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The Great Vigil of Easter: Timeless Celebration of Salvation

It is ironic that the farther removed in time we are from the early church the more important it seems for Christians to understand and reclaim their ancient heritage. The Church continues to study the biblical teachings and principles as well as the practice of its traditions. Perhaps most visible among the church's "practices" is the way congregations worship. How have individual church groups come to understand corporate worship? Many, if not most, of our worship traditions have undergone change even to the point of losing some of the rituals treasured by our ancient forebears.

The holiest worship event in the ancient church was the Great Vigil of Easter. It began on Holy Saturday, late at night when it was dark and concluded with the light of Easter dawn. The principle parts of the service were Baptism of Christian converts and entrance into the Lord's Supper or Eucharist.

Today, the Church reclaims this holy liturgy and offers it to the faithful as a renewed experience of the faith our ancestors proclaimed. (*On Holy Saturday, date and time*) the community is invited to an ecumenical service of Vigil. It will be celebrated at *name and address of church*. Participants in the planning and leadership are from several local churches.

This four-part liturgy begins with the Service of Light where the new fire is blessed and the people follow the lighted Paschal Candle just as the Israelites followed the pillars of cloud and fire when they were delivered from bondage. The Exultet is sung proclaiming our own deliverance from slavery to sin.

The second part of the service consists of several readings from the Old Testament. All of

them focus on God's saving mercy to the Israelites. They help to sum up the Church's understanding of God's redemptive power and our covenant relationship with the Lord. Along with the scripture readings there will be opportunities for the assembly to participate in music and prayer.

The third section of the liturgy is an affirmation of Baptism. Easter Vigil in the early church was a time for Baptism. For the already baptized it is a time to affirm the vows made at Baptism and to once again die with Christ and be raised with him to eternal life. Concluding this part of the service will be a reading of the Resurrection narrative from the Gospel.

The fourth part of the service will be celebrated at individual congregations on Easter itself.

The *city name* Community is welcome to join in this observance renewing the Easter vigil of the ancient church. Come and celebrate God's continuing love that remains timeless.

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