

Exodus 14:5-14, 21-29; Luke 22:7-20

There is so much in today's story! SO MUCH. So much good stuff that I am taking the ill-advised step of trying to name it all in one sermon, instead of focusing on a single feature. And I do have a reason for this decision, which we'll get to. But first let's launch into the story.

The ten plagues have happened. Egypt has been devastated by the deaths of the first-born males in every family. Well, the *Egyptian people* have been devastated. The Pharaoh, who was startled enough to relent and let the Israelites go, has snapped back to imperial mode and has sent the army to fetch them back. Pharaohs gonna pharaoh, it's the nature of the beast. Power and wealth come first. So he sends the army out because he can. And I have to think of all the Russian men who suddenly find themselves conscripted into the Ukrainian war, pretty much to be cannon fodder in a war they don't care about, who are trying to escape. That's how I imagine the Egyptian army. It's not like Pharaoh's doing this for the people of Egypt.

The Hebrew people respond as victims, not rebels. They'd been slaves for 400 years, however many generations that is. And hope is a tricky thing. If you dare to hope, you risk disappointment. And when you *are* disappointed because your hope wasn't fulfilled, you feel doubly defeated, and stupid for having hoped. Resisting hope is a way of surviving, in a way—avoiding the additional pain of disappointment. So as they see Pharaoh's army approaching and see that they are trapped between the army and the sea, *they* snap back to loser mode and lash out at Moses for having raised their stupid hopes. "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?" Who among us has not felt like a fool to have tried something out of our

comfort zone, something costly and risky, only to have it not pan out? What an idiot I was to think I could pull that off, we tell ourselves.

But Moses says to these people who are caught between an approaching army and the deep blue sea, “Stand firm,” which is kind of funny because where would they go, “and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today.” He can’t explain it, and maybe he doesn’t know himself what’s going to happen, but just because we can’t imagine how God could salvage a situation doesn’t mean that God can’t imagine it and do it.

If you’re keeping track, at this point we have three important story elements, each of which could be its own sermon: empires being empires (notice how often the chariots are mentioned in this text); people feeling stupid for having hoped they could have a life, and Moses counting on God to do something unimaginable to salvage a doomed situation. But wait, there’s more.

God drives the sea back—not the way Charlton Heston did it, but by a strong east wind that blew all night and exposed some dry land. In the Ancient Near East, you’re not a god unless you can control the waters. Mastery of the forces of chaos is Job One for a god. So the Israelites’ God is doing that thing, but in a way that is open to interpretation. The Egyptian army with their sophisticated military technology are apparently initially misled by the very natural way that the waters part. The wind blew all night and exposed some land, that doesn’t signal “god” to them. They go forward, and of course like dinguses they get their chariot wheels stuck in the mud because they’re big and heavy. The Israelites walk across successfully on foot. God *does* control the waters and the forces of chaos, but you have to get down off your chariot

to see the hand of God at work. It turns out, too late for the hapless soldiers, that the empire is not the power player in this situation.

The people of Israel pass through the waters, and it is like a birth, the rebirth of the descendants of Abraham who, over 400 years of slavery, had almost lost their primary identity. They didn't perform this miracle, God did—but they did have to walk forward into the unreliable Red Sea. Somewhere in the midrash, I'm told, there's the story of the first Israelite to step forward. He walked into the water, which in this story hadn't yet parted, and got all the way up to his chin before it started parting. And the water only parted as the people moved forward. This midrash highlights how little we can know and plan, and how dumb we may have to look in order to participate in miracles.

This story is core to Judaism. God is always saying to them, "I am the God who brought you out of Egypt." And throughout the Bible Jews are urged to remember the sabbath, to be scrupulous to observe the sabbath. Sometimes it's because of the first creation story, in which God worked for six days and rested on the seventh, establishing a pattern for all creatures. But oftentimes Jews are urged to observe the sabbath "because God brought you out of slavery in Egypt." And I would suggest that sabbath is partly a remembrance or re-enactment of their utter helplessness and hopelessness, pinned between the army and the sea, with no reasonable hope of survival, but only the unreasonable hope that God will do what they cannot even imagine.

The sabbath is a day on which you should rest, recreate, and abstain from all activities of empire. In that sliver of freedom between Friday and Saturday at sundown, you do not plan and solve problems. You dream and imagine. As Rabbi Amy Robertson says,

So while so much of our life is oriented toward predicting what will happen and being practical, there has to be space in our lives to not think practically. Just imagine the dreamiest dreams of what the world could be and have no idea how it could happen. Because if we can't dream of world we want to see, it's harder to move things in that direction. Always thinking about logistics limits our possibilities.¹

In her interpretation, being reminded to observe the sabbath because God delivered the people out of Egypt means that on the sabbath you have permission—maybe the mandate—to dream of possibilities like the possibility of walking safely out of Egypt. If God could do that, what else could God do with our participation?

This is a core story, I said, to Judaism. It is a big part of identity, to be the people whom God brought out of slavery in Egypt, with all the valence I've tried to lift out. And it's a core story for us, because Judaism gave birth to Christianity, so it's our sacred history as well, and our reason to observe sabbath. But we have another core story, and that is the story of the last supper. It, too, has many valences, many aspects that each deserve their own meditation. But the one I want to lift out here is the impossibility of the situation, the absolute dearth of any reason to hope. A dreadful, violent death awaits Jesus and anybody identified with him, at the hands of a violent empire, and it's really too late to stop that train. But in that very supper, which we celebrate with Christians around the world today, Jesus embeds the absurd hope that God will provide a future. The bread he breaks is his body, and broken bodies are what we all get, one way or another, in trying to follow his Way of servanthood and compassion. But the cup is the new covenant in his blood, like the rainbow was to Noah, evidence that beyond brokenness is a wholeness we cannot even wrap our minds around.

And so we commit ourselves once again to being fools, foolish to hope and willing to walk forward on a Way we can't see much of yet, because that's who we are, and that's who our God is. As Mary Oliver wrote in "The World I Live In,"

I have refused to live
locked in the orderly house of
reasons and proofs.
The world I live in and believe in
is wider than that. And anyway,
what's wrong with Maybe?
You wouldn't believe what once or
twice I have seen. I'll just
tell you this:
only if there are angels in your head will you
ever, possibly, see one.

Let us pray:

God beyond all knowing, we pray that you will keep our hope alive, and that after all our murmuring and even panic, we will know ourselves well enough to behave as your people, stepping forward in faith and hope. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-404-crossing-the-red-sea-exodus-145-14-21-29/>