

Pentecost 15 September 13, 2020 Psalm 114, Romans 14:7-12, Exodus 13:17-18a, 21-22, 14:19-31; Exodus 15:1-11, 20-21 Through parted waters

If we've never heard the story before, we might think today's episode, in which Israel escapes from slavery – marching through the parted Red Sea waters and watching as waters come together again, drowning the army of those who enslaved them for 400 years – must be the climax of the Exodus story.

But if we've read the story... We know we're less than half way through the book of Exodus. Which is only Season Two in a larger narrative, in which we only reach the promised land in the book of Joshua (Season Six, as we count books of the bible). And even then, we're still not ready to live as citizens of the new land.

Which is not to say there's not a lot to celebrate today, already, as God parts the waters, and leads the people of Israel. Going before Israel as a pillar of fire by night, a pillar of cloud by day. And to keep us moving in the right direction, God's angel and pillar of fire and cloud shift position, moving behind Israel now – separating Israel and Egypt – pushing Israel forward – as Israel walks on dry ground through parted waters on the night of Passover. Where we left off last week.

We're summarizing, again, noticing – another climactic moment – God striking down the firstborn of Egypt – is told in just one verse – as God passes over all the households of Israel, marked with the blood of a Passover lamb. Scripture simply noting, “There was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead...”

The much-longer-story that comes before is all about God sending a series of plagues on Egypt in an effort to persuade the king of Egypt to ‘let my people go.’ But Pharaoh flip-flops back and forth, first saying ‘no’ – then agreeing to let Israel go into the wilderness to worship God for three days. Then hardening his heart, refusing to let Israel go again. Then changing his mind again, saying ‘you may go’ after the next plague. Only to again harden his heart and change his mind again...Back and forth... Till finally, after the tenth plague and the death of all the Egyptian first born, Pharaoh *orders* Israel to leave – telling Moses ‘*Go! All of you – Go – Now!– And – bring a blessing on me too!*’ And Egyptians give gold and silver to the Israelites, as they beg them – ‘*leave, before we all die.*’ And Israel goes forth in the night... And for a moment... there's hope... even for Pharaoh...

But – a few hours later, when Israel has gone some distance – Pharaoh changes his mind yet again – and sends his armed chariot battalions to pursue Israel and bring them back to slavery...

And as we rejoin our story in progress, we've just overheard God thinking aloud, deciding to lead Israel by a long way around to avoid Egypt's border patrols on the main highway... Traveling back roads, actually, according to Rabbis of old, not so much to dodge Egyptians (whom God can deal with) – as to make it hard as possible for Israel to be able to retrace its steps and turn back to Egypt when they get scared... As God knows – our default position... is to prefer the slavery we know... to the freedom we don't know...

And God knows its only by keeping the way forward unknown – that God can hope to free Israel from familiar slavery thoughts and slavery ways...

Which I can identify with, as I recall some of the long-way-around routes God has led me on, on this life's journey... With so many twists and turns... that whenever I'm tempted to turn back for a little while to slavery ways disguised as freedom – thanks God, even a little recalling of all the perils I've avoided by following God's lead – reminds me – it's a whole lot simpler and less difficult to stay on the journey with God – then to try to head off on my own – and end up driving off a cliff or into a swamp... where the old familiar roads... lead...

And – we're studying the book of Exodus – because it's in our lectionary reading schedule this year – and because Exodus is about the long-way-around sometimes being the better way. And God has been teaching me for a long time – if we don't take enough time with the first books of the bible – we'll never be able to know Jesus very well. As the New Testament assumes we know – or are willing to learn – the themes of the so-called Old Testament (though 'First Testament' is a better term). Starting with God's steadfast love, mercy, and compassion for all – and right next to that theme – God's commitment to justice and helping the oppressed, not the oppressor. We also hear early on-in God's word – obedience is God's chosen means of liberation – and – God's promises are always trustworthy. And God abhors violence...but doesn't quite rule it out altogether... always... And if some of these themes seem to contradict others – this may be due to more either-or thinking than the bible prefers... But enough for now of the long-way-around part of the story. As God leads us finally... straight ahead... into the Red Sea waters...

Which reminds me again – how much I dislike violence and bloodshed – in life, or in the bible. As a pastor, I've sometimes glossed over these chapters

of Exodus, where God's mighty acts result in the drowning of Egypt's army – and as they pass through the waters Israel sings for joy, as they see their enemies dead on the seashore. A challenging text to preach as good news.

But similar challenges show up often in scripture. So I study and try to understand holy Scripture on multiple levels. And following the lead of many preachers and teachers better than me, I'm trying to focus on both the context... and the underlying spirituality of the biblical text.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. says in a sermon on Exodus (14:30) titled *The Death of Evil upon the Seashore* (quote:) “The meaning of the story is not found in the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers – for no one should rejoice at the death or defeat of a human being. Rather, this story symbolizes the death of evil and of inhuman oppression and unjust exploitation.” Dr. King goes on to draw parallels between God's delivery of Israel and the independence movements underway at the time of his writing in Africa and Asia, with many countries casting off the yoke of colonialism after long centuries of exploitation... Drawing parallels also with the civil rights movement in the U.S., from just after the end of slavery to the present.... Talking about the Pharaohs of the American South using Jim Crow segregation laws to keep former slaves in perpetual servitude... Calling the Supreme Court decision striking down the doctrine of “separate but equal” in 1954 an opening of the Red Sea moment. Dr King's sermon is powerful because his illustrations are true to life – and true to the text and context of Exodus...

Exodus is Israel's foundational scripture. Every verse has received extensive consideration over the millennia. In one famous Rabbinic commentary God tells angels who have begun rejoicing as they see the Egyptian armies dead on the seashore – *stop celebrating the death of “the work of my hands.”* God claims Egypt as part of his people... even as God has just led the Egyptian army into death. Death can't have the last word...

And yet, the bible and the same Rabbis who teach God's love even for enemies – are also singing along with the song – probably the bible's first psalm – the psalm and song Moses and Miriam lead Israel in singing – as the reality of freedom starts to sink in. And Miriam, sister of Aaron and Moses, is named a prophet, as she leads the women in singing a song celebrating God's triumph over Pharaoh's armies... Her song that starts with the same words Moses sang – but the women, Rabbis of old noted, sing differently – as they are *ready* for freedom – much more so than the men. The men, led by Moses, raise

their voices in song. But the *women* led by Miriam, expect freedom – and bring tambourines – or drums (depending on translation) – and pass through parted waters – singing, drumming and dancing...all the way into the new land...

And the Rabbis of old heard with ears, like Dr King, far better attuned than most of our ears can ever be – to the experience of slavery and release from bondage. They heard the song the Israelites sing as (quote:) “fraught with tension: massacre, overwhelming physical suffering, on the one hand – and the joy of God’s salvation on the other...” in the words of Avivah Zornberg, who then asks: “How is it possible to sing, to praise God for acting both cruelly and kindly?” Answering with a quote from Rashi, the foremost Jewish bible interpreter of old, who says of God (quote): “...even at the time He fights and takes revenge on His enemies – He still holds to His compassion for His creatures – nurturing all living beings – unlike a human king, who turns away from all other activities when he makes war – and lacks the strength to engage in both war and love.”

Reminding me again of Dr. King, the non-violent warrior – who prayed always for the enemies of his people, even those who beat and threatened with police dogs and turned fire hoses on children... Prayed for their salvation and liberation from all hatred and fear...

Avivah Zornberg, contemporary Torah scholar, again writes (quote): “The complex reality that is celebrated in the Song (of Moses and Miriam) – death and life, suffering and joy, justice and mercy – transcends a simple split between “us” and “them”: the suffering and fear as the enemy’s portion – the joy and elation as the Israelites’. Both extremes of response are the poles of the Red Sea experience....”

These starkly contrasting poles and perspectives – of Moses, Miriam, Aaron and the Israelites on one hand – and Pharaoh and his armies on the other – are both still part of the ongoing story of Exodus...As God still speaks God’s words of freedom to all who listen...And to all who will ever listen. And God is still always very patient... Yet even God’s patience has limits... We need to be aware of...

So – with all God’s angels and all God’s people, we too, are called to weep for Pharaoh’s armies, dying and dead on the seashore... And continue to sing with all those whom God is delivering now from slavery... at the same time... Holding everyone in our hearts and prayers... As God’s exodus journey continues... All the way to Kingdom come... Thanks be to God. Amen.