

September 17, 2023

# The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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**Exodus 14:19-31**



In a completely unscientific, 20-second Google search of the phrase “Old Testament God,” conducted by yours truly earlier this week, I was somewhat disheartened but not really surprised to find that three of the top five search results were titled, in order: #1: “Old Testament God is scary”; #2: “Old Testament God and wrath”; and #5: “Old Testament God and evil.” Again, this does not scientifically prove much of anything, but it does reflect a certain dominant belief that the Old Testament God is basically not the kind of deity you want to hang out with: this God is the god who’s obsessed with sin and punishment and wrath and destroying evildoers. Whereas, by contrast, we tend to assume that the “New Testament God”—conveyed through Jesus Christ—is the one whose team we want to be on: on the New Testament side, it’s all about mercy and love and compassion and forgiveness...or so our assumptions generally go... It’s very understandable why we tend to hold this bifurcated view of the God of the Bible: passages like our first reading this morning from Exodus, where God is drowning Egyptians in the Red Sea, make it very easy to associate this deity with punishment, to see this Old Testament God as an angry, even vengeful, figure whom we would be best advised to simply avoid.

But the whole notion that God changed at some point between the Old and New Testaments, that God became more compassionate, loving, and merciful through the ministry of Jesus is a very problematic and flawed idea. The premise of this idea, that God’s character in one part of the Bible is different from that character or nature in other parts, is rooted, I believe, in the assumption that the biblical writers are like newspaper reporters, faithfully recording “what God is like” in as objective a manner—with as little personal bias—as possible. But in trying to maintain an “objective” Bible—a Bible that simply reports what God is like full-stop, without influence from authors’ agendas—we end up with a decontextualized Bible, biblical stories taken out of context which we then struggle to make sense of because we are unfamiliar with the stories’ background. An excellent case in point is today’s troubling passage from Exodus.

If this text were written by objective reporters, just reporting without embellishment what God did on the shores of the Red Sea one day thousands of years ago, we would be right to fear this God, to want to put some distance between ourselves and this dangerous, destructive God, maybe to dislike, even to hate this God, a god who saves one group of people by drowning the other group—not to mention all their horses—without a smidgen of mercy or compassion.

But thankfully the writers of Exodus are not objective reporters. They were Jewish individuals who were suffering terribly under the Babylonian Empire about 2500 years ago. Many had been forcibly exiled from their homes in Israel to the mighty city of Babylon. Many saw their loved ones die along the 500-mile forced march from Jerusalem to Babylon. Many, probably most, felt terror-stricken by their utter vulnerability as foreign captives in the conqueror’s land. They feared for their lives and for the safety of their family and friends, bonds that had been suddenly and

violently ripped apart.

And so, utterly trapped, vulnerable, and afraid, they began to write down stories rooted in their one last hope: the hope that their God, the God of Israel, the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saw them in the midst of their exile march, that this God knew their suffering, that God cared about what they were going through, that God's power and compassion would ultimately win out, rescuing the Israelites from the hands of their oppressors.

Reading between the lines and with this context in mind, it becomes easier to see how the writers of our passage this morning are not objectively reporting the death of thousands of Egyptians literally drowned by God in the Red Sea. Instead, our text's writers are using Egypt and its mighty army as a thinly veiled symbol for their current oppressors, the Babylonians, under whom they are presently suffering.

Keeping this symbolism in mind, what are our writers doing and saying? Thankfully, they are not reporting to us that God, objectively, is a bloodthirsty, vengeful deity who delights in drowning to death anyone who gets in God's way. Rather, they're saying that despite exile, despite tremendous suffering, despite death itself, there's still reason for hope.

Now, admittedly, the writers represent this hope in a very graphic way by showing the Egyptians (symbol for the Babylonians) crushed by Red Sea waves. But the point is not how the Egyptians perish: those gory details are just part of the ancient storyteller's craft. Instead, the story's point is that no matter how bad it gets, no matter if you are trapped on the one hand by the depths of the Red Sea and on the other by the fearsome army of Pharaoh, there is still reason for hope.

And why? Because the God of the Bible, the God of both the New Testament and the Old Testament, is not the scary, abusive deity that an initial impression from today's reading might convey. Instead, as characters throughout the entire Bible testify, from the Egyptian slave Hagar in Genesis to the visionary author of Revelation, the God of the Bible is a God who sees, a God who recognizes and knows those who are suffering, a God who cares especially for the vulnerable, the oppressed, the weak, the forgotten. And moreover, this is a God of miracles: a God who not only knows the plight of the pitiful but then, when all hope seems lost, miraculously makes a way where there is no way, piling up the waters of the Red Sea to create a path of dry ground so that the vulnerable Israelites might ultimately walk to safety.

About fifteen years ago, as a way to earn some side money, I took a job at a nursing home on the outskirts of Chicago. Every shift I would make my rounds through a particular wing of the facility, helping residents take their medicine, get to the dining room for meals, do laundry, find lost hearing aids, and other caretaking tasks. Over the course of my time there I got to know one lady in particular, a lady one hundred years old whom I'll call Jane. Jane possessed an upbeat steady glow; never too high or too low, Jane walked a very even-keeled path, although her

calmness was by no means dry or lifeless—quite the opposite, her inner peace was enveloped by a radiant warmth, a profound joy springing up from the depths of her soul. One day Jane and another resident, named Alice, were talking together in a common area outside their rooms, and my ears perked up when I heard Jane suddenly say, “I’m 100, and I pray each day that God will take me soon.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing: pray for your own death? Even at 100, I thought, how could anyone—short of serious depression—actually prefer death over life. Alice, Jane’s friend, apparently shared my sense of shock, as she replied, “Oh Jane, don’t say that!” But Jane interjected, “No, really, it’s okay. I’ve lived a long time, and I’ve endured a lot of family tragedies. And God has always made a way. I don’t fear death, because I’ve seen God make ways where there was no way all throughout my life. God’s not going to stop helping me out now.”

“I’ve seen God make ways where there was no way all throughout my life.” That is quite a testimony, quite a solid rock to stand on when stress or suffering or sickness or even death itself suddenly block our path, making any way forward seem utterly impossible.

Where are you, like the ancient Israelites, caught between an army and a sea right now? Where are you, or someone you love, stuck in an impossible situation? Where in your life do you need someone, anyone to make a way where there currently is no way?

Good thing for us, God—the God of both the New Testament and the Old—is precisely in the business of making miraculous ways, of making the impossible possible, of seeing with eyes of love and compassion and concern where we are stuck and in need of a divine helping hand.

When I was much younger, I remember hearing a Gospel song entitled “God Will Make a Way.” Maybe some of you know it. The lyrics go like this: “God will make a way, where there seems to be no way. He works in ways we cannot see. He will make a way for me. Jesus, be my guide; hold me closely to your side. With love and faith for each new day, he will make a way. He will make a way.”

This hope—that God will make a way, especially in impossible situations where there seems to be no way—is precisely the message our OT authors are trying to get across to their comrades in exile in Babylon. Far from the idea that God is scary and bloodthirsty, the point of this morning’s text is actually that God is quite the opposite: caring, compassionate, and miraculously helpful.

So in the week to come, may we face our impossible situations by turning in faith to our loving and compassionate God, the One who makes all things possible, the One who makes a way where there seems to be none at all. Amen.