

Good Friday Ecumenical Service
First Baptist Church of Manasquan
March 25, 2005

It's a first – and maybe a last. A lily was delivered to my front stoop yesterday, and I delighted to put it on the coffee table in my living room– right where the poinsettia sat a couple months ago – and right where the Christmas stable and manger scene **still** sit ☺. This is what happens in at least **some** pastors' homes when Ash Wednesday crowds close upon Christmas. Easter arrives before Christmas is fully out the door! It's a beautiful thing – to have the fragrant scent of resurrection wafting gently over the Christmas crib.

Heightening that hand-holding marriage between Christmas and Easter in **my** mind is the fact that this year Good Friday falls on March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation.... In the shadow of the cross, hear again the Gospel of the Annunciation found in St. Luke, chapter 1:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of

the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1.26-38

So it was that the Holy Spirit conceived the Word made flesh. So it was that the whole world got a brand new start. No surprise, then, that March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation, used to be celebrated as New Year’s Day.

Pre-Annunciation, the **Romans** also used to mark March as the first month of the year. The names “September,” “October,” “November,” “December,” come from the Latin words for seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth. That is because the Romans counted **March** as the number **one** month....

For European Christians, as late as the 1700’s, March was the month of New Year’s Day, which was observed on March 25th instead of January 1st. In the Middle Ages, the people believed that March 25th was not only the day on which Jesus was conceived in His mother’s womb, but also the day on which **all** of creation began. Not only that, folks in the Middle Ages believed that March 25th was the day on which Jesus was crucified, too. The mystery of creation, incarnation and redemption was all neatly sewn up in one day. In this year of our Lord 2005, the Feast of the Annunciation and Good Friday are once again one.

Some of you have read or seen *The Return of the King*, the third volume or movie in *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. The climax of the book occurs when the hobbits Frodo and Sam destroy the Ring of Power in the Cracks of Doom located in the fiery bowels of the mountain Orodruin. When this happens Sauron, the Dark Lord, is toppled, an earthquake and volcanic eruption occur, and the land of Mordor is shaken and reconfigured. Ever after, in the land of Gondor, March 25th is celebrated as New Year’s Day, in celebration of the victory of light over darkness.

Hear again the Good Friday Gospel, this time from St. Matthew, chapter 27:

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Matthew 27.45-54

The centurion was surely reborn spiritually on Calvary that day. The "good thief" from St. Luke's Gospel was also reborn to hear Jesus' promise, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23.43), and then to see the promise fulfilled on the other side of his and Jesus' deaths. In St. John's Gospel, water and blood flow from Jesus' pierced side, as if it were amniotic fluid from the womb which brought forth the Church on the cross of Christ's suffering and our salvation.

Jesus' earthly ending was our eternal beginning. It is because of the reality of Christ's resurrection and the promise of ours that German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was able to say as he headed to the gallows in a WW II concentration camp, "This is the end, for me the beginning of life."

Let it be done to us according to Your Word, O Lord. On this Good Friday which is also the Feast of the Annunciation, we praise you for the gift of

our lives, your Son's incarnation and our salvation. We acknowledge that we have been bought with a price, O Lord, and that we are not our own. Let us incarnate the love of the One who died so that we may live. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson