

PENTECOST 16

Proper 19 - Year A

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Exodus 14:19-31

¹⁹The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

²¹Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At the morning watch the Lord, in the pillar of fire and cloud, looked down on the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into a panic. ²⁵He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared

the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

Who went into the Red Sea first? According to Jewish midrash (a narrative interpretation that is meant to stand alongside Scripture – think Ancient Near Eastern fanfiction), the sea did not automatically part for the people of Israel when they came to it. They were at a standstill: the sea before them and the Egyptians behind. No one moved.

No one, that is, except for Nahshon. He walked (or, according to some sources, jumped!) into the sea; it wasn't until he was in over his nose that the waters parted.

This raises the age-old question: Where does God's work end and ours begin? Perhaps the parting of the sea was not a foregone conclusion. Perhaps God was waiting for a human partner to jump into the salvation story – to help write it. But to enter this familiar (and epic) story with an imaginative narrative invites us to engage with the text in a fresh way: It raises new questions about God, story, and our human relationship with the divine.

Discussion Question

If you were to tell this Scripture story from the perspective of someone who was there, who would it be? What would they see, say, and do? How would that story contribute to your understanding of this narrative?

Psalm 114

- ¹ Hallelujah!
When Israel came out of Egypt, *
the house of Jacob from a people of strange
speech,
² Judah became God's sanctuary *
and Israel his dominion.
³ The sea beheld it and fled; *
Jordan turned and went back.
⁴ The mountains skipped like rams, *
and the little hills like young sheep.
⁵ What ailed you, O sea, that you fled? *
O Jordan, that you turned back?
⁶ You mountains, that you skipped like rams? *
you little hills like young sheep?
⁷ Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, *
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
⁸ Who turned the hard rock into a pool of water *
and flint-stone into a flowing spring.

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

This is a psalm of praise, commemorating the Israelites' salvation through the parting of the Red Sea. There are two noteworthy dynamics at work here:

First, the psalmist articulates the ways in which creation participates in God's salvific acts. In particular, the poem highlights the response of the immutable (the hills) and the frightening (the waters, which often symbolize the forces of chaos in Scripture) elements of nature. The psalmist's praise calls to mind that even the immovable and chaotic elements of nature respond to God's sovereignty – a psalm of hope for the times when we feel helpless and small. It may be out of our control – but not God's. This gives us the courage to continue the work God has given us to do.

Second, this psalm remembers God's act of *communal* salvation. In a culture of individualism, it is tempting to think and speak almost exclusively about the way God acts in our (individual) lives. However, this psalm reminds us of the ways in which God acts in our (collective) lives: Sometimes, salvation comes to an entire community.

Discussion Questions

Have you witnessed the awe-full experience of God in nature? Could you write a psalm of praise about that event?

When have you experienced the salvation of God in your community?

Romans 14:1-12

14 Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it for the Lord. Also those who eat, eat for the Lord, since they give thanks to God, while those who abstain, abstain for the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

¹²So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

“I don't know how they can be a Christian and believe in X.” “How can they be a Christian and do Y?” No matter where you are on the political spectrum, you may have heard (or said) something to this effect on some hot-button social issue.

The truth is, this attitude is as old as the Church: At the time of the writing of this letter to the Romans, Christians were debating whether they could, in good conscience, eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. Some argued that participating in this ritual amounted to idolatry. Others asserted that, since they knew the idols were *not* gods, it was not worship at all; they could go along with the common cultural custom of the day, and knowing their own convictions, not get entangled with the religious ritual or symbolism.

The issues may be different today, but the circumstances are similar: It is tempting to judge others for not thinking, believing, or behaving in the “right” way (that is, the way we do).

This passage challenges us to pump the brakes on judgment: It is right and good for us to have convictions about how to live faithfully. However, problems arise when we superimpose these principles on others. It is better to practice living with the uncomfortable understanding that different Christians interpret their faith differently. We are not called to be the judges of others' faith commitments. Rather, we are challenged to hold fast to our convictions, but with an attitude of humility – knowing that there is only one Judge of us all (and we're not it!).

Discussion Questions

What judgments do you think God might be inviting you to hold more loosely?

How might your life change if you were a little slower to pronounce judgment in life?

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Commentary from Jessica Frederick

It’s interesting to note what people *will* or *would* pay in this parable. The first enslaved person in the parable claims they *will* repay the king – however, given the size of their debt, that was an impossibility. That’s why the king *didn’t* say, “This seems like I’ll achieve a reasonable return on investment on this choice,” but rather was moved with pity and forgave the debt. When this enslaved person encountered someone who owed him a much smaller (and more payable) debt, he had his debtor thrown into prison until he *would* pay the debt – as though prison would help him get his finances in order!

In his parable, Jesus helps us to see the ways we are bankrupt: Can anyone truly repay what we owe? No, we are all indebted to God, and to one another. Recognizing that reality, it is better to let go of the ledger in our relationships and participate in God’s economy of forgiveness.

Discussion Questions

When has someone forgiven you?

Where in your life do you see the opportunity to forgive someone else?