

Winners and Losers

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
September 14, 2008*

Exodus 14:19-31

After ten plagues that ruined his land and his people and his own household, Pharaoh of Egypt had relented and let the people of the Lord go – all of them. Then Pharaoh had a change of heart. He sent charging horses and thundering chariots to slaughter the children of Israel as they approached the edge of the sea. Israel cried out to the Lord. And they cried out against Moses: “Did you bring out to the wilderness to die because there are no graves in Egypt?” It was more than a rhetorical question. But through Moses, the Lord promised to deliver his people. They had only to be still.

The angel of God, who was going ahead of the Israelite formation, moved and now was going behind them. And the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them, and stood behind them. It came between the Egyptian formation and the Israelite formation. There was the cloud — and the darkness. And it lit up the night. And they did not come near each other all night.

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. And all that night the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind. He turned the sea into dry land. And the waters were split apart. The children of Israel went into the sea on dry ground, with the water like a wall to their right and to their left. And Egypt followed in pursuit. All of Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and riders went after them into the sea.

At the morning watch, the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian formation. And he threw it into confusion. He clogged their chariot wheels, and they turned with difficulty. Egypt said, “Let’s get away from Israel. The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.”

The Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the waters may come back upon Egypt, upon their chariots and riders.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. And at daybreak the sea went back to its place. Egypt was fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept Egypt into the sea. The water came back and covered the chariots and riders, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them survived. But the children of Israel went into the sea on dry ground, with the water like a wall to their right and to their left.

That day the Lord saved Israel from the hand of Egypt. And Israel saw Egypt dead on the seashore. Israel saw the Lord’s mighty hand displayed against Egypt. And the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in his servant Moses.

Sermon

It’s a familiar story: The children of Israel cross the Red Sea on dry ground, while the forces of Pharaoh do battle with the sea and lose. I’ll admit, though, to having a Hollywood picture of the story. Usually when I imagine Moses, it’s Charlton Heston I see. And if I ever imagine Pharaoh, he’s as likely to look like Yul Brynner as anyone else. As for the crossing of the sea itself, I can’t picture it without dramatic music playing in the background. I can’t picture it without shifts in perspective from panoramic views of the whole scene to close-ups of the main characters. And, of course, I can’t picture it without primitive special effects.

The crossing of the Red Sea was no special effects illusion. It was, however, a dramatic event, a dramatic vehicle, that pitted a stubborn Pharaoh against a relentless God, a dramatic vehicle that featured Moses in a starring role, a role that would secure his place in history and, more immediately, validate his position as Israel’s leader. The LORD God commanded, Moses obeyed, and Israel was saved. That’s the story in a nutshell.

But I've been wondering about that story for weeks now, and with increasing intensity. It started when I preached a sermon about hell. (You may remember that one.) After that service, Gayle C. mentioned to me a Jewish story that she was familiar with. In the Jewish Midrash, the tale is told that, when Pharaoh's chariots and horses and riders were drowned in the sea, the LORD's angels came near to him to celebrate, to sing a hymn of praise. But the LORD rebuked them. "My creatures are dying," he said, "and you're singing?" That started me wondering.

Then some time later, I listened to an interview with the journalist Seymour Hersh. He was talking about the My Lai massacre. In March 1968, a US Army company entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai. They were looking for enemy soldiers. Instead they found old men and women and children. They herded most of these old men and women and children into ditches at the edge of the village and shot them dead, hundreds of them. Then — this is what shocked me the most; I have been familiar with My Lai since I was eight or nine years old, but this part was new — then American soldiers sat down next to the ditch and ate lunch. I was appalled when I heard that. There's more to the story. The more you hear, the uglier it gets. But the sheer callousness to human misery: sitting there, next to the death ditch, eating lunch. What an appalling illustration of human depravity! That story had me wondering even more about the crossing of the Red Sea.

We didn't hear this part of the Exodus story today — we did sing it though — but after Israel was safely across the sea, after the shore was littered with Egyptian corpses, right there, right then — at the very time when God was rebuking the angels, according to the Midrash — right there, right then — with the corpses right in front of them — the children of Israel began to dance and sing, not in a spirit of lament, as Bill L. recently recommended here, but in a spirit of unbridled joy. I've been wondering about that.

It makes sense to celebrate a victory. OSU football fans do it most Saturdays in the fall. The Boeing Corporation does it when it wins a multi-billion dollar contract. And on November 5, either Democrats or Republicans will be doing it. It makes sense to celebrate a victory.

Celebration makes the most sense, I suppose, when the victory is complete, especially when it has been a long time coming. VE celebrations in May 1945 were heart-felt and prolonged. The struggle against Hitler's Germany had been long and costly. VJ celebrations three months later were perhaps more raucous because, with the defeat of imperial Japan, the worst-ever war the world has known was finally over. How could anyone not celebrate those victories, especially when such evils had been defeated?

Imagine Israel, then. Enslaved for four hundred years, free at last! How could they not celebrate? God told the angels to quiet down. But angels had never been slaves. Angels had never had their baby boys drowned. Angels had never been surrounded by the terror of Passover night. How could Israel not celebrate?

Yet it's worth noting that the text of Exodus does not say, "Israelites saw Egyptians dead on the seashore." Rather, it says, "Israel saw Egypt dead on the seashore." Israel was not celebrating the death of so many soldiers and so many horses. They were celebrating their own birth as a nation and the accompanying demise of their greatest nemesis: Egypt. Egypt was no longer a threat to Israel's life. Egypt was no longer an obstacle to God's promises. Egypt was dead. Israel saw it, and Israel celebrated. It was a great victory. And it makes sense to celebrate a victory.

But still, what about those dead soldiers and dead horses? Does somebody always have to lose for somebody else to win? Was there no other way to secure Israel's freedom? Must slaveholders always pay with blood? Abraham Lincoln wondered about this. He wondered whether the Civil War, which remains our nation's bloodiest, deadliest war ever — he wondered whether the Civil War was the price we had to pay as a nation, South and North, for slavery, for hundreds of years of slavery.

Perhaps that's so. But still, are the soldiers the guilty ones? Why do the soldiers always have to pay? Why are soldiers always legitimate targets, as if they deserve to die, while civilians — whatever that

really means — are “innocent”? And what about the horses? In the book of Jonah, we learn that God cared about Nineveh’s cows. Didn’t he care about Egypt’s horses, such beautiful horses? Were the horses guilty? Maybe there was no other way. For Israel to win, Egypt had to lose; for Israel to live, Egypt had to die. Maybe there’s no other way.

But what if the winner wins by losing? What if the winner lives by dying? On the cross, Jesus is both loser and winner. He loses his own life. Though he is innocent, he is slaughtered as if he is guilty, guilty as sin. And from his side pour blood and water — the blood of the Passover lamb, the water of the Red Sea. And Israel sees him dead. And Rome sees him dead. And heaven sees him dead. And the devil sees him dead.

But in losing his life, he wins. Because he will not journey into death, but through death. No watery grave will grip him for good. He will burst out the other side of death, like Israel stepping out of the sea onto higher ground. He will be the living One, the life of the world, the life of all who follow and trust him. And he will forgive his enemies.

But I still wonder about the death toll from competition, from conflict, from war. In my lifetime, I haven’t wanted to celebrate over war. There have been victories, but often those victories have been clouded. And even when that hasn’t been the case, I’ve been more inclined to heave a sigh of relief, not over victory, but over the end of the killing and the dying — for now.

I know there are real enemies in the world. Enemies of God. Enemies of justice. Enemies of peace. And it is a good thing when these enemies meet defeat. A good thing, worthy of celebration. But conflicts and wars are often murky. Just like family squabbles, no one is really innocent; everyone is, to some degree at least, guilty. All the right is not on one side, and all the wrong on the other.

And when the blood is being spilled and people are dying — soldiers and civilians, innocent and guilty — when the blood is being spilled and people are dying, I can’t help but wonder if the story of Jesus should make more of a difference. Jesus, the winner and loser. Jesus, the Passover lamb, who dies on a cross. Jesus, the One who passes through the sea of death — and lives.