

Miriam, Don't You Weep

It is a story that may be difficult for some of us to hear. As we focus on the creative, loving nature of our God, it can be difficult to reconcile what we know of God in that regard with a story that ends with the corpses of men and animals washed up on a beach, apparently destroyed by the hand of God. This aspect of the story can be hard to jibe with the words of Jesus that may be returning to us, unbidden: “love your enemies, bless those who curse you, turn the other cheek, forgive...” It may be at least some consolation that our Jewish sisters and brothers have been aware of this seeming contradiction in the nature of God for centuries. There is an ancient Jewish midrash that tells of Yahweh weeping as the Hebrews celebrated because, in the words of God, “the Egyptians are my children too!”

But it is important for us to understand just what this story has meant over the millennia to countless followers of the Abrahamic religions, Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is important for us to understand why it is that generations of Negro slaves in America and their descendents could sing with joy that “Pharaoh’s army got drown-ded;” why a pacifist like Pete Seeger could include that tune in his repertoire of folk songs; why, indeed, we can claim the song as part of our Christian heritage and sing it with gusto. How do we liberate this story of liberation from its more horrific details and allow it to be a word of freedom and consolation in our own lives?

Let’s begin with the internal truths of the story. For that group of Israelites following Moses out of Egypt, freedom has only been a rumor, a tale told by the old people about long-ago forefathers who were old when their fathers’ fathers were young. For generations, they have known only slavery of the most demeaning kind, living herded into camps, performing the most back-breaking labor for untold hours in a harsh climate under the whips of the overseers. Suddenly, someone has risen up to speak for them, a young man of their own people, a servant of their God, yet brought up in the court of Pharaoh. Their hopes have been raised, then dashed, raised, then dashed, again and again as Pharaoh has been cowed by the signs and plagues brought by Moses and acquiesced to Moses’ demands of freedom for the Children of Israel, only to change his mind and tighten his grip on them, time after time. Finally, there has been one last plague, a mysterious illness striking the children of the Egyptians, killing even Pharaoh’s own first-born, but leaving the Hebrews and their children unscathed. Then the Egyptians couldn’t get rid of them fast enough. So they have set out on their journey to the Promised Land of their ancestors, newly clothed and bejeweled with tribute from their former captors, stunned perhaps by this reversal of fortune, some of them no doubt singing the Hebrew version of “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last!”

But Pharaoh changes his mind one more time. And now they are trapped – trapped between the sea and the advancing chariots of Pharaoh’s army. Now the songs of joy have turned into frightened shrieks, the wailing of terrified women and children, the shouts of the men against Moses: “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? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

Somewhere in all that chaos, probably close to the side of her younger brother, was Miriam. Did you know her name means “bitter water,” that it is the same name we now pronounce Mary? She had been trapped before between Egyptians with death in their eyes and the water of

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bitterness. To prevent the Egyptians from killing the baby Moses, she and her mother had been driven to commit his tiny body to the river Nile, protected only by a fragile ark of reeds and pitch. Did she remember, I wonder, how that episode ended in her brother's salvation? Did she dare to hope now, trapped again between the devil and the deep blue sea? Or had she, too, succumbed to tears, fearing for her life and the lives of her people, hearing the men around her turn against her brother? Did Moses take a moment in the midst of crisis to comfort her? "Mary, don't weep, don't mourn."

And then the miracle happened. "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." Somehow, it happened. I won't take the time this morning to review for you all the theories on how it happened, on whether the Red Sea was actually the Reed Sea, a shallow marsh, or whether there was a conveniently timed earthquake or tsunami or storm. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. The Children of Israel were free and whatever happened that fateful night they and we attribute it to Yahweh, the God who heard their cries and came down to them. Did the Egyptians, in their pride, encounter a miracle and assume it was for their benefit and not for the Hebrews'? Did their military leaders make a tactical error in deploying chariots in unfavorable terrain? We cannot know. But they were bent on continuing a rule of terror and slavery over the Israelites and they plunged recklessly ahead into a situation that was not to their advantage. And they paid the price for their presumption. But the Children of Israel, whom they had beaten and enslaved for four hundred years, were free.

So if, like me, you are troubled by the deaths in this story, I affirm your compassion. In addition to the story from the Mishnah I cited earlier, some of you may remember that I quoted some time ago from the great Southern preacher Will Campbell, who said, "anyone who is not as concerned with the immortal soul of the dispossessor as he is with the suffering of the dispossessed is being something less than Christian." But that concern is not at the core of this story. We must read this story as we read much of the Bible, through the eyes of the dispossessed, the oppressed, the poor, the weak, the stranger. Seen from that perspective, the story once again becomes the story of liberation, of freedom, of hope.

It is not necessarily easy for us to read with the viewpoint of the oppressed. We have been raised, as Americans, to understand ourselves as liberated and as liberators. It has been a long, long time since the majority culture in this country faced oppression. That is how our national tale begins but we rid ourselves of our English overlords over two hundred years ago. Just as, after four hundred years in Egypt, the mindset of the Children of Israel was the mindset of the enslaved, so is our mindset that of the free. We have gone to war many times since the Revolution but each of those wars, seen in the most positive light, have been wars to protect or achieve the liberties of others or to expand our own liberty, in the case of the War of 1812. Individually, our family histories may include incidents of oppression, but those are generally not the stories that define us. I've mentioned recently how the awareness of the prejudice and injustice suffered by my Irish and Indian forebears has sharpened my awareness of the underdog but I learned about that part of my history from school, not from my family. My maternal grandparents experienced the exploitation common to the Dust Bowl nomads of the Great Depression but my story-telling Granny generally characterized that experience as "Times was

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hard for everybody then.” I didn't know what they were really up against until I read The Grapes of Wrath. But to truly understand the people in the stories of our Scriptures, we must set aside our native confidence and optimism and learn to think like those who are on the bottom looking up.

Consider, for a moment, the viewpoint of just some of the people who have embraced this story and made it their own. Remember that scholars believe the stories of the Torah took their final form during or just after the Babylonian Captivity. For the Jews, hoping to return or just returned to their homeland, this story of their ancient liberation would have been a source of hope for the future of their people, a reminder that Yahweh would be with them no matter how powerful the foe. Think of the generations of African-Americans who, first as slaves and then as the victims of Jim Crow and the Klan, claimed this story as their own, how they saw in their own lives the pattern of Israel repeating – the enslavement and exile, the struggle for freedom. Little wonder that they found comfort in the idea of God's hand against their tormentors: “Pharaoh's army got drown-ded! O Mary, don't you weep!” And think, if you will, of generations of *campesinos*, toiling in Latin America's modern feudalism, with huge percentages of the arable land held by latter-day barons, and how those struggling men and women have embraced the liberation theology offered by their countrymen such as Alfonso, Cardinal López Trujillo or Rubem Alves or Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in spite of official disapproval. For how many Marias or Muriels or Marisols has this story been a reason to hope and not to mourn?

We must be very careful, as I said in relation to the story of Moses in the bulrushes two weeks ago. We must be very careful, here in America, that in our confidence and optimism and complacency we do not become Pharaoh. We are seen around the world as those who set the rules for the rest of the planet, with or without their consent. As Euro-Americans, we are seen by our Black and Asian and Latino and Indian sisters and brothers as those who hold the power in this land. Those of us who are middle-class and higher, who are in upper management, who sit on boards, we are seen as potential little pharaohs by those who work for us, who apply to us, who cut our grass, who bag our groceries.

On Friday night, Connie and I were watching Oliver Stone's powerful 1987 movie, “Wall Street.” Late in the movie, Michael Douglas' character, Gordon Gecko, is trying to persuade a group of union leaders to help him buy their airline by agreeing in advance to grant him concessions. One of them, Carl Fox, played by Martin Sheen, responds, “There arose in Egypt a Pharaoh who did not remember...” Failing to protect the rights and livelihoods of workers who helped build a company while in pursuit of higher profits is the work of modern Pharaohs. That's an extreme example. Shane Claiborne is a leader in the New Monasticism movement that is a subset of the Emergent Church movement among Christians. His community, The Simple Way in Philadelphia, got their start in helping a group of homeless families who had taken over one of North Philly's abandoned cathedrals, St. Edward's or St. Ed's as the locals called it, as a resort from living in cars or on the streets. In his book, The Irresistible Revolution, Claiborne tells how one challenge from the city to the squatters was a planned visit from the fire marshal, hoping to catch them in ignorance of fire codes. The night before the inspection, two anonymous firefighters showed up and led the residents in their final preparations of bringing the building up to code, donating scores of smoke detectors, repairing exit signs and helping with myriad other details. The next day, the community passed the fire inspection. Claiborne writes: “It felt like

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nothing could stop us, as if God really was on our side. I wasn't really sure how God felt about taking sides in difficult situations like this, but we had a real sense that even if we were being pursued by every department in the city, somehow the sea would split open and swallow them up (in the most loving way) in order to protect the families. I became a believer in miracles." Sometimes, even the rules we make to protect the innocent can empower the little pharaohs who would enforce them without reference to the true wellbeing of others.

But if this story of the Red Sea passage is a warning to some, it is also a promise to all. For all of us, no matter how high our station or how seemingly secure our future, face oppression from Pharaohs in our own lives as well. They may be Pharaohs without us or Pharaohs within us, but whatever or whoever they are, we can be assured that our God, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is stronger and that God will act to deliver us. "It's significant, writes Gary Anderson, that this Pharaoh, "unlike almost all other foreign kings in the Bible, however evil they may be, is not graced with a name." Thus, he can be identified with, and experienced as, every one of the "powers-that-be," every overwhelming, well-armed oppressor, for he is "as much a cipher for evil as a flesh-and-blood human being". If God and empire face off, the story reminds us, in any situation or time, God is always going to win." The Pharaohs we face may be part of what theologian Walter Wink calls "the Domination System... unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all."

This story also reminds us that we can be liberated by God from the powers that haunt us within. God knows what those things within us are. One rabbinic teaching on this passage says that when the sea split to allow the Israelites across, that all the waters in the world split similarly. Not just the seas and the rivers and the lakes, but even "the deep, deep sea of the human soul split in two, and for a brief moment, all its contents were exposed to the light of day." When we accept and embrace the grace, love and power of God, we can be set free from the Pharaohs that lurk in the depths of our souls: addictions, selfishness, greed and fear. There is a wonderful midrash on this story in Jewish literature that I think illuminates this point. It seems that when Moses held his rod out over the sea, the waters did not part immediately. Moses urged the people to proceed anyway, "Yet the children of Israel hesitated. They were prepared to plow into the ocean, but they needed to be led. A leader appeared in the person of Nachshon, son of Aminadav, tribal prince of Judah. Leading his tribal column, Nachshon strode into the sea. Wading through the rising tide, the waters first reached his waist, then his chest and shoulders. At the very last moment, as the waters reached his nostrils, the Red Sea parted and the Children of Israel followed him into the sea." Why was this so, asks Rabbi Lazer Gurkow, of congregation Beth Tefilah in London, Ontario? Because, he writes, "The waters were waiting for the Jewish people to express their faith through action. It was not enough that the Jews believed. The sea demanded an external demonstration of their faith." Like Nachshon, we must learn not to let our fears keep us from stepping out in faith. God is there to split the seas for us.

We may remember this story in a special way as Christians. Larry Broding writes, "Just as the Israelites walked through the midst of the water toward their salvation, we, too, journey through the waters of baptism toward our freedom. And, just as evil (symbolized by the army of the Pharaoh) was crushed in the rushing waters, so too, our sins are washed away in Baptism. Just as God formed a new people out of the experience, we, too, are formed into his new people, the

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Body of Christ.” Through the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit, through our participation in the Body of Christ, we receive the power of God’s love, the power that enables us not only to defeat the Pharaohs in our own lives but also to extend the love of Christ to those who have been Pharaoh’s unwitting tools. We celebrate our communion with God and with each other through Christ today in our commemoration of the willing self-sacrifice of Jesus, who defeated the powers of evil and death not through armed conflict or by calling down fire from heaven but by offering his life as an example to us and for us. In Christ Jesus comes our ability to love each other and care for each other, to bear one another’s burdens and to walk with each other on the hardest journeys and on the brightest days. Thanks to Christ Jesus, we need not fear fire nor flood, Satan nor Pharaoh. In the flood of Jesus’ love, Pharaoh’s army is “drown-ded.” Thanks be to God!