

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE

Our first reading recounts the miraculous culmination of Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt and the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. A foundational text of Judaism, this passage from the Book of Exodus will also be familiar to most of us, probably in fairly grand form; across the centuries, it has inspired immense works of art in the Christian tradition, from Handel's three-hour oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, of which the anthem we heard a few minutes ago is just a small part, to the sweeping gestures and special effects of Hollywood's *The Ten Commandments*, which still draws over five million viewers to ABC for four hours on Easter Eve each year. As Holly retells the story today, though, I'd ask you to listen past the grandeur and the special effects, and to focus on a small but surprisingly thorny question: Why does God drown the Egyptian army?

Our reading from Matthew is the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. As Ken Minkema might say, the passage is typical late-summer fare in the lectionary: a tricky parable, less straightforward and less well-known than the mustard seed or the lamp with the bushel basket, a stubborn block of prose often avoided by the preacher in favor of the flowing poetry of Psalm 103, part of which I crammed into Call to Worship today because it's too good to lose. But I happen to know that most of you are better equipped for Matthew's tricky parable than anyone else in Connecticut this morning, because, as I discovered on Wednesday while catching up on the sermons Holly and I had missed when we were out of town, Courtney Mason and Alan Kendrix preached on this same text on August 20th! When I read their beautiful sermon on forgiveness and realized it was based on the same reading I was struggling with, I immediately decided I should bail out on Matthew. But then I wondered why I felt that way. Not for your sakes, I will admit. As members of a congregation, we don't often get a chance to work through the same text together from two different perspectives in close succession, and surely we need all the help we can get with forgiveness these days. No, I wanted to bail on Matthew for my own sake, because, to me, the parable of the Unforgiving Servant is more than tricky. It is disturbing. Infuriating. Wrong. Which, I've come to realize, probably means I need to preach on it, or try to, anyway. So. Whether this passage is new to you or whether you remember it from a month ago, I ask you to consider with me which parts of it make sense to you, and which parts provoke you to resist. Both in and around the words of scripture, then, let us listen for the spirit to speak.

THE SCRIPTURE

Exodus 14:19-31

The 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. It 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. Then 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. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He 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." Then 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." So 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. The 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. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel 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.

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 18:22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

SERMON: "IN ANGER"

Thank you, Jordan, for centering us, Choir, for singing with us, Holly, for reading to us, and thank you all for trusting me up here a second time. Please pray with me.

Dear Lord, may the words I speak and the thoughts we explore together bring us closer to you and, through you, to one another. Amen.

What a joy it has been this summer to watch and listen with you all as laypeople have stood up and testified, week after week, to the presence of God in our lives together. Tony and Kristen's hope, Ken's faithful knights, Brad's affirmation, Geoff's good news, Victor's dream, Courtney and Alan's forgiveness, and Sarah's belly badge have renewed for us a collective sense of identity and purpose as a church. They've done this by giving us a richer and deeper sense of our own family history together, and if there's one thing I've learned as a historian, it's that the telling and retelling of family history, the cataloguing of and reckoning with the stories we share, become crucial in times of change. I've felt this myself as the sons I share with Holly have begun to grow up. Anyone who has met our boys can guess that their father, too, was a short and skinny little kid. And anyone with a view of the tenor section on Sunday mornings before the Children's Sermon can guess that, like Quinby, I spent a lot of church services with a book in my hands. When I was his age, if I had left Narnia or the Lord of the Rings at home, my backup was the Bible, which I invariably opened to the parts I had figured out were juicy, or, as Quinby would put it, full of action: Kings, Samuel, Exodus. Exodus was a favorite, in part because of the frogs and the super-creepy angel of death, and in part for reasons I couldn't have fully articulated at the time. Looking back thirty-some years later through the frustrations of a little boy who liked singing better than baseball and grownups better than his own peer group, I can appreciate the appeal of the story of the ancient Israelites busting out of Egypt, pursued and outnumbered but ultimately triumphant.

The Book of Exodus was not written to make me feel better about third grade, however. The scribes who compiled it in the fifth century before Christ had a monumental purpose in mind: they were codifying a single, foundational story of the Jewish people, a source of shared memory that could stand up to the larger Persian culture in which they found themselves engulfed. They were grappling with diverse histories preserved in divergent oral traditions, trying to sort out who they were and who God was, and out of their grappling came a family history, a narrative that is still absolutely central to Jewish identity, retold, to this day, in prayer and song, in the core rituals of faith in Yahweh. Though historians agree that the events it retells did not occur as the scribes depicted them, the Exodus is real in the sense that without the persuasive power of that narrative, the people of Israel would not be who they are. And with that persuasive power came the possibility of appeal beyond the Israelites themselves, to the oppressed in other times and places. Our sermon hymn bears witness to that appeal. Enslaved Africans in the American South, forcibly separated from the traditions of their own ancestors and kept apart from speakers of their own languages, found in Exodus, in this corner of their oppressors' religion, a voice that spoke to their condition: "I have observed the misery of my people," the Lord tells Moses from the burning bush. "I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them." After two millennia,

Yahweh's voice, put into new songs, could still sustain the spirits and uphold the humanity of persons bought and sold as property. Thanks be to God!

But. By the 18th century, the same story, the same Exodus, had also become a foundational narrative for slave traders. Handel composed his glorious *Israel in Egypt* in 1738 for an audience of middle- and upper-class Englishmen who had grown accustomed to thinking of themselves as the chosen people of God, the favored Israel of their age, and who projected that status across the globe using an overwhelming navy and expanding colonial empire. While Handel composed the delicate, filigreed setting from Psalm 105, "He brought them out with silver and gold," up to 5% of the English economy depended on cane sugar, rum, and the Atlantic slave trade that dragged 10 million Africans to the New World. How could the same narrative accommodate itself to both the powerless and the powerful in so unequal a society? How could the oppressor knowingly claim the mantle of Yahweh? Of course, we humans are depressingly good at misinterpreting scripture when our material interests are at stake, but in the case of Exodus 14, the text itself leaves the door to self-satisfaction wide open. Remember the question I asked you to ponder about this passage: Why does God drown the Egyptian army? The answer is NOT because they are about to catch the Israelites. Listen:

At the morning watch, the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He 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." Then 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."

Stop. There is no threat here. The enemy is in retreat. But God keeps going. "As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. Not one of them remained." Oh God, why are you killing these people? The answer, it turns out, has already been given to Moses, just before our passage began: "Lift up your staff, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself." As a short, skinny boy, I remember savoring these words, admiring their confidence, their utter lack of compromise, the sense of inevitable vindication that propels them. Such is the bright, merciless burning of righteous anger. Now, with two short, skinny boys of my own, I stand shivering with the Israelites, looking down at the ebb and flow of dead bodies on the seashore, and I can't help but see in them one long, winding road of biblical bloodshed, where each wrong, real or perceived, leaves more bodies broken: from Cain and Abel to Pharaoh and Moses to Saul and David and beyond. Even the most moving laments hold the seeds of rage and violence. "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion," sings the psalmist in exile ... and six verses later? "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall be they who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall be they who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

At this point, when we may almost be tempted to agree with Christopher Hitchen's famous indictment of organized religion in *God is Not Great* ("violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry"), I know what we should do. We should turn to the New Testament, where the Word incarnate makes a fresh start in the world. And for two verses at least, today's reading from

Matthew is exactly what we need. “Lord,” Peter asks Jesus, “if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Often portrayed as something of a bumbler by the four Gospel writers, here Peter shows a flair for scriptural interpretation; the sevenfold forgiveness he proposes mirrors the sevenfold destruction that God promised to any who sought revenge on Cain after Abel’s murder back in Genesis 4. The first act of violence in scripture thus finds its mirror in a pact of nonviolence. Jesus takes Peter’s idea and runs with it, unravelling more of Cain’s family history; just as Cain’s great-great-great grandson Lamech, who committed the second biblical murder, proclaimed that his own death would be avenged not seven but 77 times, so Jesus urges his disciples to forgive not seven but 77 times. The implication is clear and beautiful: only radical nonviolence can undo centuries of bloodshed.

So far so good. Then Jesus tells a parable about two slaves, one of whom owes his master a great deal of money, the other of whom owes the first slave a far smaller amount. As Courtney explained last month, the monetary amounts involved in the story truly are wildly different. If we take the *denarius* to be a day’s wages at today’s living wage of \$15 per hour, the second slave owes the first a substantial sum of \$12,000, but the first slave owes his master 6 billion dollars, twice what our president claims to be worth. Indeed, some commentators think Matthew inflated the first slave’s holdings beyond what Jesus originally said in order to make it clear that the debt under discussion was definitely spiritual rather than just monetary. In any case, the parable clearly positions the slave-owning king as the God-figure in the kingdom of heaven, with the two slaves representing two members of the church. But if this parable is designed to illustrate how repeated forgiveness might operate in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus’s metaphor goes completely off the rails. Not one of the characters forgives another more than once, and not one of the slaves, who represent us, the members of the new church, forgives at all. Having been cleared of his monumental loan, the first slave attacks the second over his smaller debt, choking him and casting him in prison. Their fellow slaves are, understandably, disturbed by the first slave’s actions, and they inform the king, who summons the unforgiving slave and... Matthew’s readers take a breath, waiting for the vision of nonviolent justice the parable has promised... The king speaks: ““You wicked slave. I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.”

Oh God, why are you torturing this man? His pain will not bring back whatever he owes you. “And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured.” Nothing in that sentence is okay. I want nothing to do with the lord in this parable, with the king in this kingdom of heaven. He is a slave driver, an inquisitor, a water-boarder. I’ve done my reading. I know slavery was practically ubiquitous in the ancient world and harsh physical discipline so common in the Roman empire that the authorities established a special public official whose services and implements one could rent out in order to torture one’s slaves without going to the trouble oneself. I know that Matthew’s intended readers were observant Jews whose family history centered on the God of Genesis and Exodus, who drowned the Egyptians and exterminated entire peoples in righteous fury, and that Matthew may have altered Jesus’s words to fit their expectations of justice. But I also suspect that Matthew knew, deep down, maybe without admitting it to himself, that the king was wrong to act as he did. I suspect this because I recognize the phrase he uses to describe the slave’s punishment. You know it too, because you’ve heard it before. Forget this parable for a moment and listen to the phrase itself, and tell me how it ends every other time you’ve heard it in scripture: “He handed him over to be...” “He handed him over to be...” Yes. “He handed him over to be crucified.” The only other context in which these words appear

in the entire Bible, eight times, and in all four Gospels, is at the end of Jesus's trial in Jerusalem—which, in Matthew's Gospel, is where he will go as soon as he finishes instructing his disciples concerning the life of the church.

In other words, Matthew pulls an Old-Testament-savvy reader into the long-familiar family history of eye-for-an-eye justice, only to unravel that history once and for all when God herself is handed over to be tortured. His implication is simple: after the Crucifixion, after the crux in the Divine story, all violence, even violence against the unforgiving slave, becomes violence against God. And by encountering the parable first, before we find out where Jesus and Matthew are headed, we the readers are pulled into more honest relationships with ourselves and with one another. For though as an adult I want nothing to do with the vengeful king, after confronting him this week I confess to you that we share something, he and I. Like him, I am too much in anger. In anger. God knows there is a lot to be angry about right now, as our country tries once more to reckon, infuriatingly slowly, with our racist history and our racist present, as our city seeks for ways to care for children whose worlds have been turned upside down by tribalism and bigotry, and there is room for righteous indignation in the cause of justice. But to be angry, to recognize a wrong and burn for what is right, is not the same thing as acting in anger. **In** anger, I snap at a choir member during rehearsal. In anger, I discard the courtesy my spouse deserves. In anger, I reject an apology from my own son. In anger, I make myself alone. But if I am here with you, even if I speak of anger, even if I **am** angry, I am not **in** anger, I am **in** the body of Christ. And if I am in the body of Christ, I can pray for peace.

We can pray for peace.

Thanks be to God.