

The Significance of Several Old Testament Readings from the Vespereal Liturgy of Great and Holy Saturday

Xenia Moos

Holy Week in the Orthodox Church has many rich services that lead the faithful through the Passion of Christ in preparation for the Resurrection. One of the longest and most exciting services of the week is the Vespers of Great and Holy Saturday. There is a tendency to mourn Christ's Crucifixion and death on Good Friday and to rejoice in His Resurrection on Sunday while not giving much thought to the important events of Saturday. It is not the case that Christ died on Friday and was inactive until Sunday morning. Saturday is the day when Christ descended into Hades and, as the troparion says, "Trampled down death by death." The familiar Orthodox icon of the Resurrection of Christ is actually an icon of Holy Saturday because it depicts Christ trampling down the gates of Hades and setting the captives, the righteous dead of the Old Testament, free. The Vespereal Liturgy illustrates the transition from Friday's death and darkness to Pascha's life and light in the very tone of the service, which begins with sorrowful hymns and dark vestments. During this time, Christ invades Hades, Satan's gloomy habitation, and shines His bright light upon the dismal scene and Satan realizes that he has made an enormous mistake. This is a great victory, for Christ and for us! At this time, the hymns become triumphant and the vestments change from dark to white. In the Greek tradition, the priest showers the congregation with bay leaves and rose petals, signifying the breaking of the gates of Hades, the triumph of Christ over death and the defeat of the Evil One. We sing *Arise O God and judge the earth for to Thee belongs all the nations*. It is not quite time yet for the exultation of Pascha; that comes later that night and into Sunday morning when the Church celebrates Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead, which sealed what He had accomplished, for... *if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.*¹ Saturday is the necessary link, the essential transition, between Friday and Sunday. *Sorrow is not replaced by joy but transitioned into joy*, as Father Alexander Schmemmann has written.²

One of the highlights of the Saturday Vespereal service is the solemn reading of 15 passages from the Old Testament. These readings prefigure Christ's death, descent into Hades, and Resurrection. "Transition" is a major theme. For this essay I have chosen to comment on the readings from the books of Exodus, First and Second Kings, and the Prophecy of Jonah which all speak of transitions from darkness and death into light and life.

It is from the book of Exodus that the Church takes the word "Pascha" for the Feast of Feasts, the Resurrection of Christ. "Pascha" means "Passover." In the Exodus account, the Angel of Death "passed over" the homes of the Hebrews who had anointed their doors with the blood of a lamb. In the same way, death passes over Christians who are saved by the blood of our Paschal Lamb, Jesus Christ. However, the idea of "passing over" also refers to the

¹ I Corinthians 15:17 (KJV)

² Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *Great and Holy Saturday*, www.schmemmann.org/byhim/holysaturday.html (accessed May 8, 2014).

Hebrews passing over the waters of the Red Sea, transitioning from the darkness and death of Egypt into the light and life of the Promised Land. Sister Vassa Larin equates the word “Pascha” with “transition.”³ We ourselves are transitioning from the fasting of Lent into the feasting of Pascha.

Egypt is a picture of the world and all its carnal delights, “leeks and onions” being the least of them. Yet the Hebrews were enslaved, just as we become enslaved by sin. To be freed from enslavement, to escape from captivity, they had to pass through the waters of the Red Sea, which is a type of Christian baptism but also a type of death. Just as this passage resulted in the destruction of Pharaoh and his army, Christ’s passage through death resulted in the destruction of death and Satan’s realm and the release of the captive Old Testament righteous. When the Israelites reached the other side, they were jubilant and during the reading of this same passage on Saturday we also rejoice, singing: *Let us sing to the Lord for gloriously He has been glorified!*

In the historical books of First and Second Kings, the Prophets Elijah and Elisha bring the dead back to life, foreshadowing the resurrections of Lazarus, Christ, the righteous Old Testament saints who rose from the tombs at the time of Christ’s crucifixion as well as our own future resurrection. These stories are the first examples of resurrections from the dead in the Holy Scriptures.

In the book of I Kings we read the story of the Prophet Elijah, who was commanded by God to visit a widow in Zarephath in Sidon, who lived with her son. Because of a severe famine in the land, the widow had just a little oil and flour and was intending to bake a small loaf of bread from these meager supplies, share the meal with her son, and then prepare to die. Elijah asked her to give him some bread first, which she did out of faith in God’s prophet. As a result there was a miraculous provision of God so that she never ran out of oil and flour for the duration of the famine. This is similar to the story in Exodus where an endless supply of manna – bread from heaven- appeared on the ground. Jesus Christ proclaimed that He was the Bread of Life and of course, the Bread of the Eucharist, which is His precious Body and is the medicine of immortality. (It is interesting to note that in the Slavic tradition, instead of strewing bay leaves and rose petals, the congregation is served a small meal of bread and wine, probably for the purpose of refreshing the people who have stood for nearly four hours.)

The widow’s son became ill and died. Elijah took the lad upstairs to his own chamber and prayed to God. Then he stretched himself out upon the child three times and prayed “O LORD, my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” The Lord heard Elijah and returned the boy’s life to him. The Prophet delivered the boy to his mother who responded, *Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.* This is similar to the response of the crowd at the resurrection of Lazarus as well as the response of the centurion who witnessed the miraculous rising from the tombs of the Old Testament saints at the

³Sister Vassa Larin, “Holy Week Palm Sunday,” *Coffee with Sister Vassa* http://www.ancientfaith.com/video/sistervassa/holy_week_palm_sunday (accessed May 8, 2014).

time of Christ's crucifixion. Yet witnessing someone's return from the dead does not guarantee belief as Abraham told the rich man in the story of the other Lazarus.

The story of Elisha is similar. The Prophet was in the habit of staying with a wealthy family as he went about his travels. He wanted to show his appreciation and learned from his servant Gehazi that the woman had no son. He prophesied that within a year, she would be holding a child in her arms, and so it came to pass. Years later, while working in the fields with his father, the boy felt a sharp pain in his head, and he died in his mother's lap. She searched out Elisha and told him of her son's death. The Prophet sent Gehazi to raise the child from the dead, without effect. When Elisha arrived, he laid upon the child who sneezed seven times and opened his eyes, alive.

These two stories illustrate that there is a hope for resurrection, that the idea of raising people from the dead is not an impossibility. The Hebrew people of Christ's time were very familiar with these stories so they knew that resurrections were a part of their tradition, albeit it quite rare. When Christ called Lazarus from the grave, their thoughts must have all hearkened back to the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Jesus spoke of His own impending resurrection when he said to his disciples, *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*⁴ Interestingly, Elijah himself never died and appeared with Moses at Christ's Transfiguration.

The book of Jonah, which is read in its entirety on Saturday, foreshadows several events in the life of Christ, especially the passion. Christ Himself referenced this book: it: *For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*⁵ Jonah is a type of Christ and even though his behavior appears to be the opposite of Christ's there are many striking parallels. Both were sent by God to sinners to preach repentance. Christ obeyed while Jonah attempted to escape, even though he surely knew he could never escape the presence of God. Both fell asleep in the bottom of a boat during a storm. Jonah, realizing his guilt, asked to be thrown into the sea to calm the waves. Christ, being guiltless and the Creator of the sea merely spoke to the waves and they subsided. Both spent three days and three nights in the heart of the earth: Christ in the tomb and in Hades and Jonah in the depths of the sea as his whale visited the roots of the mountains. There were two men with missions, two ships, two storms, two sleepers, two desperate crews, two three-day stays in the heart of the earth resulting in two resurrections from the dead, because Jonah was just as good as dead since the whale was a type of death.

. The whale vomited Jonah upon the shore and Christ emerged from the tomb. St. Jerome wrote: *With regards to the expression 'vomited' we must take this to be said in a very emphatic way to mean that triumphant life has emerged from the deepest and most impenetrable parts of death*⁶ which corresponds exactly with Christ's emergence from the tomb.

⁴ John 2:19 (KJV)

⁵ Matthew 12:40 (KJV)

⁶ St Jerome, *Commentary on Jonah*, trans. Robin MacGregor, Section I-11.

Normally, any flesh would have been digested in the stomach of an animal. Jonah should have been dissolved but he emerged perfectly whole. After three days in a tomb, a human body begins to decompose. As Martha said of their brother Lazarus who had been dead four days, *Lord by now he stinketh*. But not so with the body of Christ which remained incorrupt as prophesied in the Psalms: *For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.*⁷ Jonah transitioned from the darkness of disobedience to a figurative death in the belly of the whale and was vomited out into the light of day as a type of resurrection, from darkness to death to life. This is also the case with Christ: there was the darkness that came upon the earth at the time of His crucifixion, the darkness of the tomb and His bright resurrection on Sunday morning. Both Jonah and Christ knew they had to die to save the people but neither committed suicide. Jonah didn't jump overboard. In both cases, the saviors had to be killed by the sinners they were saving.

St. Jerome connected the story of Jonah to a scripture from the Prophet Hosea: *I will be your death, O death! I will be your bite, Hell!*⁸ which immediately brings to mind the words of Saint Paul: *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*⁹

The sailors tried valiantly to make it to the shore on their own but it was necessary that Jonah die for them to be saved. Like the sailors, we cannot be saved by our own efforts and this is depicted on the resurrection icon where Christ is grabbing Adam and Eve by their wrists, indicating that they lacked the ability to even reach out and grasp His hand.

A few words can be said about the Ninevites, the people to whom Jonah was sent. Jonah preached a very simple message to them. The king responded with true repentance, ordering his people to repent in fasting, sackcloth and ashes. This is analogous to Great Lent. As is often noted during Lenten fasts, God is not interested in whether food is eaten or not eaten, He cares about the heart. The purpose of the fast of the Ninevites was to concentrate on their sins in order to sincerely repent of them. Likewise, the purpose of Lenten fasting is to help us focus inwardly, towards sincere repentance. Ninevah did repent, much to Jonah's chagrin. He hated the Ninevites so intensely that he was loathe to see them repent and gain God's favor, to become part of the family of God. Yet Christ loved them- and us- so much He went to the Cross for us. In this story, Jonah is like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son who resented the repentance and restoration of his sinful younger brother.

In conclusion, let me confess that until I did research for this paper I did not really understand the purpose of the vespers of Great and Holy Saturday. I am from a tradition that did not believe in Christ's descent into Hades. Christ died on Good Friday and arose on Easter Sunday morning and that was that. Even after I converted to Orthodoxy many years ago, the significance of Holy Saturday still eluded me. While we did attend the Vespers, I didn't

⁷ Psalm 15:10 (KJV)

⁸ Hosea 13:14

⁹ I Corinthians 15:55 (KJV)

understand why in the middle of the service the vestments changed from dark to light and why the hymns took on a triumphant tone. I was completely baffled by the bay leaves and rose petals, assuming this was some pre-Pascha anticipatory enthusiasm. Saturday was a transition day for me- it was the day we began the transition from hummus to sour cream! For me, Holy Saturday was the day to go grocery shopping for the leg of lamb! While studying for this essay, the light bulb went on and I realized why we were so triumphant and joyful on Saturday for it is on Saturday that Christ invades Hades, smashes the gates of Hell, defeats death, defeats Satan, and rescues Adam, Eve, and all the other righteous dead and makes provision for our own resurrections. No wonder everyone was is joyful! How did I miss it for all those years?