

God of Wonder – All Things Are Possible

Exodus 2:1-10; 14:27-25 30-15:2, 20-21 Psalm 104:1-11, 24-25, 30, 35b Matthew 19:23-26

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Third Sunday after Pentecost

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Today in the afterglow of Vacation Bible School, and on Father's Day when we remember especially our earthly fathers, we reflect on the marvel and mystery of God our heavenly Father and his miraculous ways with us. Karl Barth notes in his Dogmatics, that

“We do not come to know what it means for God to be the Father by observing human fathers, but the other way around; we know what it means for a man to be a father by observing God the Father.”ⁱ

The grand story of the Bible tells us how God, our great Father, makes a way where there is no way. God makes possible what humanly speaking seems impossible.

From the stories our children learned about last week we reflected Monday on the marvel and mystery of **creation**, how out of the myriad possibilities God brought forth life on this earth, so far as we know the only planet in all the cosmos where there is life. And out of all the creation God made you and me in his image and calls us good, loves us deeply, and made us for a purpose. God is with us. God is for us. We are not alone. “You were created, I was created for God's Grand Story.”

Tuesday, we reflected on how God delivered his people Israel out **from Egyptian slavery to freedom in the promised land** miraculously leading them through the Red Sea, using Moses and his sister Miriam as his agents. In gratitude they each sang songs of praise for what God had done. Moses sang,

“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation.”

Miriam, Moses' sister, who had so many years before brought to Pharaoh's daughter their own mother to be the nurse for little infant Moses, so that he grew up in the palace of Pharaoh receiving the best education and training for leadership possible, yet learned his true identity as a Hebrew. Miriam took a tambourine in her hand and with dancing sang,

“Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

The point in Moses' and Miriam's songs is not to glory in the death of anyone, least of all those Egyptians. The point is to recognize and celebrate God's miraculous deliverance, making possible what seemed utterly impossible. "God makes a way in His Grand Story."

Wednesday, we learned how God changed the heart of a **rich little tax collector named Zacchaeus so that he became a generous big hearted-man and a follower of Jesus**, who gave away half of his possessions to the poor and paid back four times as much to any he had defrauded. "Little is much in God's Grand Story."

On Thursday we learned how **God healed a woman who had been sick** for twelve years when she in faith touched the hem of Jesus' garment. "God heals in His Grand Story."

The grand story of the Bible tells us how God makes a way for us where there is no way. God takes what seems impossible and makes it possible. As the grand mega story in the Old Testament tells us, God delivers his people Israel from death on the seashore by making a way for them through the sea. As the grand mega story in the New Testament tells us, God delivers the whole world, all who will come to him, through Jesus' death and resurrection from the dead. He defeated death by death. Both of these stories tell of impossible possibilities. As our New Testament Lesson today sums up, **"For God all things are possible!"**

I

In saying that, Jesus was responding to the disciples' question about who can be saved. He had taught them how riches can be a hinderance to entering the Kingdom of Heaven. We all know we can become too comfortable with things and rely on them rather than on the Lord. Jesus likened the difficulty of a rich person entering the Kingdom of Heaven to that of a camel going through the eye of a needle. When the disciples, now confused, perplexed and ready to throw in the towel, cry out, "Then who can be saved? Jesus looked at them and said, **"For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." For God, all things are possible!**

I wonder today, what in your life seems impossible? Maybe you feel like you have missed out on some great opportunity. Maybe a mistake you made in your past is still a nagging weight you are carrying around needlessly that is pulling you down and holding you back. Maybe when you hear the news of wars and starvation and environmental deterioration and political chaos and fragmentation in our country you feel overwhelmed, and you want to throw in the towel, and cave in to cynicism and despair.

With Pharaoh and his army bearing down upon them, "The Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear they cried out to the Lord."ⁱⁱ Yes they were afraid. But they did cry out to the Lord. They did offer a desperate prayer. And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today... The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."ⁱⁱⁱ

God says to you and me today, hold on! You are not alone. I made you and I love you, I am with you and I will use you for good. No matter where we are in life, as God instructed

Moses, so God instructs us tell the children of South Highland not to look back to those forces that have been destructive in our lives but look ahead and move ahead trusting God. **“Tell the Israelites to go forward.”** And with that the mighty Egyptian army bearing down upon them and a deep deadly sea ahead of them, God intervened. Hear the Grand Story!

“The angel of God who was leading them ahead moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. 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.

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. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers...

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. 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...
 Thu the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.”^{iv}**

II

My friends, think back across your life: do you see ways and times the Lord parted the sea for you, opening you to something that seemed impossible? Have there been times when miraculously you squeezed as a camel through the eye of a needle? God may have parted the sea for you, but you had to step into it and go forward through it. As Psalm 77 ponders,

**“I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.
 Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters;
 Yet your footprints were unseen.
 You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. “^v**

I think how God raised up a rough self-taught poor back woodsman in Illinois, named Lincoln to lead and reunite our nation through its worst division over the seemly intractable issue of the slavery of black people brought kidnapped forcibly to these shores from Africa and bought and sold like cattle. In his early years Abraham Lincoln was something of a Deist and a

fatalist. Yet as he grew older, Lincoln came to believe that God is at work even as human beings are at work. He came to appreciate, as he said,

“That the Almighty does make use of human agencies and directly intervenes in human affairs, is one of the plainest statements of the Bible, I have had so many evidences of his direction, so many instances when I have been controlled by some other power than my own will, that I cannot doubt that this power comes from above.”

As Jon Meacham summarizes in his marvelous recent book, And There Was Light – Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle,

“Despite his doubts, he (Lincoln) demonstrated a belief in the role individuals could play in the world.”^{vi}

Martin Luther King Jr. said in a powerful message from this text in Exodus that he called, “The Defeat of Evil Upon the Seashore,” as tomorrow we come upon the celebration of Juneteenth, and the defeat of slavery, and later of segregation, in this nation, King said,

“Above all, we must be reminded anew that God is at work in his universe. He is not outside the world looking on with a sort of cold indifference. Here on the roads of life, he is striving in our striving. Like an ever-loving Father, he is working through history for the salvation of his children.

As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us. Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of man’s endless struggle against it, but because of God’s power to defeat it.”^{vii}

III

Friends I truly believe God is active and alive and at work and wants to be active and alive and at work in you. I truly believe God is active and alive and at work both powerfully and subtly, you know sometimes in our church. God leaves no footprint yet opens the sea!

We are in the midst of much transition. Change is here. And change is coming. A special capital drive “Building for the Future has begun. New staff has come, and more will come. A new pastor will arrive. New ways are emerging for communicating the unchanging Gospel message in a new century filled with instant global communication and now artificial intelligence. I want to tell you of one instance where we have seen a veritable miracle here at South Highland recently.

For some years our wonderful Child Development Center, which cares for up to 120 preschool children all day every weekday, has struggled financially. It is a difficult balance to pay 20+ teachers a fair living wage while offering families child-care at a reasonable tuition price that young families can afford. At our last Session and Deacons meeting, CDC board chair

Ramey Harrell announced to both boards the steadily increasing deficits they were experiencing. He reported that if some help did not come the CDC would run out of cash by this coming September and be forced to close. That night the Session unanimously passed a resolution guaranteeing to find a way to keep the CDC running for one more year, through 2024, while funding sources were pursued. Our Session did not know where the money would come from, but they prayed and acted on faith.

At our Coordinating Council two weeks ago, CDC board members asked to come and speak. They came, and we all assumed they came to ask for more money. And that is what they had been planning. However, just a few days before that meeting they received word that our Child Development Center has been awarded a special payment of Covid money from the state of Alabama, a payment coming in the amount of \$470,000! Thanks be to God! But note – more money from us, not the government, is needed to establish a significant endowment to care for these children.

God makes a way where there is no way. God takes a church like ours, filled with all sorts of people, suburbanites, urbanites, upper middle class, middle middle class, lower middle class, over housed people and homeless people, black, white yellow and brown, people like Kenny and Vivian Odii from Nigeria who have come here to do advanced PhD. university work and found a spiritual home among us. And Kenny congratulations upon being honored as best representing “All of the Core Values” of the PhD program in nursing at UAB God takes all of this and all of us, and mixes us together, and out of our stepping forward in faith opens up the sea. **“For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.”^{viii}**

**“God is working His purpose out As year succeeds to year...
God is working His purpose out, And the time is drawing near;
Nearer and nearer draws the time, The time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God As the waters cover the sea.”^{ix}**

Amen.

ⁱ Karl Barth, 1975, Dogmatics, 1975, p.389, quoted by Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace, p.171

ⁱⁱ Exodus 14:10

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^{iv} Exodus 14 selected verses
^v Psalm 77:11-12, 19-20
^{vi} Jon Meacham, And There Was Light – Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle, p.124
^{vii} Martin Luther King, Jr. The Defeat of Evil Upon the Seashore, p.83
^{viii} Matthew 19:26
^{ix} The Hymnbook, “God Is Working His Purpose Out, p. 500