

Sermon: Who Is Like You, O LORD?

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 14:19-31; Exodus 15:1-11, 20-21**

Tradition is a powerful thing, and because of tradition, we can hear today's readings in a new way, after which, we'll ask some incriminating questions. It was tradition among the Israelites for the women to celebrate military victories when the army came home. For example, in 1 Samuel 18, long after the Exodus, we read:

As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they made merry...

That's the tradition. Today's readings are another case of the lectionary telling us only what it thinks we ought to know. First, we heard the narrative of how God saved the day and delivered the Israelites up out of Egypt, which is undeniably a defining moment for the Jewish people. Then we heard some poetry celebrating the event, the so-called Song of Moses followed by the Song of Miriam. But knowing the tradition, that seems upside-down and backwards. Miriam's song should come first, according to tradition.

What we didn't read was verse 19, immediately before Miriam took a tambourine in her hand. It goes like this:

When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. (Exodus 15:19)

This verse takes us out of the poem and back to the narrative, a move which tells us that Miriam's action follows chronologically from the end of the narrative portion in chapter 14. *Then* the prophet Miriam sang to *them*, meaning Moses and the Israelites, all of the Israelites, who then sang this song to the Lord.

And it's really just one song, the Song of the Sea, *Shirat Hayam*, led by Miriam and the women who invite the men to join them. That's the tradition.

We can't explain everything about this story, which is a mix of the wonderful and the ordinary, of pillars of fire and cloud and chariot wheels getting stuck in the mud. What we are left with is the Biblical witness to God's majestic splendor and awesomeness.

Yet we have questions. What would it have meant to the Israelites if God hadn't delivered them up from Egypt? And, what does deliverance mean when the result is so many dead Egyptians on the beach? I'm sure it was only business with Pharaoh; he was warned often enough. If God is for you, that's one thing; but otherwise...

Notice it is the Israelites and not God who exult at this victory over Pharaoh, and they have the good sense to know that it was God's victory, not their own. And it was hundreds of years in the making, well before Moses, Aaron, and Miriam arrived at this moment, going back to when God said to Abram, 'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.' (Genesis 12:2)

Eventually, it all goes wrong when 'a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph,' a descendant of Abraham. It's not until Moses encounters God in the burning bush that we get a sense of *why* God delivers the Israelites out of Egypt in the first place, and it's not to pass judgement over the Egyptians. The goal is simply to rescue the people from oppression, and to do it, God and Moses make a deal. The Lord said to Moses, in chapter 3:

"I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" [God] said, "*I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: **when** you have brought the people out of Egypt, **you shall worship God on this mountain.***" (Exodus 3:10-11)

That's the deal: God will bring the people up out of Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey, and they will, in turn, worship God. Simple. What's next for the Israelites? Forty years in the wilderness, to learn how to be God's people and a nation.

Who does the fighting in this story? God and God alone. This is a story about God and about how God acts in our lives. God wills freedom for us. God wills freedom for those who suffer, for those who are oppressed, and for those who cry out to God for deliverance.

This story of the Israelites' deliverance is their story, not ours. What does God's deliverance mean for us? Are there pre-requisites before anyone can expect to be delivered from oppression? God knows the Israelites weren't perfect, and neither are we. How do you qualify; how do you even get on the Deliverance List?

It's hard for us to know because we, as a people, as a nation, are hardly oppressed. But what about a place like Syria? The people there have been at war with their government since 2011. If you search for 'Syrian Civil War' on the internet, you'll find that it has its own Wikipedia page. Over 400,000 people have died in the conflict, five million have fled the country, and almost seven million have been displaced within the country. When will deliverance occur for the people of Syria, and in what way?

If the Bible gives us examples of God's saving actions through history, and I believe it does and that God does, from Creation all the way up to right now, is it ever as dramatic or as noticeable as it was for Moses, Aaron, and Miriam?

'Who is like you, O LORD?' Who indeed? Certainly, no human among us today. This is a God who bears watching, a god to fear, in every sense, and one to believe in, one to rely on.

Maybe we need to ask ourselves what kind of deliverance it is that we are seeking. What kind of deal would we make if God could deliver us – or our neighbor – up from poverty or addiction, or save us from another night out on the street?

God wills freedom for us. Freedom is to know and fulfill God's law, as Jesus taught us to do by his own example. God sets us free to live in obedience to God, and obedience to God brings peace and fellowship to us all as we build the kingdom of heaven right here, right now. And that is a tradition and a victory worth celebrating.

Amen.