

Rescue at the Red Sea

I don't know if anyone else saw this, but one of the weird things that happened with Hurricane Ian is that Tampa Bay emptied of water. Apparently, the counterclockwise motion of the hurricane in relation to the position of the bay caused the water to be sucked out. It's called a reverse storm surge.

But then as the hurricane moved on, the water surged back in. Although there were pictures of people walking on the dry bottom of the bay, officials warned them not to do that since the water's surge back in could really happen at any time.

Of course, since I've spent all week working with this story from Exodus, what happened in Tampa Bay sounded not unlike what this story describes.

I once watched a whole program that had this grand scientific explanation for the whole Exodus story including the plagues and this parting of the sea. I think in that show they postulated an earthquake and subsequent tsunami that resulted in the parting of the Red Sea...that the movement of the tidal wave sucked the water out of part of it or something like that.

Those sorts of things are called demythologizing. Demythologizing takes the heroic and supernatural – the mythology - out of a biblical story and tries to explain it in a way that seems more believable. Some people find that really helpful as they navigate these hard to believe stories.

While I find the science interesting, it doesn't have much impact for me on how I hear the story. What I find most meaningful is what the story meant for God's purpose then and how the story has helped further God's purpose in the centuries since.

Whether you need the science or you're perfectly comfortable with the supernatural, this story does show the collaborative work of the forces of nature and God, working through a human being, to carry God's purpose forward.

Last week we were with Joseph in prison. We heard how God was with Joseph and everything he did prospered. Through Joseph God blessed Egypt as well as Joseph's own people.

But as time went on, a new Pharaoh ruled who did not remember Joseph. His main concern was that those Hebrews had gotten too numerous. In order to keep them under control,

Pharaoh made them slaves. This nation that was God's chosen people, people chosen to be a blessing to the world, were slaves. That promise of blessing appeared to be dead.

But, then God raised up Moses who would be the one to lead the people to freedom. God's purpose here is to keep that blessing alive. In a way, it really is creation again. Just like at creation, God's arm stretched out over the watery powers of chaos, and a way is made where there was no way. Through the waters comes the new birth of a people, set free to be the blessing to the world God created them to be.

It's also a story about liberation. Through these waters God's people walk from slavery to freedom- an image that is echoed in our baptism. Through the waters of baptism, the evil within us is drowned and we come out of the water, freed from sin and death.

Moses has been a powerful symbol of freedom for people throughout the centuries. Nowhere in our history is that more prominent than in the African American spirituals associated with the black slaves.

Lyrics like these to Go Down Moses:

When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand
Let my people go

Refrain:

Go down, Moses
Way down in Egypt's land
Tell old Pharaoh
Let my people go

The image of Moses leading Israel to freedom was a powerful one for those black slaves. The spirituals were songs of hope and freedom. Oppressed people find hope in a God whose mighty works brought a whole people to freedom.

It was against the law to teach the slaves to read. The spirituals then were a way to pass the stories on from generation to generation. They were a way for the slaves to encourage one another. Some of the spirituals may even have been coded instructions for escape on the Underground Railroad. That seems to be disputed and that might be more legend than

history. But think about a song like Wade in the Water. Spiritually, it's an image of baptism. But it may also have been an instruction to escaped slaves to walk into the water to throw the dogs off the scent trail.

Often when we sing spirituals, we think of them as an image of our heavenly home after we die. References to crossing the Jordan River to the Promised Land are clearly drawn straight from Exodus story.

For example, here are part of the lyrics to Swing Low Sweet Chariot.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home.
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

Is that a song about being carried to heaven? Or is it about the underground railroad carrying escaped slaves to freedom?

It might be both. But the spirituals are not just about a heavenly reward after enduring a life of misery. They're about recognizing that God's mighty acts can bring freedom in this life. They did for the Israelites.

The African American spirituals later became important to the Civil Rights movement as well. Knowing that God is on the side of liberation was a powerful theme of the whole movement.

One of the things about these ancient stories that is so powerful is that people can locate themselves in them. The African slaves in our country felt the plight of Israel. They put themselves in the shoes of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea to freedom.

They could see themselves literally passing through the waters of the Ohio River to freedom in the north.

So, where do we see ourselves in the story? We sort of have to come to the unsettling realization that white America is Egypt in the story, not Israel.

The story is a pretty good example of law and gospel. When oppressed people read the story it's one of hope. It's good news.

When the oppressors read the story, it convicts. But that conviction is still the beginning of the gospel. Recognizing where we have been wrong is part of the movement to repentance, forgiveness, and transformation.

Whatever we feel bound by – externally or internally – the Moses story tells us that God desires our freedom.

Maybe we're bound by a past we can't shake. Poverty binds too many people. Others are enslaved to an addiction. Maybe we're trapped in a situation that's eating us alive. Maybe the frailty of our bodies has us bound. Or maybe we're bound by fear, anxiety, or depression. Or maybe anger and even hatred have us tied up in knots. We all have something at one time or another that makes us feel trapped or bound.

And there are still people who live in literal slavery, or near slavery. There are still people throughout the world who are oppressed.

This story reminds us that God is continually working on behalf of freedom for all who are oppressed. God works continually to free us from whatever binds us. Through our own waters of baptism we too are set free.

But we do have a part to play. Like the Israelites, we are called to step out. It had to be pretty scary to step out onto that dry sea bed. Would the waters hold? Could Moses...and God...be trusted?

Our freedom was won because of Christ's death and resurrection, but stepping out on the journey to healing and freedom can still be scary. We will have scary and hard things to do as we live into our new freedom.

But yes, it turns out God can be trusted. God will go with us into this new life of freedom. God will remain steadfastly committed to a whole world of freedom.