wine after a much more non-threatening Vigil service; my husband took one look at my shameless glow, pulled me into the kitchen and hissed a friendly recommendation from Exodus 34: "Put a veil on your face, honey!"

I came into the Episcopal Church 30 years ago from an atheist background, and my first Easter liturgy as a believing Christian was the Vigil. No surprise, then, that I have always loved it. But especially since that extraordinary experience at the Advent, I have also longed to see more churches with the chutzpah to

(Continued on next page)

Waiting for the LIGHT

Julianne Turé photo

Anyone can turn out all the lights or set a real fire ablaze. Simple intentionality about worship's artistic, dramatic, and nonliteral communication can work wonders, and inexpensively.

(Continued from previous page)

confront people with the sensory extremes this liturgy makes possible. The Vigil is far from the only place where the potential for such godly confrontation lurks, but its reliance on very primary symbols, accessible in just about every cultural context, makes it a natural. Night and light, silence and sound: honor these contrasts and they'll do their work on the soul with very little help from us.

"In the darkness, fire is kindled," says The Book of Common Prayer — a rubric that could be the beginning of a poem. But in my experience churches are often afraid of darkness; they won't really turn out all the lights, lest someone be unable to read the answer to "The Lord be with you" in their bulletin. Often the Vigil seems to begin in a mild dimness, guaranteed not to inconvenience anyone, but also guaranteed not to communicate a visceral experience.

Darkness, real darkness, does its own job on everyone in the building. We all feel blind and lost — not bad things to be, at the end of Lent. If we have any ability to make artistic associations at all, our minds will wander through memories of caves, of tombs, of fearful times we were lost in the dark as children; of blindfolded trust exercises in school, watching for shooting stars, or waking up disoriented in a strange place. As we sit there with such images playing in our minds, we cannot but know there is something wrong, and that the consequences for us are unpleasant — again, an appropriate enough state of mind to be in at the end of Lent.

Faint dimness, on the other hand, is an atrophied half-symbol which requires a verbal explanation to communicate anything specific. When the first experience you have at the beginning of a liturgy is stepping into a space in which it merely looks as if they probably could have put some more lights on, you don't free-associate about chaos, lostness, and death; you wonder if the usher missed a few switches. "It's supposed to give a sort of feeling of waiting for the resurrection," we have to whisper to the unchurched guest we invited to join us. If the place were pitch black she'd be murmuring "Wow" without our having to tell her what to think and feel.

When the dimness transitions to normality later — maybe some side sanctuary spots go on, maybe the house dimmer switches slide from 65 percent to 100 percent — again we have to lean over to the visitor and explain, "See, they're putting on more lights now, and



that's because this is the part of the service where we start celebrating Jesus being risen." A sudden burst of brightness is self-explanatory, but again, some churches seem cautious about risking such visual drama, as if somebody might complain because their eyes had trouble adjusting. Shouldn't there be physical symptoms of our difficulty adjusting to the first fruits of a new creation? We can't now feel a sudden rush of adrenaline prick the skin on our arms and legs as we witness history's first-ever resurrection body with glorified wounds, but we can feel the shock of eyes that have been without light for an hour trying to see. Why avoid this?

Equally self-explanatory is the welcome contrast created by offering only restrained a cappella or acoustic musical material early on, followed by robust, jubilant volume at the Easter announcement; far better than an ordinary introduction to the ordinary "Gloria," performed in a similar style to several previous hymns, causing us to lean over to the guest once more: "This is a festive canticle and we haven't sung it for a few weeks." Noisy acclamations, trumpet fanfares, and ringing bells communicate joy all by themselves. This moment should probably be the loudest thing that happens in the building all year.

I recall a first-timer saying to me after one Vigil where the deafening Christ-Is-Risen cheering went on for two or three minutes, "You would have thought the Beatles had just walked onstage." On the other hand, I also recall a priest in a neighboring parish recounting the story of a new parishioner who'd transferred in. The man began enthusiastically clanging the bell he'd brought, only to silence it in shame a second later when shocked heads swiveled and he realized that nobody else had come ready to do anything that actually sounded like celebration.

In his *Word Pictures: Knowing God Through Story and Imagination*, screenwriter Brian Godawa comments: "Biblically, the impact of imagery on the human audience is exaggerated, fantastic, nonliteral, dramatic, visual, experiential, emotional — and just as true as any of the historical, literal, abstract or rational propositions and words contained in those same pages." There is no need to feel cautious or diffident about the nonliteral, visual, or dramatic when they are acting in harmony with the historical and rational.

A Christianity without adequate weight given to propositional realities would no longer be Christianity. The meaty themes at the heart of the faith — death, resurrection, healing, transformation, forgiveness, sacrifice — need to be studied and integrated intellectually though abstract and rational discussion. But they need every bit as much to be experienced with the body and the emotions, through nonliteral and aesthetic communication, in a context that marries them to the revelation God has given and invites our full-bodied assent through the power of the Holy Spirit. When we do encounter them in that way, they thicken gospel meaning, grounding it and enabling us to see how much more potent and elemental God's truth is than we might have suspected from our book-learning.

The liturgical theologian Aidan Kavanagh, drawing on a remark of Urban T. Holmes, speaks of the crucial theological impact of a worshiping assembly's "being brought regularly to the brink of chaos in the presence of the living God." Perhaps the Vigil I attended all those years ago is still so vivid in my mind because it had the courage to invite us, in a thoroughly Christian ritual environment, to the brink of chaos, where both dark absence and wild rejoicing live. A small minority of worshiping communities will be blessed with the ample resources on which that parish drew, but anyone can

turn out all the lights or set a real fire ablaze. Simple intentionality about worship's artistic, dramatic, and nonliteral communication can work wonders, and inexpensively. If this all seems too foreign, gather some artists and give them the job.

The brink of chaos, the domain of sacrament and symbol, the level of viscera — whatever we call it, it's worth journeying there as Christians in the presence of the living God. When we do, we will unforgettably encounter a God and a gospel whose power extends to that level. And the encounter will disabuse us of polite illusions about who God is and what he does. Keep to the abstract surface, and we will likely end up assuming that God is only good for enhancing the "spiritual" dimension of our life, soothing our frayed nerves, or giving us something interesting to think about. But at the brink of chaos in his presence, we'll discover instead that just as the Bible's been trying to tell us, he's up to more than that: he kills death, wrenches our broken bones and lives back into joint, and shoves us trembling out into his world to start acting like Jesus.

The Rev. Beth Maynard leads Mill Street House, an intentional Christian community north of Boston, and is an adjunct instructor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass.

Stained Glass Restoration



Artists and craftsmen since 1857
Excellence through Experience

THE **J & R LAMB**
STUDIOS

877-700-LAMB

www.lambstudios.com

Tiffany Studios c. 1900 • Restored by Lamb Studios, 2009