

Your Right Hand, O Lord, Glorious in Power

Exodus 15:1-6; Mark 5:21-43

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Last Sunday morning I was at Hope Presbyterian Church. Their pastor, Rev. Christie Ashton, was here. For about sixteen or seventeen years we have been doing a pulpit swap on the Sunday of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Sunday afternoon many of us were at Union Hill Primitive Baptist Church on Winchester Road. Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, black Christians, brown Christians, white Christians all gathered to celebrate Christian unity. I thought it was a beautiful experience. I hope it is the beginning of significant engagement between north Huntsville and south Huntsville.

The theme for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity comes from Christians in the Caribbean. I keep hoping they will invite me one year to help plan these materials. This would have been the perfect year! No, with my luck, I'll be invited when it's in the hinterland and 20 degrees below zero!

The theme comes from a hymn in the Old Testament book of Exodus. Scholars believe this is ancient material, some of the oldest poetry in the Hebrew Bible. It is one of two hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God in Exodus 15. Moses and the men of Israel sang one of the hymns. Miriam, Moses' sister and a prophetess, and the women of Israel sang the other. Here's the backstory to these two ancient hymns of praise.

The people of Israel languished as slaves in the land Egypt. The pharaoh of Egypt was a stern, hard-driving taskmaster. The people of Israel cried out to God for help, for deliverance, and God chose a man named Moses to be their deliverer. It was from a burning bush, a bush not consumed by the fire, that God called to Moses. God had heard the cries of the people. God saw their suffering. And God had selected Moses to be the one to go to Pharaoh and say, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go.'"

Of course, it would not be so simple. Pharaoh was a man with a very hard heart. He responded to Moses' demand by increasing the burden of the Jewish slaves. The Pharaoh quit providing straw that the slaves used to make bricks. This made their work harder. The daily quota of bricks was not lessened, and the people groaned under this added burden. Finally, to convince Pharaoh to let the people go, God sent a series of plagues. First, God turned the water of the Nile river into blood. That wasn't enough. God sent frogs to cover the land. Not enough. Then swarms of gnats and flies invaded. But Pharaoh remained obstinate, hardening his heart even more and refusing to release God's people. Other plagues fell upon Pharaoh and the people of Egypt, but he dug in his heels even deeper. Until finally the tenth and final plague: the death of the firstborn. I still like the way Cecil B. DeMille depicted this plague in the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*. A fog slithered through each Egyptian village. As the fog reached a home, a scream could be heard as the family discovered their firstborn child was dead. The dreadful fog crept throughout the land, passing over the homes of the Israelites whose doors and doorposts were marked with the blood of a lamb. The outcry of grief from the Egyptian people was so overwhelming that Pharaoh finally relented and let God's people go.

As the people fled Egypt, Pharaoh had a change of heart. He quickly mobilized his army to pursue and capture the fleeing Israelites. The Israelites came to the Red Sea. They were blocked. The Egyptian army was bearing down upon them, and they had no place to flee. The people of God were trapped. Until God performed the greatest miracle of the Old Testament. God sent a great wind and parted the Red Sea. The people of Israel were able to cross the Red Sea on dry ground. When the Egyptian army pursued them, the wind stopped. The walls of water came crashing down upon the Egyptians drowning all of Pharaoh's army.

That happened in Exodus 14. Our text and theme come from Exodus 15. Moses and Miriam led the men and women of Israel in songs of praise and thanksgiving for God's mighty deliverance. "Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power," the men sang, "your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy."

Let me pause a moment. I want to suggest that we need to be careful when we read this text in the year 2018. God is described here with militaristic language that we associate with radicalized forms of religion today. God is called “a warrior.” One of my translations calls God “a man of war.” God’s fury overthrew their adversaries, it says. God consumed them like stubble. The breath of God’s nostrils drove back the water of the Red Sea, it says. And God utterly destroyed their enemy. It was a holy war where everything—people, animals, everything—was destroyed.

This way of thinking about God today causes some fanatically religious people to behead their perceived adversaries, to bomb physicians’ clinics, fly jet planes into buildings, burn alive opponents, and to use any other means necessary to defeat those who oppose them. And when they’ve defeated their enemy, they sing songs of praise and thanksgiving much like this one from Exodus 15.

Is there any place for a warrior God in our world today? Can the world still tolerate talk of holy war? Are we at the point in human history where we must put away all language of religious militarism?

Almost.

I’m going to suggest that there are times when a holy war is appropriate. There are occasions when nothing short of holy war can be effective. Please allow me to explain.

This is a true story. It hurts me to tell it because it involves someone I love. It is the story of a man’s decline into alcoholism, as he told it to an Alcoholic’s Anonymous group meeting. He said it all started when he was fifteen years old. An uncle came to visit and told him that he had left him a gift on the front seat of the car. When he went to retrieve the gift, he found that it was a can of beer, his first. This uncle, by the way, was himself an alcoholic.

By the time this man was in his late teens, his life was out of control. A talented carpenter, he started a construction business that was trying to flourish. The problem was that his business continued to bump up against his need to drink. One was going to win and the other lose; they could not

co-exist. Time in jail, unsteady hands, unreliable behavior, they all conspired to ruined his company. Then he married. But his marriage also bumped up against his need to drink. They could not co-exist either. Again, alcohol won the battle.

Alcohol became this man's enemy, and he its slave.

This man finally reached the proverbial "bottom." In the mornings he had to drink to steady his hands. He couldn't comb his hair or brush his teeth until his hands were steadied. But his hands shook so badly that he couldn't hold a can of beer steady enough to drink it. So he placed the beer can between his knees and drank with a straw until he got enough alcohol in his blood stream to steady his hands.

The crisis occurred one morning when he discovered that someone had thrown away his straw. He couldn't find another one. He tried to drink from the can, but his hands shook so badly that the beer spilled all over his face and hair and shoulders. He said that he was near panic when he found an ink pen. He took the pen apart and used it as a straw. When his hands and nerves were steady, he went to dress for work. He said he looked into the mirror. His nose was red. His hair and shoulders were still wet from the spilled beer. His life was in shambles, and he wasn't yet forty years old. He confessed that he was drinking a couple of six packs of beer each morning before he went to work. He would drink throughout the workday. Then he would drink a couple of six packs during the evening. Every day.

He was trapped, and the enemy was bearing down upon him.

As he looked into the mirror that morning, he saw his enemy and declared war. He had to eliminate completely the enemy that was destroying his life. So he made a commitment to give it up to God, his Higher Power, as he puts it now. He called me. Another person and I took him to a center where he got the in-patient care he needed. That was 21 years ago this past summer. For 21 years now, he has been free from an enemy that was destroying him. And today my older brother will tell you that alcohol is something he had to declare holy war against.

Not people. We don't declare holy war against people. Not even people we perceive to be our enemy. That time has passed. History shows us the misery of that misguided theology. But some of our enemies are not people. Some of the things that are killing us are not people, and these enemies will be defeated with nothing less than all out holy war. So we call upon God, by whatever name you use, to do what only God can do. When our backs are up against a Red Sea and we see no way out, we call upon our

Deliverer. And when God crushes, shatters, our enemy, when the floods cover them and they go down into the depths like a stone, then we join Moses and Miriam in a hymn of praise and thanksgiving. “Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power,” we sing, “your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.”

Closing Prayer

Look upon us all, Lord. Especially those of us battling some non-human enemy. Be our Deliverer. With your right hand, O Lord, shatter all our enemies. Amen.