

A Lectionary 24 9.17.23

Exodus 14:19-31; 15:1b-11, 20-21

Focus Statement: God makes a way out of no way

You might have noticed that our “psalm” this morning was not from the Psalms, it was from Exodus. Here’s a couple of fun bible / lectionary facts for you before we begin. First, psalm just means song. There is a book of Psalms, which is actually a hymn book buried in the middle of the Bible. Not unlike the pile of hymnals sitting over there on top of the speaker that the choir uses, except over time we’ve lost the music for the ones in the Bible. The word “psalm” is from the Greek “psallein,” which literally means “to pluck or play a stringed musical instrument.” The psalms are just the words to the music. So a psalm doesn’t have to come from the book of Psalms, it’s just the most likely place to find them. But there are other songs in the Bible, like this song of Moses and Miriam, or Hannah’s song in First Samuel, or the one we probably know the best, the Magnificat, Mary’s song in Luke about casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly.

There’s your bible fact, here’s your lectionary fact. Every Sunday we read an Old Testament reading, or a reading from the book of Acts if it’s Easter. That reading tells us the history of God’s people, that’s its purpose. Then, we read a psalm. What you may not have known is the psalm is chosen as a reflection of that first reading. That’s why we read it together responsively, it is the congregational response to the word of God we just heard.

That’s what makes this psalm from Exodus the perfect choice as a psalm following this morning’s first reading, it is the Israelites communal response to the miraculous event they had just experience, the first recorded song of praise to God. When we read this psalm

responsively, we were following in the footsteps of the ancient Israelites, having witnessed an act of God so powerful that the only possible response is praise.

Let's talk about that event because there's more to it than Charleston Heston. After the Passover, Pharaoh decided the Israelites really were too much trouble to keep and he agreed to let Moses lead them away. But they didn't get too far from Egypt before he started to have second thoughts about this plan and sent his armies after them to bring them back. Seeing the approaching Egyptian army led to the Israelites first, certainly not last but probably most appropriate time of questioning Moses's leadership. Verse ten speaks of the Israelites great fear, and verse eleven reads, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" Over-dramatic, sure, but a valid point. A much more justified complaint than a few weeks from now where they'll be grumping about the lack of cucumbers in the wilderness. A ragtag bunch of families, children, seniors, malnourished and exhausted could certainly not have defended themselves against or run from the incredible fighting force that was the Egyptian army, the most powerful military in the ancient world. Few things could have been worse than the conditions they faced in Egypt, but being slaughtered in the middle of nowhere was one of them. But Moses replied, this is verse thirteen, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today." Which, as I mentioned, is a bold claim! This is Ukrainian grandmas handing sunflower seeds to Russian soldiers, "to carry in your pockets so that something good will grow from your dead bodies," this is a statement that sounds more like bravado than an actual possibility.

Our reading tells of the results of Moses's bold proclamation to not fear. Because the impossible happened. Moses stretched out his hands and the waters of the sea parted on either side, and the Israelites walked across the sea on dry ground. The question when there's any miracle story, did this really happen? Or is this just a metaphor? Well, I'll tell you what. Up until Tuesday, I would have hemmed and hawed and told you it was a metaphor. But I was talking about the text on Tuesday with a colleague who mentioned he'd always thought of it as metaphor until several years ago when he saw picture of a storm surge in Florida that sucked all the water out of the bay, so that boats were lying on their sides next to their anchors, and people were jumping off the piers and walking along the dry ground of the sea bed, and it forced him to reconsider his whole reading. And if Jonathan is reconsidering his reading, I have too as well. So, is it fact or metaphor? I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. At the end of the day, like the burning bush, what did or did not happen doesn't really matter. What matters is what the story is telling us about the nature of God. When the Israelites were stuck in an absolutely impossible situation where the odds were entirely against them, their enemies were pursuing them, and they had absolutely no way out, theirs was/is a God who not only parted the seas for them so that they could walk across to safety, but then took an active hand in destroying the Egyptian army so that they could never be pursued again. The key actor in this drama is God. The translation introduced some pronouns to make read smoother in English, but in Hebrew there are no pronouns. The text reads "God clogged their chariot wheels... God tossed the Egyptians into the sea...God saved Israel on that day." This saving work is God's work and no other, God is the one who led the Israelites from slavery to liberation, who is their God and no other.

And when “Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians... [they] feared the Lord.” This is such an interesting and important shift right here. Remember what fear of the Lord means in scripture. It doesn’t mean fear like a scary movie or even like existential dread. I think the example I’ve used before is that fear of the Lord is like standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, watching a storm roll across Lake Superior, or staring up into the vast expanse of the Milky Way. The kind of fear/awe you feel when you come face to face with our place in the universe, that God is so big and we are so small. That fear can and will drive out all other fear. Because what even is a marauding army in the face of the one whose very voice separated the ocean from the dry land and the set the stars in their courses.

And in response, they sang. They sang of God’s wonder, of God’s strength, of God’s might. They sang of a God who fulfilled the promise made to their ancestors, who never left them though they felt abandoned, and who led them through to the other side.

And here’s the thing I’ve always loved the most about this song, the reason that this song is one I hold near to my heart, a song that is the story of how I try to move through the trials and challenges of my life. They are still in the wilderness when they sing this song. Yes they’re on the far side of the sea and the entire Egyptian army has been destroyed, but they’re still in the middle of nowhere and forty years from the Promised Land. They’re not there yet. Also, this song is not the last story of their struggles of faith. They’re going to give up on God and Moses a whole bunch more times before they get to where they’re

going, and a whole bunch more times even after they get there. We're in book two, there are sixty-four more books in the Bible, all of them some version of "God's people got scared and forgot God loved them, and God came and saved them from whatever the thing was." That's literally all of scripture. So it's not like the Israelites sang once and were good forever. They will forget again, and they will also sing again. The life of faith is ups and downs. It is there is absolutely no way through this and oh my gosh I can't believe we made it through this. It is God where are you, and God I wish you were a little further away. That's faith, that's what it means to be people of God. It means to be people that God shows up for, again and again, in ways both large and small, and always utterly unexpected and not in the time or way we might have liked or wanted. Because God's vision is not our vision, God's ways are not our ways, but God's goal and purpose for us is always good, even if we cannot see the whole scope of it. We sing, dear people of God, not because we get it, but precisely because we do not. We sing because we don't know where we're going, but we look back at where we've been and trust, for at least the length of the song, that God does. Thanks be to God. Amen.