

Liberation's Song

[Exodus 14:19-31](#)

[Exodus 15:1b-11,20-21](#)

[Romans 14:1-12](#)

[Matthew 18:21-35](#)

Can you picture the other side of the Red Sea? Miriam picking up her tambourine. Can you feel the ground still damp under bare feet, the whole company breaking into dance, unable to hold it in. Moses and Miriam and the fleeing slaves who just watched Pharaoh's army disappear beneath the waves lift up a song, and the whole community joins in singing. "The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation." I find myself wanting to sing with them.... And then I read the rest of it. "Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy... the floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone." Something in me flinches at that. I don't want to celebrate anyone's death, even Pharaoh's army. So, what do we do with a song that thanks God for a body count?

Here's what I've come to believe: this song was never really about the Egyptians dying. It's about oppression dying. Miriam and the Israelites had nothing: no horses, no chariots, no weapons, no army, no power of any kind. Egypt held all the power and wealth, and used it against Israel, for four hundred years. What breaks on the seafloor that morning is not simply a group of powerful warriors, it's a system... the machinery that treats human beings as property, as labor, as expendable. God doesn't set out that morning to destroy Egyptians. God sets out to destroy the thing that convinced a nation they had the right to own others. Pharaoh drowns because Pharaoh will not, to the very end, release what he believes belongs to him. Under God's rule, oppressors die when they refuse to let go of the people, and the power, they think are theirs. I can get behind a song that celebrates liberation, even while grieving the death of those swallowed up by the lies of power's oppressive domination.

Before there is a reason to sing, notice what Israel does, and does not do. Just before today's reading begins, Moses tells them, "The LORD will fight for you; you have only to

keep still.” Israel doesn’t storm the beach. They don't organize a militia in the wilderness. They stand at the edge of the water and watch God do what they cannot do for themselves. This liberation is not a reward for people who worked hard enough, or fought bravely enough, or earned God's favor. It's a gift, handed to people who had nothing to offer in return. The first battle Israel wins; they don't even fight.

Which is exactly why what happens next ... not in today's reading, but across the rest of the story... should trouble us more than the drowning does. Within a few chapters, this liberated, undeserving, favored people is complaining that Moses has too much power. Within a generation they're building a golden calf and appointing their own gods. Within a few centuries they have kings, armies, and a temple establishment. God eventually has to send prophets, to stand in the town square accusing God's own liberated people of doing to the poor, the widow, and the immigrant exactly what Pharaoh did to them. Exodus gives Israel freedom. The rest of the Bible spends itself asking one relentless question: can God's people live without becoming Pharaoh themselves?

That question is not unique to ancient Israel. How often does this cycle repeat itself throughout history? A revolution overthrows a tyrant and installs a new one. A colonized people wins independence and recreates the very hierarchies that colonized it. A movement that begins by resisting an unjust institution grows large enough to become an institution, and starts enforcing the very conformity it once resisted. This isn't a story about a uniquely wicked ancient empire. It's a mirror. Liberated from oppressive power, we reach for power ourselves. Given the chance to be the one who decides, rather than the one who is decided for, who controls, rather than being controlled, we take it.

Which brings us, oddly, to a parable about a spreadsheet. In today's gospel, a servant owes his king ten thousand talents. The exaggeration is intentional and necessary. A

talent, itself, was already the largest unit of currency there was. A talent was worth about fifteen years of a laborer's wages. Ten thousand of them lands somewhere near seven or eight billion dollars today. It is not a debt anyone repays. It's designed to be impossible, which is exactly the point: this servant is forgiven what he could never, under any circumstance, have earned back. And he walks straight out of that audience with the king, finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. A denarius, in contrast, is about three month's wages. And he has that man thrown in prison until he pays every cent.

That servant has just been handed liberation, and within the same chapter, he has become Pharaoh. He has taken the exact shape of the power that was just lifted off him and set it down on someone weaker than himself. It would almost be funny if it weren't so familiar. We Episcopalians like to think of ourselves as the reasonable ones, the generous ones, the gracious ones, the ones who've done the work on inclusion. But that servant didn't set out to become a tyrant either. He just found someone smaller than him and reached for the power, the control, that was within his grasp.

Paul, writing to Rome, watches the same temptation play out inside the church itself... not over money, but over food and calendars and who's practicing their faith correctly. Paul asks, "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" Both the one who eats and the one who abstains belong to the same Lord. Neither gets to set up court over the other. It's a smaller-scale version of the warning in Matthew: the moment we've been shown mercy, our very next instinct is to go looking for somebody to manage, to correct, or hold something over. Paul won't let the church do to each other in miniature what Pharaoh did in the palace.

Here's what none of these three texts let us do: settle into feeling sorry for the powerless while assuming we are among them. If we've ever managed someone at work, parented a

child, held the gavel in a family decision, sat on a vestry, written a check, or simply known something another person in the room didn't... we have sat, however briefly, in Pharaoh's chair. This isn't a sermon about them, the powerful, out there. It's a sermon about all of us, in the small rooms of our own lives, where the debts owed to us are so much easier to remember than the debt we are forgiven.

Because here is the strange center of the gospel: God doesn't defeat Pharaoh by becoming a bigger, better, more imposing, more threatening Pharaoh. In Jesus, God BECOMES the oppressed one. Rome doesn't get conquered by Roman methods. Jesus takes on the very machinery of death ... betrayal, injustice, execution... and absorbs it rather than returning it. Forgiveness turns out to be the stronger force. Love outlasts the empire that killed him. That is not weakness. That is how this liberation actually works: not by producing a new class of winners, but by dismantling the whole architecture of winning and losing.

Liberation from Egypt must become a way of life, or we've only moved Pharaoh's address. Today's text isn't just about getting the people out of Egypt. It's about getting Egypt out of the people. For us, that takes noticing... genuinely noticing... the small, specific places where we hold power over others, and asking ourselves what it would cost us to set it down instead of using it. It takes remembering our own ten-thousand-talent debt every single time we're tempted to collect on a hundred denarii.

As we approach the table to feed off the body of our crucified Savior, may we gain the faith to believe in the power of self-giving love. May we be a people who notice where we have gained power for ourselves and find the courage to forfeit it. A people who elevate the weak instead of managing them, and who, when liberty comes, cannot help but sing

about it, joyfully dancing alongside everyone else who has experienced the same freedom.