Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 (A) – Sunday 13 September – Exodus 14:19-31 – Webex

Last week I was bemoaning – yet again – the tendency of our lectionary to skip over the less pleasant bits of the biblical narrative, as evidenced by the fact that it was allowing us to celebrate Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt without making us confront the calamitous reality of the ten plagues that preceded their release.

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This week I will grudgingly concede that, in my opinion, the crafters of our assigned reading list did a little better.

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And so we, like the Hebrew people, see the Egyptians – and their horses – lying dead on the seashore.

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Ture, we *don’t* have to deal the rather troubling Divine thought process that *led* to their being dead on the seashore, which we *would* if we heard the *beginning* of this chapter, in which:

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14 The Lord said to Moses: 2Tell the Israelites to turn back and set up camp . . . by the sea.

3Pharaoh will think to himself, ‘The Israelites are lost and confused in the land. The desert has trapped them.’

4I’ll make Pharaoh stubborn, and he’ll chase them. I’ll gain honor at the expense of Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.

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But we *are* confronted with the end result of the thought process – Pharaoh *did* chase the Israelites; Yahweh *did* jam the Egyptian’s chariot wheels and throw them into a panic; the Egyptians *did* try to retreat; Yahweh *did* cause the parted waters to return to their normal depth and drown Pharaoh’s forces.

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Now I am not – in spite of what you might think right about now – suggesting we ought to be obsessing about, or even focusing on, the “bad bits” of the story.

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I *am* suggesting that addressing the challenge of the whole story – *whatever* that story is – ultimately allows us to be more mature in our faith – stronger, wiser, more compassionate, insightful, and confident.

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Actually, I believe this is true not only of the biblical narrative, but historical, social, and cultural narratives, and, indeed, our own personal narratives as well.

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Anyway, the Israelites are now on the far side of the Red Sea.

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You will remember that after Yahweh’s “destroying angel” swept through Egypt, killing every non-Hebrew first-born, the Israelites left quickly, accompanied by “a mixed crowd,” and carrying their unleavened bread, the silver and gold jewelry and the clothing their Egyptian neighbors had “given” them, “livestock in great numbers,” and “the bones of Joseph” – who knows where *those* had been for the last four hundred years?

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Their haste notwithstanding, we are told they departed “prepared for battle;” although apparently not *too* prepared, given that (1) God led them “by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea,” instead of the nearer way through the land of the Philistines, because he thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt;” and (2) they were clearly terrified to see the Egyptians pursuing them.

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Moses told them to stay calm.

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“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “Stand your ground and watch the LORD rescue you today. . . .The LORD will fight for you. You have only to keep still.”

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But then the LORD himself spoke up. “Uh, sorry, no,” he said to Moses. “Wrong call. No standing still. Tell the Israelites to keep moving.”

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He *did*. And *They* did. Closer and closer toward the Sea.

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The Pillar of Fire and Cloud moved, too – from in front of the people to in back.

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At the last possible moment, the waters parted, the people crossed, the Egyptians pursued; the waters returned, the Egyptians drowned, and the people believed in the LORD and his servant Moses.

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This story is about many things, none of them mutually exclusive.

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It is about the constructive powers of Creation opposing the destructive powers of Chaos.

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We talked about this a little in this week’s Ponder and Skyrocket – that this story relates not simply Yahweh overthrowing a human king, but a contest between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt, including Pharaoh, with Yahweh “executing judgment” on the Egyptian pantheon.

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We noted that the “strong east wind” that rearranged the waters of the Red Sea and imposed limits on them is the same sort of “wind” that moved over the face of the deep on Creation’s first day; and that the “dry land” which was exposed for the Israelites was the same “dry land” – “earth” – that emerged from “the waters under the sky” on the *third* day.

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As Michael Chan has summarized, looked at this way, the story relates a struggle for control of the cosmic order – the state in which life itself can flourish and abound.

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The text also asserts the reality that “Good” will always – if not quickly and easily – triumph over “Evil.”

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Martin Luther King Jr. stated this powerfully in his sermon “The Death of Evil on the Seashore.”

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He asserted that the story is, at its core, about the death of *evil*.

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“The Israelites,” he proclaimed, symbolized goodness, “in the form of devotion and dedication to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob;” while “Egypt was the symbol of evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation and crushing domination.”

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“The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore,” he concluded, “is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good.

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I suppose we might say it is a “subset” or “particular example” of the battle between Good and Evil, but the Exodus narrative also speaks strongly to the eventual victory of Freedom over Tyranny.

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“A tyrant,” Casey Sigmon has written, “is a ruler who acts without concern for checks and balances – one who uses power oppressively and absolutely. Pharaoh is such a tryant.”

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And “tyranny,” according to Michael Walzer, “is symbolized by Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, the core of his army and the source of his power.”

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A power reflecting – returning to King’s words – “tragic lust and inordinate selfishness.”

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A power exemplified by “the willingness of people in high places . . . to sacrifice truth on the altars of their self-interest.”

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A power seen “in imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with the iron feet of oppression.”

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A power that, in the end, could not withstand the liberative force and intent of the God of Justice and Mercy.

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I could go on and cite other truths revealed by these verses of scripture – the end result of the struggle between justice and injustice, salvation and condemnation, promise-keeping and promise-breaking, faith and fear – and I doubt I could come up with an exhaustive list.

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But as we consider these great, cosmic, overarching struggles, it is easy enough to overlook the real-time experience of the Israelites themselves.

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And their experience *itself* included many things, one of which was – confusion.

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The Israelites started off on the “wrong side of the street,” segregated from their neighbors while they labored on behalf of the Egyptian’s economic success.

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Then they found themselves on the “right side” of the street as the plagues decimated the Egyptians but left them untouched.

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They were slaves in Egypt with nothing.

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They left Egypt with “gifts” of gold and silver.

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Their self-identified God, Yahweh, seemed to prevail and they were given permission by Pharaoh to leave.

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Then Yahweh seemed to lose control, and Pharaoh pursued them in an effort to bring them back.

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They started out heading toward the Land of Promise.

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Then they were told to head back toward Egypt.

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Moses told them to be still and watch God deliver them.

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Then Moses told them to *stop* being still and move forward.

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The Pillar of Fire and Cloud went ahead of them to lead them.

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Then it moved behind them.

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They were skeptical about Moses, then they agreed to follow him, then they rebelled against him, then they believed in him.

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They, vulnerable, with families and livestock and no weaponry, crossed the sea on dry land.

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The Egyptians, a mighty force of warriors with state-of-the-art technology, drowned.

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The path leading to freedom, the way leading to trust in God, the journey toward salvation – these were not easy, obvious, or straightforward for the Israelites.

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There were so many shifts and reversals, so much uncertainty, so little clarity.

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What were they supposed to do? And how were they supposed to do it?

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The difficult, dangerous, often counter-intuitive answer was – trust. And obey.

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Cory Driver relates an ancient Jewish commentary comparing the unsettling experience of the Hebrew people in the story of the Exodus to the experience of a boy walking home down a dangerous path with his father one dark night.

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The road was narrow; they had to walk single-file.

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The man sensed a thief ahead, so he moved his son behind him to protect him.

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Then the man sensed a wolf behind them, so moved his son in front of him.

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At one point, the man sensed both a thief and a wolf approaching at the same time, so he put his son on his shoulders to protect him from both threats.

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The son, frightened and confused by being jostled around by his father, thought about running home on his own.

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But he trusted his father, and *because* he did, he arrived home safely – unharmed by the very real dangers he had not seen himself but would have encountered had he run away.

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Driver then notes that we, too, can feel as if *we* are being jostled around by our *heavenly* Father as we make our way along the often dangerous, dark, uncertain path of this life.

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We can feel deeply confused by God’s dealings with us – What are *we* supposed to do? How are *we* supposed to do it?

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Why are things so unclear? Is our Father really paying attention? Should we take action on our own? What happened? What is happening? What is going to happen?

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Indeed, trying to discern how, where, and why God is leading can be deeply confusing. Unfortunate. But true.

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But of all the things the story of the Red Sea can tell us, perhaps the most fundamental lesson is this.

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If we trust God, if we follow God, if we obey God’s Will and Word – even when it seems to make no sense – we *will* make it through the deep waters.

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We *will* be free.

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We *will* make it safely home.