

September 27, 2020

Matthew 18: 1-6, 12-14

Exodus 14: 8-11, 13-18, 21-31

That We May Live
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This Fall, as we trace the path of the Exodus along with the ancient Israelites, we're trying to notice things they learned along the way – things that they were going to need to know by the time they arrived, finally, at the place of promise at the far end of a long, long journey. This week we have another story from the book of Exodus that is probably engraved in your memory thanks to Sunday School or Hollywood or a Passover meal with Jewish friends or just the power of a story like this to capture the imagination. It picks up just about where we left off last week – as the Israelites are fleeing into the night after the crisis of the Passover finally lifted the knees of the Egyptians from their necks.

Today we stand with the Israelites on the shore of the Red Sea – or the “Sea of Reeds,” as the Hebrew is better translated, though don't think for a minute that the idea of a reedy shallow tidal estuary in the Nile delta gets us off the hook of the seismic event that seems to have taken place there. No one knows for sure what happened to that body of water that night, or even precisely where it was – though clearly it was *somewhere*, because it engraved itself permanently on the people, with names that they made a point of remembering – “by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon”. And whatever it was that happened, it had the effect of working astoundingly for the Israelites and failing catastrophically for the Egyptians.

The story, as it's told in scripture, sets up an epic contest of powers. To calm the terror of the escaped slaves as they contemplate the advancing army, God explains to Moses that, in what's about to happen by the sea, “I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.” Evidently the chariots have gotten the attention of God, who seems to be spoiling for a confrontation with the world's cutting edge military technology. In fact, God is so riveted on the army (the chariot drivers are mentioned no fewer than five times!) that for a moment you almost forget that the Israelites have their back to the wall of the sea, and all the promises of freedom in their minds' ears are about to be drowned out by the rumble of approaching chariot wheels.

But the machinery of warfare, of course, turns out not only to be no match for the awesome power of God, but actually to look silly with their fancy wheels clogged in the mud of the bared sea bottom. By the light of the dawn, when it breaks, the promises of freedom have been decisively rescued, and it's the Egyptian army – the entire army, chariots and drivers and all – that has been drowned as a result of – well, of whatever it was that happened to the sea of reeds.

But really it's not so much the behavior of the water that interests me. What I want to invite you to notice in the story happens almost between words, right at the very end: “Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.”

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Remember that, just before the confrontation at the edge of the sea, Moses had instructed his people, “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” This would not be a time for actions, or even for words, or rationalization. It’s as though he says, “just stand there and *take this in*.”

We can imagine all the escalating cacophony sounds that must have overtaken them while they stood still – sounds of the army, the chariots and horses, the wind, and the sound of whatever the water did. Then, when it’s all done, “Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore”: the thunder of sound and terror having given way to silence, the Israelites keeping still on the shore, looking back on the terrible culmination of their struggle to be free: the routing of the world’s greatest earthly power, every single piece of a whole army reduced to non-existence: “not one of them remained.”

And did they remember what they saw standing there on the shore? Did it change them to have seen it? Did they tell their grandchildren what it looked like?

Before it all began, Moses had said, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and *see* the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you *see* today you shall never *see* again.” Three times he told them to use their eyes, and to expect to see differently. And did they? How long were they able to remember what they saw, looking back? How long did that terrible silence linger in their minds’ ears when they stood there, keeping still, and saw every one of the Egyptians dead on the shore?

There’s a midrash (a distinctively Jewish embellishment of a biblical story) that perhaps you’ve heard: that, on that day, there was rejoicing among the Israelites by the sea – but in heaven there was only weeping among the angels, for so terrible was the cost of their freedom. I can’t help but think that we need to let that midrash be a counter-balance to the triumphal narrative of the Israelite celebrations on the shore – because it is unthinkable that God would rejoice in the deaths of any of God’s children. When any soul, like any sheep, is lost, God the tender shepherd goes looking. We know that now. And the question hangs in the air, there by the sea: couldn’t this urgently necessary freedom of enslaved, suffering people have been won some other way – without the terrible toll of death? The angels in the midrash were surely wondering that; and we could wish that the question also crossed the minds of the Israelites on the shore as they kept still: how might God’s unstoppable insistence that oppressed people be set free be accomplished short of annihilation?

Did they remember what they saw, standing there, looking back? Did that moment of keeping still to see what they saw from the far shore change them?

Maybe not. A generation or so later, when they finally arrived at the threshold of the place of promise and found that there were already people living there – Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites (Exod. 3:8) – they chose mayhem. We can wish that the memory of the stillness on the shore of the Red Sea had lingered longer. We can wish that they had remembered to lean in to the question, and carried it with them down into history: What is our responsibility to each other in the human race?

Meanwhile, we find ourselves standing now, again, on a shore of sorts. Not that we have been enslaved, exactly – although there are kinds of bondage that are familiar: materialism, militarism, polemicism, polarization, racism, fossil-fuelicism (which might really need to be a word soon enough). We’ve made prisons for ourselves and so, no, we’re not quite free - but we’re not shackled and brutalized, not enslaved, exactly – but in bondage, certainly, to our fears, and to our reluctance or unwillingness to count the cost of our comforts and our assumptions. Those of us who stand here on this shore having escaped, for the moment, the ravages of a terrible disease that is pillaging our nation and the world, are looking forward to moving on, to the place we feel has been promised.

But from this shore we're standing on, let's take in the view of, maybe, the Big House, the University stadium on a day when it's empty. I know you can see it with your mind's eye – but try seeing it differently: if, in the stillness, we counted every empty seat along the shore of that field, that would account for just half of the number of lives that have been lost to a disease we probably could have protected so many of them from. In fact, you could fill up all the empty seats of that stadium again, a second time, and that's about how many who now lie dead along the shore of our country. Yesterday, another thousand deaths – and today – and tomorrow, almost certainly. Every one of those lives matters. And so many of them were lost as a direct result of the virus of poverty. Could we fill that empty stadium, now, with some vast rallying cry for being human together, in a world where no one has to die in order to make possible anyone else's freedom? We have escaped, for now, and may well go on to head toward the land of promise, where we can start again. But here on the shore, we hold up our safety against the toll of such terrible loss – and have to imagine that surely there are tears in heaven.

When Jesus was asked who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, he decided to play the game of superlatives differently. He called a child from the crowd – a child who, in the culture of that day, had no power or importance – and he said, use your eyes differently. Here is a little one who looks out upon this shore with eyes wide open, who stands in that so-delicate place between wondering how the world should be and learning how the world is. This vulnerable one is the greatest – which is to say, the one most to be welcomed and cared for and sought. If you embrace this one, you embrace me. And if you obstruct the way of this one – if you clog her wheels – woe to you. God is a shepherd, who will go after even a little one like this if she is lost, because God loves every one of God's children. We know that now. God wants freedom for every one of them – freedom, not death.

And, in the fullness of time, Jesus demonstrated the lengths to which God would go to find and bring back the lost ones. He parted a way right through the middle of murder and walked through and refused to be dead. He laid down his life for our freedom – and we're still standing on that shore, looking back, trying to take in the cost of his sacrifice – and trying to make worthy sacrifices of our own – of love, of justice, of time and talent and treasure.

Many things have happened so that we may live. It's a good time, maybe, for standing on the shore, and making a point of remembering. And then for doing what we can.

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