

Imagine you had been enslaved for more than four-hundred years: forced to labor in the fields, or build stone idols for a demagogue; imagine you and your family, and everyone one of your kin were owned, humiliated, abused, dehumanized, gutted of all hope and dignity on a daily basis. Imagine that this happened for four hundred years. Four hundred years!!!

Now imagine a God so big, so vast, so powerful, that He or She wields creation – that's right, a God that breathes creation into existence, understands, and calculates, and invents, and applies concepts beyond our wildest imagination.

And one day, this big, vast, spectacular God remembers a marginalized community, children of his own making. And this God says, "I'm gonna do right by you. I'm gonna help make a better world for you."

And then, over a series of years, God humbles the most powerful monarch on earth. God establishes freedom for an enslaved people. And on their way out of town, God allows the former slaves to relieve their captors of precious household goods. Oh, and God also spares these people the anguish of the angel of death – God passes over the faithful with peace.

The fledgling people group heads out of town, but within a few days the pharaoh's anger boils over, and he sends a million men in bronze helmets and terrifying chariots to exact revenge, to undo God's righting, to remind the world that the winners will always be winners, and that there's not enough space for losers to thrive.

And imagine this newly-freed people. They have finally, finally broken the chains of bondage, allowed themselves a moment of hope, and the satisfaction of safety. And if they can just make it a little further, there is a land full of possibility, a life full of potential.

And all of sudden, somebody looks back, and says, "No, not again!" A sea halts their movement forward. A vast army halts their movement backward. They are trapped. Pinned in. Out of moves.

The domination systems of this world don't just make you beat them once, they make you beat them again, and again, and again.

And I think sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes, we need to hear supernatural stories. We need to hear God's everlasting yea. We need to know that some force, eventually, and finally, has the ability to subdue pharaoh's persistence.

We don't need to hear about another great army. We don't need to hear about another great diplomat. We don't need to hear about some great economic embargo that will cripple an empire.

We need to hear that some force, some force bigger than us, much more mysterious than us, is not only invested in us, but is resolved to help transform a future we cannot transform on our own. We need to hear that such a force, such a God is gonna work through us, maybe even in spite of us, to breathe life into lifeless places.

We need a God who can make space for us; we need a God who can help us depart from the stagnancy of old things into the current of new things. We need a God who can blaze trails we never would have imagined.

And that's exactly what we get: A God who not only notices us, but cares for us, invests in us, protects us, provides safe space for us, ensures a future for us.

The waters part. Maybe it was a massive sea. Maybe it was a creek that sometimes acted like a river. Either way it's impressive! A new nation walked on dry land as they inspected walls made of water. I imagine they felt a satisfying mist on their faces as they strode toward the other side. And having transported the whole group safely across, God closed the waters, tossing bronze helmets and chariots in a frenzy, and drowning the entire army of Egyptians. And some years later, Israel will inherit a new and promised land.

Our story is not without its issues. It's really hard to reconcile a God of unceasing grace with one who would annihilate a vast army. And later on, the same Hebrews who were oppressed by the Egyptians will savagely (so the text says)

occupy settled lands. In too many instances liberation is tied up in retribution rather than restoration. And in too many instances God is on the side of specific nations instead of being a parental and inclusive deity.

Well, I think we need to be honest, and admit the violence is unsettling. I do, however, think it's worth noting that there is most likely some significant hyperbole in our story. Migration over centuries, and the slow-but-steady merging of cultures and traditions through marriage and commerce makes for rich archeology and poor literature! And if all those Egyptians really did drown, their local paper never reported it. And Israel would continue to be a vassal state of Egypt in years to follow.

I think we need to cling, and cling fiercely to two themes in this story: 1) God is vested in a people called Israel. 2) God makes space, miraculous space, for God's people.

And I think we should cling to that word exodus, a departure if you will. The story lets us know that God's no longer absent or divested from the world, and especially the world's most invisible. If we keep reading beyond the Pentateuch, we also discover an exodus from exclusivity – we discover that God expands the idea of Israel beyond a small people group, and broadens it to include every nation. Actually, let me rephrase that thought: Israel discovers, learns, adapts, evolves to understand the inclusivity and grace of God.

But maybe most of all, this is a story that offers us exodus from our same-old-sameness. Maybe, we can imagine a world where God's power is so bold and creative empires are felled with peace rather violence? Maybe we can look at all of the characters in this story and find empathy for the antagonists? Maybe this story reminds us that sometimes we're not the Israelites, but are instead the hard-hearted pharaoh, or the blindly-loyal soldiers that extend his power? Maybe, just maybe, sometimes it's us who doubt God's power to offer manna in the wilderness or safe passage through a stormy sea? Maybe, just maybe, like Moses, we have ordinary skills and ordinary talents that can depart from ordinary circumstances, and bring about extraordinary change?

Space for What's Next
Bob Stillerman
Proper 19, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 9-13-2020
Exodus 14:19-31



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Yes, Sardis, this is a complicated story for a complicated people who belong to a complicated God. But take heart, friends, despite all of this complexity, God is making space for us to thrive, space for us to depart pharaoh's grasp, space to be a people called Israel.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.