Contested Waters

A Meditation on Exodus 14: 19 – 31

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church September 13, 2020

I was surprised to hear a friend tell me recently that she has a fear of the water. Not uncommon, but she lives on the water; her spouse is really into water sports. Her fear stems from childhood. Growing up in the South, she didn’t get to take swimming lessons at the community pool. Because the pools were closed. Whites and blacks couldn’t swim together!! Instead of obeying the law and desegregating the pools, cities closed their public pools. Or they were filled in with concrete. Those that remained open suddenly had gate fees. While it affected blacks and whites, the lasting legacy, was of course, for people of color.

In his highly acclaimed book,  [“Contested Waters,” Jeff Wiltse](https://www.amazon.com/Contested-Waters-History-Swimming-America/dp/0807871273) records the story of “hatred and segregation, the poisonous spirit of which lives with us yet, a story of swimming disparity, drowning disparity, pools apart and racial discrimination.”*[[1]](#endnote-1)* Wiltse unpacks the history of discrimination at public pools and describes the impact of that history today. Swimming disparity – have you noticed that? Water, especially when you don’t know how to navigate it, can be deathly. Water is both a source of life and the cause of far too many deaths.

As we stand with the Hebrew people at the edge of the water, we can’t begin to imagine how terrified they must have been. The wilderness offered its own fears, but those risks were deferred by the immediate threat of either being recaptured by the Egyptians or of dying in the Red (or Reed) Sea. So close to freedom, and yet impossibly out of reach. Then God told Moses to raise his arm, and the waters were divided. As at the creation, God divided the waters, and the people (terrified? elated?) moved through, walking on the muddy seabed, towards freedom. They were being recreated as freed people. This symbolism is crucial to the story. Just as God created out of watery chaos in Genesis 1, so God continues to create out of watery chaos in Exodus. [Michael J. Chan](https://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=e56863e63d0f2f57830be76191295f8cf1bc52691aee60ca2c067e64f841cced), Assistant Professor of Old Testament Luther Seminary writes, From the outset, this pharaoh’s policies of enslavement, domination, and violence have been anti-creational (1:8-22), threatening God’s fructifying promises to Israel and its descendants. Here, God restores the creation process.

Parting the waters is the first half of the liberating work that needs to happen. The second half is the closing of the waters, and this is where we may have trouble. The story here is a little murky, and scholars will tell you that is because there are multiple authors contributing to this text. Blending their plot lines is a bit like blending Jesus’ birth narratives or melding the two creation stories. Did the Egyptians get confused and rush toward the water, caught in a tidal flow caused by God’s breath? Did they drown when Moses once again raised his arm to close the waters over them? Either way, they are obliterated.

Theologian John Holbert writes, “*The verb “confused” is fairly rare in Hebrew, being found in Ex.23:27, where God promises that the inhabitants of Canaan will be thrown into confusion to make Israel’s possession of the Land of Promise possible, in Joshua 10:10 when God confuses the enemies of Israel, making Gideon’s victory over them assured, and in Judges 4:15 when YHWH confuses Sisera, enabling Deborah’s victory over him. As one can see, it is a verb employed to indicate YHWH’s desire to make possible an Israelite victory. So it is here.*”[[2]](#endnote-2)

God confuses the enemies of the Israelites. God “hardens Pharaoh’s heart,” or “strengthens Pharaoh’s resolve,” as another way to think of this. [[3]](#endnote-3) God is intimately involved in defeating our enemies. Which sounds good if God is on your side. The problem is there are too many bodies washed up on the shore. Men. Horses. It would be much simpler if we turned our backs to them, pretended not to see. Those soldiers had parents. They probably had children. Wives. They received and gave love. They were also participants in a system of abuse and oppression led by Pharaoh. Because of Pharaoh’s stubbornness, they and their families suffered all the indignities and sorrows brought on by the plagues. Pharaoh mandated discrimination, enlisted them in oppression of the other. And what did these Egyptians gain from it? Their own deaths, and the grief of those who loved them.

# Theologian Rachel Held Evans, who left this world too soon, wrote about her difficulty with the terror passages in Scripture. She wrote of her inability to accept that God loves to decimate people, whether they are enemies or innocent bystanders. In her final book, *“Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again****”***she writes:

*I've watched people get so entangled in this snare [of vengeance, violence] they contort into shapes unrecognizable. When you can't trust your own God-given conscience to tell you what's right, or your own God-given conscience to tell you what's true, you lose the capacity to engage the world in any meaningful, authentic way, and you become an easy target for authoritarian movements eager to exploit that vacuity for their gain. I tried reading Scripture with my conscience and curiosity suspended, and I felt, quite literally, disintegrated. I felt fractured and fake.[[4]](#endnote-4)* Have we learned anything about questioning our leaders? Do we examine the systems they endorse, the rewards they promise? Have we learned that leadership rooted in discrimination and oppression leads only to sorrow and death?

Leslie Poss shared a Tweet with me this week which was a reminder about the existence of the Slave Bible. Published in England, the only copy in our country is owned by Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. The earliest copy was published in 1807 for use in the “British West Indian Islands.” Ninety percent of the Old Testament and fifty percent of the New Testament have been removed. Anything that speaks of liberation is gone. Verses such as "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28 Gone! Anything that could be interpreted as supportive of the institution of slavery was blatantly retained. The idea was that people of color should be saved, but not freed. The problem is you can’t have one without the other. [[5]](#endnote-5) Think about these statistics for a moment – 90% of the Old Testament, 50% of the New - most of scripture erased because it might encourage rebellion. What does that tell us about the nature of God and God’s desire for people? What does this tell us about our rebellious God who encourages us to act against injustice, to stand against oppression, to work for the liberation of all people, that they might know salvation?

Fortunately, the Slave Bible was not the only Bible from which oppressed peoples heard stories. By God’s mercy, some encountered a God who opens prison doors, who smashes the shackles and the pain they inflict. Enslaved people of color, with Christianity imposed upon them, clung to the Exodus story as a thread of hope, the promise that this God would also free them. Harriet Tubman became their Moses, risking her life to lead others through the liberating waters. They believed that God would roll back the metaphorical waters for them as well. They clung to the hope that God would deal with their oppressors.

But the story of freedom from oppression in our land is much messier than the story of the Hebrew people. The Israelites crossed the sea, the waters closed over their enemies, they danced, and they journeyed on. They made a lot of mistakes along the way, but those were problems of their own creation, nothing that could be blamed on the work of their oppressors.

Look at us. Look at what we have done. We have left native peoples, people of color, undocumented immigrants, LGBTQ peoples standing at the edge of the sea, wondering. Will anyone stand up against the oppression? Against the violence? Against the discrimination? Will God confuse embodied hatred? Will God confuse embodied prejudice? It is cruel to open the door to freedom, and then send the police dogs in to terrorize. It is cruel to command the waters to part in God’s name, but then fire rubber bullets, fire real bullets, crush the necks of those who simply want to be free.

It is a long story, a story that began with the claiming of this land as America. It did not begin four years ago, but I fear that in our current situation we have a Pharaoh like leader at the helm. I fear we have a leader who seeks more and more power, while the people around him suffer. Thousands dying from a virus which could have been contained. Children dying at a border, families separated. People of color suffering injustices everyday, injustices that go ignored, downplayed, victims blamed for the violence perpetrated against them. Gender discrimination and abuse. So much suffering. So much death. It is as if the plagues go on and on and Pharaoh and his consultants refuse to see, refuse to hear the cries of the people.

When Moses and the people were safely across the Sea, when they had reached the other side this is not what happened:

God did *not* say to Moses, hold up your hand until a few chariots get stuck, just enough to shock Pharaoh. Then you can walk in and say, “Hey, Pharaoh, why don’t you give us a little land on the far side of town, we don’t care if there isn’t access to water, or if the water has lead in it, or if the soil isn’t as fertile as yours. We will even work for you for low wages, so that you can continue to build your empire. We will understand if you need to send your soldiers in from time to time to keep us in our place…

That is NOT what God told Moses to do. God had Moses roll back the waters over all that was represented by their life of enslavement. God removed the threat of re-enslavement. This is something we have failed to do.

Let’s go back to those statistics: 90% of the Old Testament and 50% of the New Testament passages were seen as radical enough to inspire slaves to rebel against their owners. Looks like we need to do some more reading. Overturning oppression is holy work. Let us stand firm with God. Let us not be moved. Let us continue the journey to freedom.

Let all God’s people say, “Amen.”

1. <https://www.swimmingworldmagazine.com/news/the-history-of-racial-discrimination-in-contested-waters-as-a-snapshot-of-prevailing-sorrow/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Holbert, John. Patheos [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. From Sneak Peek conversation, September 8, 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. # Evans, Rachel Held. Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again, Nelson Books, 2018

   [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/09/674995075/slave-bible-from-the-1800s-omitted-key-passages-that-could-incite-rebellion> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)