“Through Heaven’s Eyes: Liberated Ones”

Exodus 14:19-31

The Rev. Katie Day

September 13, 2020

Our story this morning continues our series of the book of Exodus, and picks up a couple chapters after last week. Following the series of plagues unleashed on Egypt in order to get Pharaoh, the current cruel and oppressive king in a line of cruel and oppressive kings, to release the Hebrew people from slavery – to let them go, so they could be free to worship their God – the one true God – our God – and live into the promises made in the covenant with Abraham – following the series of 9 “plagues,” the 10th – the death of all firstborn Egyptians – was enough to get Pharaoh to release the people.

He called Moses and Moses’ brother Aaron to him in the middle of the night, saying, “Go, and worship the Lord, and the people were ready, and they went. 600,000 men, plus women and children, journeyed on foot from Egypt to Succoth, with livestock and herds of animals.

Chapter 13 of Exodus tells us that God led the people in a roundabout way to avoid war with the Philistines, and led them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

At this point, Pharaoh decided to go back on his word, and sent his army to reclaim the formerly enslaved Israelites. When the people saw the full military force of Egypt after them, they panicked, and accused Moses of bringing them into the wilderness to let them die – saying it would be better to remain enslaved in Egypt.

This is heartbreaking – for those of us who have read the book and know how it ends – to witness this community of God’s chosen and beloved people long for enslavement, long for a limited, oppressed existence…

not to get too metaphorical, but how often does that happen? How often are we on the brink of liberation only to look backward and not forward, and out of fear long to return to what we know. Fear would keep us bound, but God would set us free.

God saw what was happening. God instructed Moses to lift up his staff and stretch his hand over the sea, and the people could walk through on dry ground. But before that happened, the presence of God who had gone before the people, leading them in a pillar of cloud and fire, moved to the back of the crowd instead, serving as a buffer between the people of Israel and the Egyptian army.

This kept the Egyptians from being able to see and attack, but it also kept the Hebrew people from being able to see what they feared. The presence of God had guided them, and now would protect and reassure them by physically directing their gaze no longer to their past, but toward their future, toward a new beginning, together, as wide and open as the sea.

And Moses stretched out his hand, and the waters parted, and the people walked across the sea on dry land. It’s a fantastic story.

Except…the Egyptians. The Egyptian army, pursuing the Israelites, were slaughtered in the waters as the sea returned to its normal level. Almost immediately following the plague of the death of the firstborn. It’s too much.

The text tells us that God was expecting this to play out the way it did –

had even said a few verses before our passage: “I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.”

The story says that confused them, caused them to panic and the wheels of their chariots to stick, and they tried to turn back, but they were tossed into the sea. GOD tossed them into the sea. The text reads that Israel saw the dead bodies on the shore. This is a story of liberation, a story of triumph, victory over oppression and cruelty. And yes, the Egyptians under Pharaoh’s rule had done terrible things in the domination and enslavement and abuse of a people – God’s people.

But this last bit – about them being tossed into the sea and then the dead bodies on the shore, it’s terrible. It shows the lengths to which God goes to defend, protect, and liberate the people, to uphold the covenant,

and it makes me uncomfortable. Because… what if I’m an Egyptian?

How often have I stood in opposition to God’s plan and purpose, participating in unjust systems simply because it was easier than removing myself or taking a stand? How often have I denied justice, denied dignity to someone, and turned my back on the poor?

More times than I probably can ever know, let alone care to admit, or acknowledge, or relive in my memory. Because, I think that, most days, I am far closer to the fleshpots of Egypt than the unleavened bread eaten on the wilderness journey of the Israelites.

I am privileged, powerful, and live a very comfortable existence. And there is nothing inherently wrong with that, until I don’t turn aside sometimes to wonder who doesn’t have that privilege and power and comfort, until all of that begins to reframe my worldview, to reorient my norms to worshiping and protecting my relatively charmed life.

And in the midst of this pandemic, when my social world has shrunk down to my immediate family and I’ve grown used to the ease of ordering anything I can dream of online to be delivered by jet and truck to my door, and I have literally all the knowledge of the world at my fingertips in this device – how can this seemingly gifted, blessed safety and sanctuary be bad?

I mean, I’m doing my part – staying in, staying safe. Supporting independent fabric artists by purchasing handmade masks, tipping my grocery delivery shoppers really well… It is easy for me to turn off the news, put down the phone, ignore the cries of those who suffer. It’s not like I’m actively pursuing someone in a chariot, right? I always have a good excuse. That’s how I know…I’m an Egyptian.

Do I deserve to be tossed into the sea? Surely not. But that’s how the story goes. That’s how God’s stories go. The things that stand in opposition to God’s plan: all that which actively opposes justice, compassion, mercy, equity, will eventually be destroyed.

And that is good news! I promise. It is good news.

Pastor Lane Alderman, beloved former pastor of Roswell Presbyterian Church wrote before his death –

“This passage is not just about the defeat of the Egyptians. It begins and ends with the victory of God’s people….By the power of God, new life has begun for the people of God….Come join! Walk away from the armies of this world that cling to the power and the pleasure and the goods of this world.” (*Feasting on the Word Additional Readings, Year A*, 2011)

We are children of the covenant now – grafted onto God’s family tree along with so many other misfits, outcasts, and sinners. The ultimate victory of God’s people is our victory, and God is always and ever about liberation, even when we cannot or will not see the chains that bind us. When we try to look at our lives through heaven’s eyes, we can see the whole picture, the bad and the good, and the hope for our redemption.

A couple weeks ago, Jennie told us that we don’t get a burning bush. God doesn’t call to everyone the way that Moses was called. Well, you don’t get a parting of the Red Sea, either. God doesn’t liberate us all in such dramatic fashion.

But we are set free – free from sin, free from selfishness, free from the status quo, and we are set free *for* God’s own grand purpose, to participate in justice, compassion, mercy, equity, so that we might join in the good news of liberation, even as we witness the pain and loss of this world, as the Israelites did, reaching the other side of the sea.

God’s ways are not our ways. The Hebrew people are set free, according to the stories, only to wander in the wilderness for years and years before coming to the promised land, flowing with milk and honey. We’ll hear some of those wandering stories next Sunday. The people were free, given new life, but a homeless, meandering life on the road. God’s ways are not our ways.

When God called Moses to this work of liberation from the burning bush, Moses had to turn aside to see it, to hear it. But here in this part of the story, God saw the people’s need for liberation as so dire that they had to be actively turned toward it – shielded and walled off from their past in order to move forward.

We are much the same today, I believe – we know our past by heart, we keep practicing it, narrating and storytelling in all the ways, from the holidays we celebrate to the resentments we hold dear – and God even now is physically re-orienting us to our liberation, even as it doesn’t appear as obviously in front of us as God sees it.

May we experience liberation in getting to see ourselves in some revealing moments in all our “Egyptian-ness,” and may we feel not shame, but relief. May God’s constant presence protect and reassure us as we are guided into an unknown future. And may we ever practice that sacred curiosity that was Moses’ call and is ours, as well, for what else or who else we are called to be.