

**“Faith in God”**

Exodus 14: 10-31 (10-13-2013)

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One of my favorite religious cartoons is called: Moses, the early years... Picture it: Moses, sitting in his baby bathtub with his little arms stretch out and totally dry because the waters have separated for him (he is Moses after all), and his nurse made saying: “Cut it out, Moses, and take a bath! “

What the resurrection story is to us Christians, mainly the central, primal, all important story for our faith, the story of the Exodus is that to our Jewish brothers and sister. It is Israel’s central, primal, all important story to everything that is to follow - from the covenant and laws given at Sinai, through the 40 year journey through the wilderness to reaching the Promised Land. Everything that follows, all of their history and relationship with God, is shaped and experienced in light of the Exodus story.

There are a great number of ways one can talk/preach about this story. Two generations of Americans have received their impression of the exodus shaped by Cecil B. DeMille’s 1950’s epic *The Ten Commandments* which takes the biblical story, except for a bit of Hollywood license, literally. And for some that might be enough. But as we know, when a metaphorical narrative is taken literally, it renders it incredible and even worse, ridiculous.

For those of us who take the Bible too seriously to take it literally, we know that it is a story about power and powerlessness. Egypt who had the most advanced war machine in all the land was going after the ragtag collection for former slaves staggering toward freedom.

Pharaoh has horses and chariots and spears and skilled warriors, and Moses is carrying - a stick.

Then there is another mismatch: Pharaoh, if you believe his PR department, is a descendant of the gods. He is divine. He is the word of law; his every utterance could mean life or death in an instant. Moses is a stuttering old man. And even though he will gain some fame as a lawgiver, he is just the messenger. From the very beginning, Moses is a misfit, a man between two cultures, a Hebrew by birth and an adopted member of the royal household, a fugitive from justice herding sheep in the boondocks for 40 years.

And then there is the clash of religions. The cult of the state, where ruler and god are one, with priests and pyramids and pomp and circumstance; and against that a collection of ancient stories told around campfires, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of a promise that is so old that the slaves have all but forgotten that this promise makes them a people; God's people in fact. There is no way the slaves come out on top; no way Moses prevails in this contest.

This story is about the arc of history. MLK Jr. once said that the long arc of moral history bends toward justice. The God of the Bible intervenes on behalf of the down trodden and the oppressed. God favors the poor and liberates the captives which has happened again and again in history. King knew this because he knew this story.

This story is about the judgment of history on mighty empires that amass their wealth on the back of the poor and oppressed. It is about worldly glory and fame coming to mean nothing when it has been gained from the forced toil of others. We might be moved to feel sorry for Pharaoh, especially since the Bible says that God "hardened his heart." But Pharaoh's atherosclerosis has at least as much to do with the hold of his power has on him as it has to do with God. He had countless opportunities to do the right thing, to "let the people go" because justice required it. Each round of plagues offers him an exit from the road of total destruction. Even after the death of the firstborn at Passover which included his own first-born son, he let the Hebrews go but regrets it immediately and chases after them, because, at any cost, he must and cannot be anything else but Pharaoh.

The story of the Exodus is all about these things; but if this all too much to remember and to sort out, the story is mostly about God. If we really want to know how we should read and understand the story, the better clue is found in what follows. The story stops because the children of Israel sing and dance for a whole chapter. They can't help themselves because the odds were against them. The Egyptians were at their heels and the sea was in front of them.

They were desert people. The sea for them was a symbol of chaos and death. They were truly afraid that they would perish. All that was left to do is put their faith in God: into the God who once separated the waters from the waters to make a way where there had been none (chaos), hoping that this God would do it again; faith in God to save them and lead them into freedom which God did; and faith in their leaders Moses and Aaron who themselves had to have enormous faith in God's guidance.

The crossing of the sea is a story that transitions a people from fear to awe, from doubt to faith, from cries of despair to shouts of joy and worship. In that sense it is a great story, a hopeful one. But as the story continues, the children of Israel would forget, on numerous occasions about what God had done for them and their faith would weaken, especially in the wilderness that is to come. They forget more than once about faith and what it can do for them.

In that sense, as we talk about faith this month, the exodus story I believe reverberates with us, especially the fact that many times, when the going gets tough, we lose sight of our faith in God and how our faith can actually help us to get through whatever we need to overcome. When life gets difficult, too many think of faith as the last resort, instead of making it an instrument of support and help.

Let's take a look at what is faith. What is faith in God and how it does not have to be the last resort in difficult times?

I think that the most common, modern, yet distorted meaning of faith is that we have learnt that faith equals believing; faith as believing in the doctrines of the Christian tradition; faith as

believing that there is a God, faith as believing that Jesus is divine, faith as believing that Jesus died for your sins, faith as believing that...and then fill it with almost anything in what you believe in. And if you believe these certain things, that is faith.

The understanding of faith as belief is the gift of the enlightenment, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Before that no one questioned that the Bible came from God, that the Genesis stories of creation were true, that Jesus walked on the water and so forth. It didn't take faith to believe any of that. It was simply part of the taken-for-granted understandings of people living in western Christendom. Only when those things started to be questioned that suddenly faith came to mean believing.

I understand that this kind of thinking about faith sustained and sustains many believers. It has been a way of holding on to the meaningfulness of the Christian tradition when everything around you is radically questioned. I get that. But faith as believing renders faith impotent because it happens in our heads, not our hearts.

There are more loving, more meaningful, more ancient and authentic meanings of faith. Those among you who have been confirmation mentors, will recognize these three because this is what I teach the kids in the session on faith.

The first more authentic understanding of faith is trust. Faith as radical trust in God does not need any particular beliefs. The opposite of faith as trust is not doubt but anxiety. You can measure the amount of faith as trust in your life by the amount of anxiety you have in your life. Anxiety often is created by thinking we have to do it all on our own. Trust means that there comes a time when we have to let go and let God. Now I don't want you to go home and worry about the level of anxiety you might experience. All I am suggesting is that a solid strong faith as trust can get a handle and even cast out anxiety.

The second of the ancient and authentic meanings of faith in God is fidelity; faith as fidelity to a relationship; fidelity to the relationship with God. Again, it has very little to do with what we

believe with our heads; it's faithfulness to that relationship. The opposite of faith as fidelity is obviously infidelity. Unfaithfulness. In the biblical tradition, it gets frequently expressed as idolatry - be faithful to something else rather than being faithful to God. The other word that is used to rail against infidelity is adultery – not in the sense of sexual behavior but in the sense of being unfaithful to God.

The third and final of the more ancient and authentic ways of understanding faith in God is faith as a way of how we see and relate to the world we live in and move and have our being in. It has to do also with how we see God in all of this. I have not found a good word for that but it shows up in the questions we might ask when things go wrong. Is God testing me with this new set back - in my job or my health or my family? What does God want from me? Why would God punish me with this? Haven't I suffered enough? I must have done something to deserve this. This is one way, a pretty hostile way, of looking at all that is, including God as the adversary.

A second way one can see the world and God is indifferent toward human existence and indifference toward us. God does not care about me! I am off his radar. And who cares anyway about any of this? All I want is peace and quiet, my little corner of happiness. God? Who cares!

You might have noticed that both of these ways of seeing the world make very little if any room for faith. What they do is pay attention to the self and its well-being. God has no place in each.

Do not despair: there is a third option. We have the choice to look at all that is, including God, with the eyes of faith – with trust and commitment to the relationship. That is what Moses did. He did not have all the answers. He trusted God and stayed faithful to that relationship, and it allowed him to do great things. And when we do the same, we are able to see this world as gracious, as nourishing, as supportive of life, as hopeful and optimistic. We can see God in this reality as that which has brought us into existence and nourishes us from the day we are born to the day we die.

There is nothing weak or weird about this way of living and thinking. This attitude is still very much aware that the flower fades, the grass withers, that we all die. But to see reality and God in it as supportive, gracious and nourishing creates the possibility of responding to life in a posture of trust and gratitude. And we're back to faith as trust. Interestingly, this attitude cannot be taught or acquired via miracles. We will have to make a choice about which way we want to go...

Once the songs of joy over the miraculous deliverance from the oppressive grip of Egypt had ended, the children of Israel were just starting their journey of faith in God who led them out of Egypt. The Bible tells us that there were many times when they had to make the choice to have and keep the faith in their God.

We are invited to make that journey as well, that journey of faith, in which we learn to trust our relationship to God and learn to be faithful to that relationship, and learn to see the world in a new way. And if we give ourselves permission to enter into that journey with our hearts, I guarantee you, we will be led into an evermore wondrous and compassionate understanding of our lives with God. Indeed, if this is not what life and faith is about, namely, growth and wonder and compassion, then I wonder what this life is about. Amen.