

Sermon: By a Strong East Wind

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 14:15-18 (KJV); 19-31 (NRSV); Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21**

When last we met, we spoke about Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery in Egypt, a story that ended well when Joseph became an advisor to Pharaoh, foresaw a famine, and saved Egypt and his family.

At the very end of the story, he reconciled with his brothers, saying, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." And then there came a time when a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. This Pharaoh said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land" (Exodus 1:8-10).

Egypt went to war quite often, so this was a valid concern, and so Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites.

If you have ever watched the film, *The Ten Commandments*, you know how the story goes. Today, we are at the point when a new Pharaoh is in hot pursuit of the now-free Israelites, as Pharaoh and his officials have changed their minds, saying, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" (14:5)

The exodus from Egypt was *the* defining event in Israel's history, and it still inspires people to escape bad situations in search of freedom.

In American history, the Pilgrims understood their leaving Europe for America as a new exodus. Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson wanted Moses leading the Israelites through the parted sea depicted on the great seal of the United States. Black Americans saw themselves reliving the Israelite experience when for centuries they had hoped for freedom and then had to fight for their civil rights after they achieved it. And in the 1970s and 1980s, the mass migration of Jews from the Soviet Union became known as Operation Exodus.¹ Hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews found new life elsewhere.

God inspires people to think up for themselves some ingenious way to outwit their Pharaoh. In medieval England, King Canute demonstrated to his flattering courtiers ‘the weak and frivolous power of a king’ by proving that only God can control nature.²

In the days leading up to D-Day, the sixth of June 1944, confidence was high that God would lead the invading army to victory. Yet, the day before, the worst June gale in forty years blew through the Channel, swamping boats, destroying essential equipment, made the infantry seasick, and cast doubt on the wisdom of the whole project. Some religious people felt that it was better to pay that price than to have it said that it was not a fair fight because God interfered on the side of the Allies.³

Splitting the sea survives as a metaphor of the faith we have that God stands on the side of the unjustly oppressed, and that God’s help can seem mighty mysterious.

So, let’s turn back to our readings.

We can ‘trace distinctive styles and theological notions’ throughout the Bible, most clearly in Genesis and Exodus. Exodus especially was built up over time, with many editors, all of whom had their own points of view and interests.

There are multiple examples in both books, but here today, we heard that both the angel of God and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of the Israelite army and went behind them, to separate the Egyptians from the Israelites overnight. These are two different manifestations of God and they are both included in the story.

More than that, ‘the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night.’ Bible scholars would call this a corrupted text, meaning it’s incomplete or garbled. ‘It lit up the night’ could mean, ‘and the night passed,’ or, ‘it cast a spell upon the night.’ The bottom line is, it was really, really dark, so that neither group could see the other.

Exodus gives us many passages where things can be explained by natural causes but then God amps it up, just to show who is in charge. The nine plagues, for one. Today, we hear that ‘the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind’ (14:21). It’s interesting to know that the wind came from the east; it’s perfectly natural. But then God ‘turned the sea into dry land.’ Not natural. God is doing these things. If you had to ask.

Just as King Canute knew that there are things that only God can do, so too did the Egyptians and Israelites learn and know that God is LORD over all.

Two victory hymns follow the account of Israel's deliverance, one by Moses, which was probably not written until Solomon's time, and the other sung by Miriam, Moses' and Aaron's sister. Her song is ancient and is one of the original elements that formed the core of the escape story. It's an expression of faith in God just as the entire exodus event is an expression of Israel's faith. And Israel's faith rests on a divine and historic revelation.

For some reason, the lectionary snips out verses 12 to 19, part of Moses' hymn, which is unfortunate, because we would have learned that all the neighboring peoples – the Canaanites, the Moabites, the Edomites – trembled and were dismayed when they heard what God had done.

God had and *still has* a plan and a purpose for doing these things. God does not rejoice in the deaths of the wicked. God is moral, and we can weep for the dead Egyptians. We should also know that Egypt remained Egypt. This story is about God's victory, not Egypt's defeat. It's not about Moses or Miriam. God is the most important and most central character in both passages, which follow one after the other in Scripture.

Exodus' role in the Hebrew Bible is akin to the role the Gospels play in the New Testament – it focuses on a historic event on which Israel was built just as the Gospels are based on the historic event of Jesus' ministry on which the church was built. And here we are today.

The church is held together by our common life, values, and practices. We may hold different opinions on some things, but the church is also held together by the remembrance and celebration of what we call the Last Supper.

Through these historic events, through God's revelation, both Jews and Christians gain insight into life's meaning. It was God's will that these things should happen.

Ultimately, Exodus, like the Gospels, is a faith story. When we read Scripture, it should be in the back of our mind that these are great stories, but they mean something; they're trying to tell us something. It's hard work to break them down and interpret what they mean for us, but by doing that work, we remember, and it becomes our story too.

Amen.

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¹ Tigay, Jeffrey H. "Exodus." *The Jewish Study Bible*, by Adele Berlin et al., Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 107.

² J. Edgar Park. "Exodus." *The Interpreter's Bible (Vol 1) the Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1952, p. 936.

³ Ibid.

