

Moses: Leader of the Exodus

from the pulpit of
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Exodus 13:17-22 & 14:19-31

¹⁷When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. ¹⁹And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” ²⁰They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²²Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰It 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.

²¹Then 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. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At 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. ²⁵He 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." ²⁶Then 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." ²⁷So 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. ²⁸The 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. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel 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.

There are a lot of little stories about the famed physicist Albert Einstein living in Princeton, New Jersey, and occasionally being mistaken for someone else or his making a comment worth remembering. I am not sure whether this one is apocryphal or actually authentic, but it's worth repeating as one which has circulated as being true, at least among preachers.

On the campus of Princeton Seminary is a little jewel of a building that is the heart of the seminary's worship: Miller Chapel. It is a small

rectangle of a church with a lovely neo-classical façade, and white pillars with Corinthian capitals. It now sits on the green in the middle of the seminary campus, having been moved there many decades ago. The story is told that on the day the chapel was moved, half the town of Princeton turned out to watch the operation, and among them was Albert Einstein. For years he lived near the edge of the seminary campus. Einstein is said to have watched the snug little chapel as it lumbered down the street on the movers' rig and quipped something to the effect of, "I hope they don't think that they can fit God into that little box."

Fitting God into a little box is impossible, try as we may. The good news about the full extent of the Biblical witness is that we can see many ways that God has been revealed to humankind throughout history, *and* we have vastly varied human experiences of the living God. So many, in fact, that I imagine most of us would like to pick and choose the God we want.

The creed we are using in worship this summer, *A Brief Statement of Faith*, lifts up two of the most beautiful images contained in scripture – God is like a *Mother who will not forsake her nursing child*, and like a *Father who welcomes the prodigal home*. This is the God I want – the one we can find in the family room of our home, kind, gentle, forgiving, intimately present. But the God we want, is not always the God we need. The creed also affirms a powerful, manipulative, dare I say – vengeful God who takes sides, as in today's scripture reading: *Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage*.

The miraculous crossing of the Red Sea is one of the most celebrated acts of God, as far as the Old Testament is concerned. And the imagery has been picked up in the Christian tradition to underscore the liberating nature of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is such a formative story, it is as if it is encoded in the DNA of our faith. But when you sit down and read it, or hear it aloud, and pay attention to the details, you cannot help but wonder: Is this THE God I want to worship? I mean the plagues were

bad enough to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, but even when Pharaoh changed his mind and went after them, did the deliverance of the Israelites require that God would send the Egyptians into a panic, clog their chariot wheels, and toss them into the sea to drown, so that the Israelites could turn around to see the Egyptians piled up dead along the seashore? In a world sick to death of violence, did God have to intervene quite like this? Was there not a more peaceful way?

Safwat Marzouk is a biblical scholar of the Old Testament teaching at Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He is also a Christian, born, raised and educated in Egypt. He has obviously spent much of his life and scholarship pondering what it means to be a Christian Egyptian in light of this text, having once read an article that raised the question: “Before Hitler, who was the stand-in for pure evil?” And the answer given was “The Egyptian Pharaoh, of course.”

Academically, he had reconciled himself to the fact that Egypt was not the super-power in the ancient Middle East at the time of the Exodus, so that one could set Egypt aside, as a frozen image or metaphor that represents any form of oppression, be it political or economic. That works for an academic, biblical scholar who is an Egyptian Christian.

But then, when the animated version of the story, *The Prince of Egypt*, came out, after watching it with his seven year old daughter, who asked, “Daddy, does God love Egyptians?” he had to re-think how to reconcile his identity within the story. How to be an Egyptian historically and politically, and also a Christian. He found that to either dismiss the text, or simply to allegorize it – both – were inadequate choices. He ultimately found himself finding a place within the tension of the story, quite like Moses himself – who was also raised both as an Egyptian and an ancient Israelite. “This liminal space,” he wrote, is what enables me as a Christian Egyptian to reflect on the ways in which I am privileged, and to be courageous to speak truth to those who abuse their power to oppress the poor... the complexity of identity, in relation to the

Exodus as a liberation from dominance – invites one to think about what we need to be liberated from, and what we need to be liberated into.”

He goes on to say that if we can see ourselves standing within the tension of this text, it positions us in a better place for inter-religious dialogue among Jews, Muslims and Christians, writing: “We are called to be liberated from assuming that the only options available are assimilation or demonization. We are called to be liberated into finding a third space in which not only to exist together, but also enrich one another through our shared sameness as human beings amid our diversities and differences...” He concludes: “We need to be liberated into the virtue of humility in which we recognize our need for the other, and the virtue of hospitality in which we are willing to open ourselves to the other.”¹

Now, I realize that the virtues of humility and hospitality seem awfully pale, weak and even inept in the face of the brutal realities facing our world today. Humility and hospitality could seem even hopeless virtues against a truck barreling into a pedestrian walkway in Nice on Bastille Day, or people with assault weapons taking down innocents and whole governments. I suspect most of us would rather position ourselves solely with the Israelites, with God at our back, between us and the enemy, and hope that God would destroy the evil other on our behalf. That would be a nice little box, wouldn't it? God always on our side alone?

But God complicates that easy reading of this text with a little detail that we dare not miss: *Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.”* The youngest son of Jacob, who led ancient Israel into Egypt in the first place to escape famine in their land, Joseph is recalled

¹ Safwat Markzouk, The Exodus: A Christian Egyptian Perspective, Dec. 15, 2014, Huffington Post.

in this story to lead us back to the original promise made to his great-great-grandparents Abraham and Sarah: *I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

The Exodus is THE defining event in ancient Israel's journey with God, revealing a God who hears the cries of suffering people and who goes to deliver them. But the end goal is not for one tribe or nation or race or clan of people to end up in a place flowing with milk and honey, but for ALL people to enjoy the abundant blessings of God for a good and meaningful life.

Even in the interpretive work of the Hebrew people, a Jewish Rabbi wrestled with the drowning of the Egyptians. According to the Rabbi, and a Rabbinic tradition that has insisted on preserving this interpretation: The angels were all rejoicing over the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea: playing their harps, singing, and dancing. "Wait," said one of them. "Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping!" They went to God. "Why are you weeping when Israel has been delivered by your power?" "I am weeping," said the Maker of the Universe, "for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore – somebody's sons, somebody's husbands, somebody's fathers."²

Friends, there is good news for all of us in the story of the Exodus: Whenever it looks like we are pushed against impossible odds – God can make a way out of no way. God will enable human partners to come to the rescue, with an outstretched hand to part the sea; and God will be at our back as a guard against us and whatever pursues us. That is a good and worthy interpretation of this ancient text – which we have grown to liken to Christ himself leading us through the impassable sea of death,

² Hasidic story quoted by Al Winn, "A Way out of No Way," *Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 1990.*

safely to the other side. Against everyday obstacles, and in the ultimate sense, God makes a way out of no way.

But we also have to be honest with ourselves and understand that the story of the Exodus is not primarily about individuals. It is about a people, a nation of slaves who had no way out apart from God's liberating power. Like it or not, it is a story about redeeming the politics of power, and the economics of oppression. It is a story about the Creator of the Universe, who is ever on the side of the unarmed, the homeless, the refugee living in a foreign land, the powerless, the marginalized. God's justice is not equity and impartiality; it always tilts toward the poor. And the very God who has our back, Is also THE God calling us – who like Moses – have been raised in the houses of privilege and power, to go down – where there is great need – and help, let his suffering people go free.

AMEN.