

“God’s Sovereignty”

We have been looking at the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs in Genesis and Exodus. Throughout our studies we have seen how God uses certain people in his plan of salvation. God is active but so are his human agents. These agents have to make choices. They also have to take actions to further God’s justice.

Today, in our passages from Exodus 14 and 15, the focus is more on God’s sovereignty and power. The Israelites have left Egypt but Pharaoh has changed his mind and acts with new resolve to bring them back to Egypt. Pharaoh takes his army to bring back his slave labor. He wants to display power.

But what we learn from the story today is God’s power. Yahweh knows well before the events themselves that one more crisis with Pharaoh is still to be faced. Yahweh actually hardens Pharaoh’s heart so that God will get glory over Pharaoh. Pharaoh really wanted to do what he did. But God hardened his heart so that his resolve would be even stronger. What we need to appreciate is that God is always in control of this encounter with Pharaoh. God is sovereign.

The Israelites are in need of God’s power. They are completely vulnerable and without resources. They are going up against the most powerful army on earth. Moses alone is not enough. They complain against Moses, which evokes a political

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crisis, a crisis of leadership. They attack Moses for what they see as his unwise, dangerous, miscalculated, stupid initiative. Though they were in bondage in Egypt, they now wonder if they would be better to have stayed in Egypt and serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness. They are not showing faith in Yahweh. They are not acknowledging Yahweh's power. In their complaints, they utter the name Egypt five times. The name of Yahweh is absent.

We may want to criticize the Israelites for their complaints and lack of faith. But do we do the same thing at times? When things are not going the way we want, do we lose focus on God? During the course of this COVID-19 pandemic, have we become frustrated and wondered if God is with us? Do we wonder if God is really protecting us? Have we kept the faith?

The Israelites had revolted against their bondage and left Egypt. Emancipation was attractive but now they faced hardship. It is difficult to sustain a revolution, because one loses all the benefits of the old system well before there are tangible benefits from what is promised. Do we wonder at times if it was worth giving up our former life before we became Christians? Do we wonder if we should really bother living as a disciple of Christ? The Christian life does not seem to do away with hardship. Are we too impatient to wait on God's power and rewards? The world we are living in today tests our patience.

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Maybe part of the problem is we do not appreciate our freedom. As pointed out by Rev. Christine Chakoian, pastor of Westwood Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, you cannot know what freedom is until you have been enslaved. It is only when we read this story of God saving the Israelites that we begin to appreciate the power of this experience of liberation. “Before you can know what kindness really is” writes Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem, “Kindness,” “you must lose things.” Things like dreams of the future, achievements of the present, accumulated savings stashed away in storage barns as if they protected us (Luke 12:28). “All this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be.”

We who come to Latimer church have not actually been physically enslaved. But before our salvation in Christ, we were enslaved to sin and the ways of the world. Maybe we need to look at life through the eyes of the actual oppressed so that we can appreciate the power of the experience of liberation. We should reflect on who would protect us if we did not have the security of our savings accounts or our pension plans. Maybe that would strengthen our faith in God’s power and sovereignty.

Moses has to respond to the complainers. He says, “Do not fear, stand, see.” Moses refuses to accept the despairing picture of reality offered by the Israelites. His self-defense is staked on the claim that Yahweh is indeed a live, active decisive

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character in the crisis. He challenges the people to recognize the presence, power and fidelity of Yahweh. Moses asserts that Yahweh will work a deliverance.

Yahweh alone will deliver. Israel does not need to act. There is no human agent.

Israel will only witness the battle. Egypt will be removed forever.

God rebukes the Israelites, whose complaints exhibit a lack of faith in him and give credit to the reality of Egypt and not to the reality of Yahweh. The people are required to “move on” and “go forward” and not just wallow in their pity. In the end, it is not economic might, authoritarian power, or military force that thwarts Pharaoh’s aggression. Instead, God sends an angel to lead the Israelites and sets a pillar of cloud behind them, lighting up the night. God drives the sea apart, the waters forming a wall on either side for their safe passage, the ground dry beneath their feet.

This miracle of God is a replication of the coming of dry land in the creation story. In this instance, God does a deed as powerful, original and life giving as the newness of creation. The Egyptians are caught in the power of the waters. They foolishly had followed the Israelites into the dry land. By the time it is too late, in Exodus 14:25, the Egyptians are made to confess what the Israelites doubted. Yahweh is sovereign.

Yahweh performs a second wonder, the return of the waters to their proper course. The mighty forces of Egypt are swept into the sea. Yahweh unleashes the power of chaos. Military power is no match for the power of God. Pharaoh and his army are helpless and are destroyed. The Israelites look on in astonishment at dead Egyptians. Dead are soldiers, horses, power, arrogance.

The Israelites are driven to two conclusions, First, they fear Yahweh. They are to fear no other, no other gods. They know Yahweh will do for them what they cannot do for themselves. Second, the Israelites believe in Yahweh and Moses. The ones who were fearful and doubting have come to have faith and confidence in the leadership of Moses. It is important that fear of Yahweh is linked to the concrete specific political leadership of Moses.

The story of the stunning victory of Yahweh over the great power of Egypt is told in order to summon Israel to faith. We must maintain our faith in God even when things are not going well, even when the world around us seems crazy and unpredictable. In the book of Romans, Paul writes to Christians who are struggling, doubting. In encouraging them, he writes in Romans 8:37 that we are more than conquerors, that those who love God will win a sweeping victory. Paul would not have had this triumphant battle metaphor if it had not been for the Exodus narrative we read today in Exodus 14.

What is the Israelites' response after they see the defeated Egyptian army?

We read the songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15. Words and ritual alone cannot contain it; awe rises in song. With tambourine and dance, they worship. They now have a faith that is a trust against the evidence, against the odds, where Yahweh governs.

Yahweh's power is the only explanation for what happened to the Israelites. The story cannot be explained by human strategy or by any natural phenomenon. Some like to try to explain the crossing of the sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army without a miracle, but that just does not work. If they were able to cross the sea because it was only a foot deep, how did that destroy the army? Even if the sea was only a foot deep, how did it become dry? One just has to accept that this narrative is a miracle of God, to show the sovereignty of God. Yahweh brings both life and death. The story is a witness to the power of Yahweh and the consequent summons to faith.

Our faith should be strong enough that we do not need God to prove his presence through miracles. But there are times we need miracles to show God's power. We need this strong faith today. With a pandemic that has brought uncertainty, disruption, illness, and death, we need to know God is with us. With

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the need for justice to come to our country and to all those who live in it, we need to know God is with us.

Rev. Chakoian reflects back on the songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15. I close with what she writes: “For all of us whose people who have never been in the land of slavery looking toward freedom, this song may be taking on a new meaning. God is on the side of the oppressed, not just in ancient Egypt but in modern America. It is still in God’s power to part the waters, to throw the horse and rider into the sea, to lead the slave to walk through the waters, free. It is time for us to hear the song of Moses and Miriam in a new way---for it is the hoped-for-song of every people who have been oppressed, enslaved, demeaned. It is the long of every soul whose future has no hope.” In the Exodus story, we have such a story to tell and remember of God’s power and protection.