

Exodus 14:19–31 (NRSV)

The angel of God, who was going before the Israelite army, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Dead and Buried to Sin

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 14, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Exodus 14:10-31

Some years ago I suggested this congregation that reading through the Psalms would be a good Lenten exercise. A few of you took me up on the idea. I know that at least a few of you did because I heard from you after a week or two. Reverend, went the common refrain, do you know what's in those things? I kept looking at the book cover to make sure I was reading the Bible, Reverend. What with all that slaughter and praying for all manner of painful deaths for their enemies. Children being bashed with rocks. Hateful calls for vengeance and violence. Reverend, I'm beginning to think the Bible ought to be R rated. Then came the cruelest cut of all. Reverend, why did you suggest we read the Psalms, anyway?

I answered, well how about the 23rd Psalm, and Psalm 100, and Psalm 121? Your smart retort? Well Reverend that leaves 147. I think I pointed out a few others that were at least PG, but you weren't satisfied.

So then I answered what is as close to the truth as I know it. The Psalms give voice to the full range of human expression. We have all felt sorrow and joy. We have all found comfort in God's words of assurance, and we've all wished to see fire rained down on our enemies. But it's a slippery slope isn't it? We can find the full expression of human emotion in the Psalms, but when we think of the Bible as the Word of God, those words start to have a little more weight. If the words in the Bible are God's Words, then they must, in one way or another, be what God thinks we ought to think. And then we're left quite understandably asking, does God really condone vengeful carnage? It's a fair question, and one worth thinking about.

One problem we face in trying to make sense out of the Bible is that truth is a very precise thing for the modern mind. In the language of logic, either something is true or it isn't. Two plus two equals four, not five, not three, not six thousand. Well the ancients of the Biblical world certainly knew how to count, but they didn't think that everything was as precise as arithmetic. Stories were more malleable. To them truth was usually something to grapple with, something to argue with, something to agree with and disagree with.

James Micheners novel, *The Source*, in Michener style, is a huge and far ranging saga, the story of Israel from pre-history to today. In the Canaanite era there is a character, an old patriarch, named Zadok. At a particular point Zadok was struggling to understand if God, El Shaddai, God Almighty, really wanted him to bring war against a neighboring town. And Zadok was disputing the question with God. The conversation goes:

"Are you still afraid of war, Zadok?"

"Yes. When I was a boy and we were besieging Timri ..."

"I remember Timri."

"You ordered my father Zebul to destroy the town for its abominations, and he forced me to stand beside him as he slaughtered men and women and children. And my ankles were red with blood. And I got sick and wanted never to see a spear again. And I hated you, El-Shaddai, for you were cruel."

“I remember that night,” the god said. “You were seven years old, and you cursed me, and was it not then that I spoke to you for the first time? On the morrow of Timri when your father was sleeping near the serpent that would have bitten him?”

Zadok recalled that remote midday, fifty-seven years ago, when he had first spoken with his god, and not once in the intervening years had it occurred to him that El-Shaddai had chosen him that day precisely because of his opposition the night before to the massacre of Timri. El-Shaddai could have elected older men and wiser as his voice, but he had chosen the child Zadok because even as a boy of seven he had been willing to judge the questions of mercy and humanity with his own conscience.

The ancient Israelites understood themselves to have more permission to argue with God than we often do. Abraham argued with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Moses argued with God about taking leadership of the Israelites and then later implored God not to destroy the people when they made the Golden Calf. The ancients could argue with God.

They could also embellish the stories of the Bible. In the early centuries of Rabbinic Judaism, in the same era our New Testament was being formed and fixed, many of the Biblical stories were enlarged. This morning we read the account of the parting of the Red Sea and the safe escape of the Israelites. But listen to some of the embellishment that was added to the story in early times. One account says:

The sea yielded the Israelites whatever their hearts desired. If a child cried as it lay in the arms of its mother, she needed but to stretch out her hand and pluck an apple or some other fruit and quiet it.

Or another: *The waters were piled up to the height of sixteen hundred miles, and they could be seen by all the nations of the earth.*

And this: *The great wonder of Israel’s passage through the sea took place in the presence of the three Fathers [Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] and the six Mothers [Sarah, Rebekah, and Jacobs four wives], for God had fetched them out of their graves to the shores of the Red Sea, to be witnesses of the marvelous deeds wrought in behalf of their children.¹*

And these are but the tip of the iceberg. Unlike modern readers, the ancient Israelites had more permission, it seems, to argue with God and to re-shape the Biblical text. This is no small matter. For when they encountered Psalms that made them cringe, or when, like Zadock, had had their fill of war, or like our passage this morning when God used the Red Sea waters to massacre the Egyptians, the Israelites had more freedom in two very important ways. They did not have to stake their faith on whether the story happened just exactly the way it was told, and they didn’t have to take it or leave it as the word of God. They could modify the stories, and they could argue with God.

We moderns have painted ourselves into a bit of a corner. This morning’s passage gives us the stirring story of God saving the Israelites. Even as moderns, I think, we can give the poetry its due and not get too hung up on the exact nature of the miracle. That is, even we moderns don’t always have to find an explanation for how the sea parted; although some do have that need. But even if we have the freedom to frame the story as poetry or mystery, our freedom is short-lived. We are constrained to find truth in its overall message. For example, what about the Egyptians? As moderns, we find ourselves with two choices. We can, like many of you did

¹ Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 556.

with the Psalms, write me an email and say, you know Reverend, I don't think that God would do that. I'm having a hard time believing the Bible. Maybe we should throw that book away. Alternatively, we can say, well the story is in the Bible; it must be the Word of God; it must make sense somehow; there must have been a good reason why God did it.

If you have to choose between these two alternatives, I'd actually be happier if you decided to throw the Bible away than try to figure out a divine justification for killing all the Egyptians. I'm not kidding.

Here's why. We moderns like to have our truths precise, like arithmetic. Either God did it for a good reason or the whole Bible must be false. It's the old idea that if you take out a brick, the wall will fall down. We want to make sense of the passage. But we moderns are generally inclined away from slaughter. Like Zadok, standing ankle deep in blood tends to turn our stomachs.

So we come to a passage like this morning, and in hopes of keeping the Bible intact, we look for a way to accept what God did to the Egyptians. Our moral sensibilities refuse to let us just say, hey, they were our enemies; we're glad they got drowned. While we all may have felt those feelings, we all know that you aren't supposed to come to church to wish bad things on your foes. And we're not too happy with the reason given in the passage, either. Remember, it says that God drowned the Egyptians to show them that he was God. We're not too happy with the idea of a murder-happy God.

In our time, we need another explanation. And as it turns out, we have given ourselves an out. Just one. In our time we have become enamored with the idea of justice, so enamored that just about anything can be allowed in the name of justice. Now don't get me wrong, justice is important. It's an important Biblical topic. And it's an important moral topic. But justice is hardly the focus of this morning's story. It's about God's powerful saving of the Israelites and God's equally powerful devastation of the Egyptians.

But if you turn to modern Biblical commentaries on this passage, lo and behold, you would think the whole thing was about justice.² The Israelites were treated unjustly by the world power of Egypt. God saved them from the powerful and the unjust. In an act of justice God wiped out the oppressors, the Egyptians. It's in our commentaries. It's in the words of this morning's hymns. Why is that?

Because in our time, violence and slaughter are unacceptable except in the service of justice, especially of justice against the powerful. In our time we don't have the freedom to argue with God that Zadok did, so we pretend that God said something different from what we read. We keep the violence sacred and give it the cause of the oppressors fight against the powerful. Unfortunately, there are many modern theologies that have this escape hatch of sacred violence in the name of justice. I would rather you throw the Bible away than adopt those theologies.

Here's why. When we allow ourselves to categorize another as utterly evil, an oppressor, a purveyor of wickedness, when we allow ourselves label another as the paragon of malevolence and depravity, then in the name of justice we can bring to bear the full force of our pent up rage on them; in the name of justice, in the name of God's justice, we can do it without restraint.

If you want an example, look at ISIS. They do the most heinous acts in the name of God's justice. In the name of God and God's justice against the oppression of western power, saying they are breaking free and establishing God's community, they justify all manner of horrific actions. As I said last week, I fear the group is so ideologically committed to destruction that it cannot be curtailed without force of some kind. But it will be equally important for us to

² See, for example, *The New Interpreter's Bible*

avoid seeing ourselves in a Holy War of our own against them, a war in which we enact God's justice with unfettered loathing and cruelty because we say we are fighting the forces of evil. This is the problem with truth treated like arithmetic; once you've got the answer, that's all you need to know. Better we be like Zadok, reluctant and saddened to go to war, taking no delight in the slaughter, and focused on healing to come. Better we treat the Bible like the ancients did.

If I were to make sense of what happened to the Egyptians, if I were to give myself permission to mold and shape the text like the ancients did, I would say that perhaps the Egyptians were buried beneath the weight of their own desire to annihilate the Israelites. Corrupted by certainty in their own righteousness, they sought to destroy the Israelites. Blinded by their certainty that they were the good guys, they brought the full force of their fury to bear on the enemy. And sooner or later the weak link in the logic gets exposed. You end up axle deep in the mud with the sea waters rising. At least then the story would be a cautionary tale for us, too. Beware of the wolf clothed in the lambskin of justice. For ultimately there is no glee to be found standing ankle deep in another's blood. Amen.