

15th Sunday after Pentecost

“Over My Dead Body”

17 September 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Exodus 14:19-31

In his September 12, 2017 blog Benjamin Corey (patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie) asked: “Why do logical atheists often insist on reading the Bible like a fundamentalist—as if there’s only one way to understand and apply it to Christian living?” Corey then uses the example of a critic of a devout Christian and a Miss Teen USA contestant who has a tattoo as an example of hypocrisy. What Mr. Corey is pointing out is that it’s as if there is only “one way” to read and interpret the Bible.

I don’t believe and think that God explicitly wrote the Bible. I do believe and think God inspired imperfect human beings to write the biblical witness guided by the Holy Spirit. For this reason, while I do consider the Bible the most important document ever inspired by God and produced by humankind, I do not consider the Bible to be either infallible or inerrant. Hear the day’s lesson:

¹⁹ The 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. ²⁰ It 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.

²¹ Then 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. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴ At 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. ²⁵ He 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."

²⁶ Then 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." ²⁷ So 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. ²⁸ The 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. ²⁹ But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel 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 (Exodus 14:19-31).

In our culture, few things comfort more during grief/heartache than biblical texts. Remember these comforting words: “The Lord is my shepherd,” or “In my Father’s house are many rooms....” Or, from Isaiah:

[40:1] Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

**[2] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her**

that she has served her term,

that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the LORD'S hand

double for all her sins (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Or these words from Paul:

[37] No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38] For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, [39] nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37-39).

Regrettably, the Bible also has hard and difficult portions to understand. Exodus 14:19-31 is a case in point. It suggests a question of “theodicy”—a fancy theological word meaning: “the justification of God’s ways in the world.” Theodicy asks why does God cause or allow the drowning of an entire Egyptian army? Similarly, we could ask: Why God allowed Pharaoh’s murder of the Hebrew’s male infants? Why were the Egyptian first born killed from the king’s house even to the first born of the herds in the fields?

No human being can explain these questions’ darkness, nor the dark actions described in Exodus. Certainly, people in the time of the Exodus understood God’s actions powerful and warlike—revealing God’s omnipotence. Evil here is not abstract or generic. Rather readers identify evil in the physical Egyptians. Accordingly, the writer portrays Yahweh as the God who fights for Israel—God’s chosen ones.

There are other books in the Bible equally troublesome as Exodus for understanding what God is up to. In Job, for example, a good and righteous man is tested to see if he is “good for naught.” Is Job good for the benefits that righteousness brings or is Job good just because Job is a blameless and upright man? 42 chapters of Job explore this topic. There isn’t a definitive answer given concerning Job’s appalling suffering. We never get our questions answered relating to why us, why now, why this, why, why, why . . . at least to our satisfaction. Yet, an answer of sorts emerges: God does not give an answer to the why question. Instead God gives something better. God gives to Job—God’s own self. God gives not an answer, but God gives a relationship.

I suggest that the text’s explanation (death of the first born/drowning of the Egyptian soldiers) is beyond human wisdom. Rather, let’s look for what we can emphasize for insight. There are three things that the texts speak clearly about, even if it is silent on the issue of Egyptian suffering.

First, the crossing of the Red Sea is another aspect of the creation story. Dry land appears for the Hebrew people in the path created across the floor of the Red Sea, just as in creation the dry land appears amid chaos. When there seems to be no way out of a situation, God's actions make liberation and freedom a possibility. We often call this the miraculous and indeed it is: the creation of a new possibility.

Max Lucado, in *Applause of Heaven*, reminds us that if God can use ordinary inanimate objects (*everyday things*) then God can use us. Lucado recalls how God used the staff of Moses to lead the people of Israel to freedom, the hurled stones of little David to turn back a giant, the saliva of Jesus to heal a blind man. He points out that when we freely offer to God what we have, whatever it may be, through the miracle of God's grace the mundane can be made majestic, the dull divine, the hum-drum holy. He reminds us that when it comes to serving God, the key is not the *ability*, but the *availability*.

Second, God uses Moses, an ordinary human being, to do the divine will. Moses raises his staff and stretches out his arms to achieve the parting of the sea. Not only this, but God also uses the stuff of nature to also do the divine will. As Moses raises his staff and arms, "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." Thus, God addresses a hopeless situation.

Third, the Hebrew response is awe and faith. The people of Israel are not passive: they must walk through the walls of water. They must also trust Moses, and as we will continue to see, this is not their first instinct regarding him. The people also respond to Yahweh: they revere Yahweh, they believe in Yahweh, and in Yahweh's servant Moses. They sing a song of worship for the blessing God's act of liberation furnishes. They will be tested for forty years, **but on this day**, they worship their God by singing "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exodus 15:21).

For us, the question about what happened to the Egyptians and why, may keep us from the more profound meaning of the text for us. Instead, could the message for today be: it is not whether people get what they deserve, but rather that our God is gracious—whether they deserve it or not. Perhaps, the Egyptians are victims, but this text's emphasis is on the Hebrew people who are saved by their God. This is the good news.

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The philosophical problem of theodicy:

1. God is all powerful.
2. God is good.
3. Evil exists.

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