

Doubt and Deliverance
Exodus 14: various verses
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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What a sad state of affairs. It wasn't too long ago that they were considered saviors of the people. But all of that has changed. Their oppressive actions, their deadly intentions, their claims of religious dominance now make them the personification of evil in so many people's eyes.

Who am I talking about? Well, I could be talking about ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the group of radical insurgents who have developed a twisted interpretation of the Koran into a terroristic state where women, Muslim and non-Muslim, are raped or sold into "marriages" that are little more than sexual slavery; where Christians, Jews, Zoroasters, Buddhists and Hindus are required to either convert to Islam, pay a huge tax and lose their homes, or be put to death; where Muslims who disagree with them are shot on site; where ancient antiquities of two of the oldest cultures in the world were destroyed or sold off on the black market to fund their warring ways; where attacks on innocent civilians became so violent and repulsive that the Vatican, a state that has endorsed the use of military force less than 10 times in the last century, ultimately joined in the calls for action to stop their reign of terror that has largely, but not entirely, been neutralized in almost a decade of warfare. Yes, I could be talking about ISIS.

Or, I could be talking about the forces of Pharaoh. Yes, just like some in the west once looked to the leaders of ISIS to help overthrow the corrupt regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the children of Jacob once looked to Pharaoh and his servant, their brother Joseph, as the source of their deliverance.

But times have changed. Many generations have passed for the families of the 12 sons of Jacob. They now number in the thousands, and they are a threat to Pharaoh. So, he oppresses them all the more and seeks ways to control their population. And then God sends Moses as the Divine agent of deliverance.

In today's text, Moses is leading the people away from Egypt back to a promised land they can barely remember. But, as they near the borders of the Egyptian empire, Pharaoh seems to forget the plagues that motivated him to free the Hebrews and send them away. He seems intent on setting up the ultimate showdown, not between the Hebrews and the Egyptian army, but between Yahweh, the God of the children of Abraham, and Pharaoh, the almighty of Egypt.

My colleague from The Well, Andrew Foster Connors, the pastor of Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian in Baltimore, reminded me of something Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggemann once wrote about this disturbing story. Walter writes: "This narrative has become the defining, paradigmatic account of faith whereby Israel is understood as the beloved, chosen community of YHWH and the object of YHWH's peculiar and decisive intervention in public events (see Exodus 4:22). This narrative, moreover, is a

crucial component in the articulation of YHWH, the God of Israel, as the God with power to override the empire through a miraculous intervention that renders the empire helpless and impotent."¹

We get queasy at a story that depicts God as causing the deaths of the Egyptian soldiers. But that is NOT how the original hearers of this story, when it was a part of their oral tradition, heard it, or how the exiles in Babylon some 700 years later, who first wrote it down, would have heard it either. They heard it as God protecting God's people, freeing them from oppression and slavery. They heard it as good triumphing over evil at a cosmic level.

Let's remember, the Israelites were descendants of Abraham, but at the time of the Exodus, they were people with barely any identity remaining. They were not a nation, they were oppressed slaves in Egypt whom God called Moses to lead away from the oppression of the past into a new future, once again dependent upon Yahweh. They were only made a people again because they were called by God to a new place and a new way. This is the context of the Exodus story; the day God delivered a people from their oppressors and pursuers.

Hear me clearly, I do not believe that today's story is not a glorification of violence or war. The first reason I think that is because this is the memory of the delivered as articulated at a time they were still under threat, from Babylon. Of course, they would want the oppressors crushed — they were still living under oppression — so their particularly brutal way of remembering it is understandable. But further evidence is provided in the rabbinic tradition of interpretation of this story over the last 2000 years.

Again, Andrew, one ancient Jewish source, notes: "According to rabbinic legend, when the angels in heaven started singing God's praises for saving the Hebrews [in the Sea], [God] turned on them in anger: 'My creatures are drowning, and you're singing songs!'"² Rabbi Telushkin argues that this well-known midrash is probably the basis for the Jewish tradition that one should not overly rejoice at an enemy's downfall and suffering (Proverbs 24:17). No, this is not a glorification of violence or even retribution; it is God's NO directed at one who used violence and terror to oppress a people. We must remember that Egypt itself will one day be a refuge again for Gods' chosen one when Mary and Joseph flee there to protect their little boy. This is not God punishing Egypt, but his rendering Pharaoh useless in the battle for the hearts and minds of the Israelites.

And what is the mechanism that God uses to deliver the people? God turns Pharaoh's own actions against him. At Exodus 1:22 we find Pharaoh's edict, meant to wipe out the Hebrews: "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile and drown." And instead, Pharaoh sends his forces into the Reed Sea and they are drowned.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2003, p. 53

² *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, its People, and its History*, (New York: William Morrow and Company), 2001, p. 35.

Does that make us comfortable with all of the violence in this story? No, and it probably shouldn't. It particularly shouldn't cause us to be triumphant or to claim God's favor when we use violence, because did you notice? God doesn't tell the Hebrews to fight back. God is the agent of deliverance here, not using some human force but only divine will, both to save the people and to end the threat against them. The people aren't permitted to be violent, only God.

Rather, the people of Israel have been freed to be God's unique witnesses, to be the bearers of God's covenant laws for humanity and, when humanity proves incapable of using those Laws as a blessing, to be the witnesses to God's entry into the world in Jesus Christ. They are saved to be God's agents of salvation for the world.

God will preserve this family so that they may be a blessing, so that God's promises to Abraham will be fulfilled. And notice that God's deliverance has little to do with the faith of the people. They are already second-guessing their deliverance before they even cross the sea. At the first sign of trouble, they turn on Moses, saying they preferred to die as slaves rather than at the hands of Pharaoh's army. The people have little or no faith but that doesn't stop God.

This is a story of God's preservation of one small minority, one tiny family. Why would Yahweh deliver them? Because Yahweh keeps promises; because Yahweh has plans for this people. They are not delivered simply because slavery is bad, though that is certainly one of the great lessons we have gained from this story. And it's why the story was so empowering to the enslaved people of this nation just five generations ago. This is a great story of deliverance because Yahweh has a task for the Hebrew people that goes back to the promise to Abraham — I will bless you to be a blessing to the nations. Yahweh wants to use the children of Abraham to deliver the world.

Through Christ we are co-heirs to that promise and we too have been preserved, been blessed to be a blessing to the world. God's promises and deliverance were a source of great hope for the women and men who, 700 years later, were in exile in Babylon. God seemed to have abandoned them, but they clung to this ancient story of God's deliverance and God's remembering the Covenant. And they hoped it would be true for them. And it was.

Don't we too hope for deliverance? We want a world delivered from our obsessive addictions—addictions to war, oppression, violence, and discord. We want deliverance for the poor and oppressed of our time, for those who live under the boot of economic, political, racial, and even theological oppression. We want justice for women whose stories are not believed or dismissed as irrelevant and whose lives are considered second-class by powerful men in the halls of American power and in similar centers of power across the globe.

Some might say, "Well, then why don't we finish the job and bomb the rest of ISIS into oblivion?" Wouldn't we be carrying on God's tradition of delivering the people from oppression? But remember it was GOD who did the delivering in today's story, not human military might.

It seems to me, while taking actions to defend those who are most at risk from the actions of despots is probably an obligation of being a powerful nation, under the rules of this

story anyway, it's really playing God. It may make sense geopolitically, but I'm not so certain that it's the legacy of this story, for our wars tend to lead to more wars.

No, to find the legacy of this story I think we do better to look to Moses, God's agent. Moses confronts power and might, speaks truth to power, reminds those living by might and not right that they cannot prevail. And then Moses leads the people out, going where God leads them.

I believe that's what we are doing when we seek to be agents of God's deliverance, despite our doubts and failings. And this great deliverance lives on among those who are blessed and so called to be a blessing. I think those places where we are engaged in lifting up those who are oppressed — not destroying the oppressors but helping to transform lives — are the best legacies of this story of deliverance.

When we load food in our cars for Soup at Six, Second Friday Lunches and The Night Ministry, we are using our blessings to care for those who are powerless. When we open our doors to groups assisting those who have lived under the oppression of addiction and help them find community and deliverance, that is a better legacy of deliverance, isn't it?

Look at what's going on with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, at work in the Southeast United States this year and still in Puerto Rico and in the Philippines, and already pulling together resources to respond to the tragic earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia yesterday, always responding to devastating storms, building partnerships, meeting needs, bringing comfort, care and, for many, a chance to survive and to thrive.

It's easy right now to look out and see places where our American exceptionalism is making our view more narrow, to see only the need to preserve our blessings for ourselves. But that would run counter to the God who is still at work delivering God's children from oppression, from slavery to sin and death and power and corruption, and all the ways that we seek to make ourselves little Pharaohs. Perhaps our task is to follow God's instructions to the Israelites, to stand firm in our hope and faith that God will prevail, and then keep moving onward toward the place God is sending us, a place of justice, of hope, of new beginnings, of freedom from the death-dealing powers of the Pharaohs of our own making.

Thanks be to God.