

## **“The Elements of Creation Become the Elements of Redemption: How God Makes Us into a New Creation”**

Easter Sunday

March 27, 2016, St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral

### **Introduction**

In the dome of our magnificent Cathedral there are four vertical panels of stained glass windows, one on each side of the dome, each with a different coloring. These colors represent the four elements into which the ancient Greek philosophers divided the world: earth, air, water and fire. But it is not an unrelated detail of historical interest as to why those windows are there. Rather, these elements play a central part in what we are celebrating today, the very heart of the Christian faith.

### **The Four Elements**

Let us begin with earth: the Book of Genesis teaches us that God created Adam from the earth. This is our human nature: God created us from the earth and of the earth, we are an integral part of this order of creation. Indeed, the Book of Genesis also teaches us that we are the culminating point of this creation – it was only the man and the woman that God created in His own image and likeness. Today we celebrate Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead, from the tomb. When the Son of God died, he was placed in the earth – from which the human race came and is destined to return in death because of our rebellion against God. Or, better, “was” destined to return. The body of the dead Savior is placed precisely where the human race came from and is destined to return, the human race he came to save from that fate of eternal death. The empty tomb which the disciples discovered that first Easter morning is a sign of the emptiness of the hold that death has on those who believe in him, love him, and follow in his way.

Genesis also tells us that, after God shaped the man from the earth, He *breathed* the spirit of life into his nostrils. The element of air speaks to this gift of life: the breath of fresh air that God breathes into Adam is the breath of His life. God created us to share His life. When the Savior returned from the dead and appeared to his apostles, he likewise breathed on them: by this gesture, he shared with them the gift of his Spirit – you might say, his very life breath. What is this life breath? It is the forgiveness of sins. Jesus shares with his apostles, with his Church, the gift of his Spirit so that that Church might be the messenger and agent of his forgiveness of our sins. Sin separates us from God and condemns us to death; the Holy Spirit opens for us the door to life by the forgiveness of our sins and joins us to Christ in his saving death and Resurrection.

The elements of water and fire are even more pertinent to us today as they are elements that are so expressive of the Easter mysteries and are used in the Church’s liturgies at Easter. Water, of course, is the element of Baptism, a sacrament especially appropriate to Easter, with adult converts to the faith normally being baptized at the Easter Vigil ceremony (as we did last night). Think about water: it has the power both to

destroy and to give life. And it purifies. We see all of this in the story of the ancient people of Israel's miraculous crossing of the Red Sea after being led out of Egypt where they had been enslaved. The water destroys Pharaoh's army, which seeks to do harm to God's people. And the Israelites passing through the water is clearly a sign of purification: they are no longer slaves, they are free! This passage marks a new beginning for them, *a new life*. And so it is in Baptism that the Spirit invoked upon the water destroys sin in our life, making us spiritually pure and restoring us to friendship with God to share His life forever.

Fire, too, has the power to destroy and to purify, as well as to give light and warmth. It purifies metal by casting off its impurities. And such is its spiritual significance. Among the various types of ritual sacrifices we hear about in the Old Testament is the "burnt offering," which the ancient Jewish people would offer to God in atonement for their sins. And fire played a significant role in shaping their common identity when they wandered in the Sinai desert in search of the Promised Land: God guided them by the light of a pillar of fire at night, and He appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush that was not consumed. Likewise for us, the Easter fire is blessed at the beginning of the Easter Vigil Service as a sign of the Holy Spirit, who purifies us from sin, grants us the grace to walk by the light of faith, and kindles within us the fire of his love for announcing the saving Good News of Jesus Christ. This is the meaning of our Confirmation, also a sacrament most appropriate to Easter: Confirmation empowers us to fulfill the Great Commission, the charge to "make disciples of all nations," and so connects us to that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of tongues of fire upon the apostles and Mary and the other disciples gathered in the Upper Room.

### **God's Plan Works from Within**

All of this teaches us how God uses the elements of creation in the plan of salvation He devised for us. He put at our disposal the beautiful, perfectly ordered work of His creation; He entrusted it all to our stewardship. But we rebelled, and all became corrupted and destined for death. But it is those very elements of creation that God uses to restore us back to what He created us for in the first place: to share His life and love forever. You might say that He works within the system He created, as flawed as we have made it, so that He might purify us to a higher, better, and new life. In other words, in God's design the elements of creation become the elements of redemption.

Does it not work this way in our personal lives as well? God first of all works within the system of our relationships. We are all here in this church today, each one of us, because someone else fulfilled the Great Commission. Whether beginning to investigate, or just embarking on the path of faith, or well down the road but still trying to figure it all out, it is all because others have taught us – usually more by example than words, although words are important, too – the love of Jesus Christ and the wisdom and better way of the truth that he teaches us. Because of them we have been given access to the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so we now have the light to see with the eyes of

faith and so understand the deeper, spiritual realities of life to which, until then, we had been blind.

God also works from within in the sense of within each of us. He speaks to us in the silence of our hearts. He connects with us in the ways that each of us can understand. He knows our deepest longings and our deepest sorrows; He knows how to heal us and how to cheer us. And He calls us to serve Him by using the unique gifts He has given to each one of us. It is thanks to others that we learn how to let Him do this for us and how to respond in the way that pleases Him – that is to say, in the way that leads to our restoration to happiness with Him.

## **Conclusion**

This is a truth of which we need to be regularly reminded, and the Church does give us reminders regularly. One such reminder occurs at this Easter Sunday Mass when, in place of the usual recitation of the Nicene Creed, the people profess their faith in the form of the questions used for the rites of Baptism and Confirmation, and then are sprinkled with the blessed Easter water – all of this as a reminder of our Baptism. The Church wants us to learn – to learn deeply and live up to – the reality of our Baptism, which is not a moment in time, or the simple joining of an organization, but a life-long journey with Christ, dying with him by dying to sin so that we may rise with him to glory. Let us be grateful that we walk this path together, in the communion of the Church. And let us walk it together with a pure conscience and generous spirit, so that God's Spirit may accompany us, all the way to the fullness of the light, and life, and love of His eternal Kingdom.