

Sept. 28, 2014 - Promises Kept: Rescue at Sea
Exodus 14:10-14, 21-29

“Wow”

This is a story for slaves. You understand why the Church was so important for the African slaves brought to this country and for the African-Americans after slavery but not racism ended. Stories like this one and the songs they made about it kept them going in difficult, dire, and seemingly hopeless circumstances. So stories like this one are a little harder for people like you and me to get. But we do have imaginations. And while our entire existence may not be lived under difficult, dire, and seemingly hopeless circumstances, we have known such times.

The story begins with one of the most egregious cases of short term memory loss of all time. Early on in this story the people speak words to Moses that ought to make our jaws drop. They say, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?”

Huh? Hadn't these people just celebrated the first ever Passover? Hadn't they just experienced the miraculous? Weren't they on their way out of Egypt? Weren't they being freed from the hard labor of slavery that made them cry out and oppression that included the killing of their children? Wasn't that just YESTERDAY?

Now, to be fair, if I saw the Pharaoh's army closing in on me, I doubt I'd be calm about it. But still . . . have they no faith AT ALL? Well, no, they don't. Not yet. One miracle, no matter how big, no matter how spectacular, does not produce faith. Faith takes time, and it takes the effort of being in relationship. They're not there yet.

Where they are is between a rock and hard place, between Pharaoh's army and the sea. And they can't swim. “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?”

This is why I love these stories. They are stories of grace and encouragement. They are stories of God rescuing the completely undeserving. They are like the Gospel of Mark which portrays the disciples of Jesus as having no faith and no understanding at all. Do you find that encouraging? I do. God chooses a man, Abraham, who doesn't even know him. God chooses a man, Moses, who does everything possible to argue his way out of God's call. God chooses a helpless people, the Hebrew slaves, who show no evidence of knowing who God is and who despite their miraculous deliverance at the Passover have no trust in this God. Later on, God will choose women who have no status in this culture to do all kinds of amazing things, including being the only witnesses to the crucifixion and resurrection.

In today's story, not only are the people without faith or merit, they are told to stand by and watch, play no part so that it is crystal clear that their deliverance comes entirely from God. God is fighting on two fronts here. On one front God is trying to win the trust of the people God is bringing out of Egypt. This will prove to be a difficult, never ending struggle. On the other front God is trying to defeat the world's biggest, badest army. This will prove to be piece of cake.

As with the Joseph story, sin comes back to bite. For the hearers of this story, Pharaoh and the Egyptian armies are evil personified. Pharaoh thought himself to be a god, and drowned babies to prevent any deliverer from overthrowing his reign. Now, it's his boys who are being drowned. It is fitting. And all of it entirely unnecessary.

What happens to Pharaoh's army is fitting. Jews look back on this story as one of deliverance but also one of sadness for what happened to the Egyptian first born and, yes, even the Egyptian army. We Christians look back on this story as a precursor of what would come. It was at a Passover celebration meals that Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take eat, this is my body broken for you." As the Hebrews would be saved and would become a nation by passing through the water, we are saved and joined together in the waters of baptism. It is fitting.

I hope you hear this story as one of great grace and encouragement. I hope it helps you in our times of difficult, even dire circumstance. I hope it helps you see your worth in a new light because God's choosing you is not dependent upon your worthiness any more than it depended on the worthiness of the Hebrew slaves or that of the disciples of Jesus. All that matter is that God thinks he might be able to do something with you.

And I hope you also hear this story as something even more than that. I hope you hear God's call in it. Behind this story is Moses, who tries to wriggle away from God's call but eventually gives in. Without him or someone very much like him, the Passover, the deliverance at the sea, and the Exodus would not have happened. God chooses to work in this world through people. God chooses unworthy people. God chooses people who resist. But chooses them because God chooses to work in this world through people and unworthy people are about all there is to work with. That means if nobody responds, not much happens. Through the waters of baptism we are made into God's people and heirs of God's Kingdom. Let's do God's work.