

“CHOOSING THE END OF THE STORY”

Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 18:21-35

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There are stories that are foundational to a people or a culture, stories that define the political, theological, or emotional center of that people, a reference point in layer after layer of behavior and self-understanding. The Exodus is the foundation story of Judaism. Every year at Passover for upwards of three thousand years, Jews throughout the world have remembered this story in word and song and ritual of food. But beyond that, like the cross in Christianity, the story of the Hebrews' oppression at the hands of the evil Egyptians and God's miraculous deliverance of them permeates the whole of Jewish theology, piety, and self-definition.

Foundation stories of all ages and cultures tend to have a kind of formal sameness to them. They begin with a narrative that crescendos to a main event. Then there are the stories of the immediate aftermath of that event, both tales of great heroism and good, and tales of the not good: evil, exploitation, greed. A battle between good and evil is being waged. Finally though, the story finds its completion in the after-story, if you will. The story finds resolution in the reflection that shapes its narrative, the interpretation that tells us, in the battle between good and evil, who won, and why, and what was learned from that.

In the Exodus story, the narrative begins with the enslavement of the Hebrew people, and rises through the story of Moses: his birth, his youth, his encounter with God that leads him to confront Egypt's Pharaoh and demand that Pharaoh let the Hebrew people go. The story reaches its peak in this morning's reading when God in faith parts the waters of the Red Sea, and the people in answering faith walk through those waters, away from slavery and towards a new life yet to be defined. Then come the aftermath stories: the heroic leadership of Moses and the people's sometimes joyfully faithful journey through the desert; the other stories of plotting against Moses, of whining about not enough food or water, and why did we ever leave Egypt where even though life was not wonderful, it was at least familiar. Good and evil struggling together for the soul of this people and the soul of their story.

All of this is important, and if you want to take the time, it's worth reading through the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy to get the full flavor of how it plays out. But the most important piece of what goes on here is not the particular episodes of the story itself, but the reflection on them, how the community chooses finally to cast the story and institutionalize its meaning in the collective memory. In the Exodus story, the considered memory is portrayed in God's giving and the people accepting The Law, the whole great gift of the Jewish Torah, at Sinai. Out of the experience of fear and oppression, the people choose to respond by saying yes to God, saying yes to a theology and morality defined not by fear and whining, but by a radical commitment to justice and an equally radical hospitality. "Feed the poor," the Law commands. "Take care of the widows and orphans; offer hospitality not only to your friends, your family, your people; but to the strangers and sojourners among you." Why do you behave this way? Why for the Jews and later for us this God, this theology? The answer is written over and over in

Hebrew scripture “Because you were strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt until your God delivered you with a mighty hand.” The story is resolved; a choice was made, and its making cast the form for the entire narrative. We tend to take all this for granted. We, who grew up in the church, we think, of course, the stories of Moses and the Exodus lead to the giving of the Law on Sinai; they lead to the Bible’s passion for justice, for compassion, for inclusivity, because that’s the way it’s written. We don’t question the story. But you have to see, it didn’t have to be that way. The Israelites were oppressed by the Egyptians and delivered by a power mightier than Egypt. Those are the “facts” of the story. As the people reflected on that experience, there were so many ways they could have cast their narrative other than as an impetus to justice and equality. But in the end, in the aftermath of the event, after struggling between good, evil, and all in-between, they finally chose; they chose for an understanding that made them more; they chose for an interpretation of their calamity that opened them up; they chose for a commitment that made them the people of God.

As I wandered through the Exodus story this week and thought about how it ended and how it could have ended, I found myself thinking about last week-end and the visit of Reverend Arakawa and his wife among us. I know it was a holiday weekend and many of you could not be here to hear and see his presentation last Sunday night. As part of that presentation, he showed a movie, a retrospective for the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. What is most moving about the story of Hiroshima is how the survivors, the Hibakucha, have taken their unspeakable disaster and interpreted it, memorialized it to make their lives, to make their city not a place of rage and desire for vengeance, but a center for the study of peace. It’s a remarkable outcome; and again, the story didn’t have to end like that. The story has this particular end because of the choices those people made; and we, the whole world, as well as they, are blessed by their choosing.

Today marks the 4th anniversary of the terrorist attack of September 11th. We’re all aware of that as we come to worship today. Just those words, September 11th, are at the center of what has become a foundation story of this culture in this time. On some of the facts of this story and its aftermath at least most of us can agree. The story gave us a new vocabulary: Homeland security, Patriot Act, Alqaida. It launched us into a war with Iraq, whose costs—human and financial—are staggering. It has motivated both fear and hatred of American Muslims and an answering reaching out by both religious and secular groups to make common cause with Muslims. It has generated calls for retaliation, vengeance, for destroying those who are different from us and raised other voices for peace, for understanding, for embracing the strangers in our midst. The story of September 11th has rendered us a culture and a people deeply divided, and the best way forward is terrifyingly unclear.

What is clear is that we as a nation are at a point of choosing. The story of September 11th is only half-told. We have the event, and now 4 years of aftermath, and what we are struggling about as we go forward is its outcome: how this story will be finally cast in our culture, in our individual and national self-understandings, in our path towards the future. What will we finally make of this story and what will this story make of us? That is the question before us.

There is no shortage of voices raised these days with answers, so I hesitate to add mine. But as I

read my Bible, the place where God calls us who are Christians to go, the place where we find covenant and wholeness and identity as the people of God is when we take the evil that is done to us and we respond like the Israelites of the Exodus or like the survivors of Hiroshima. We find our identity as the people of God in choosing that because we have known terror, because we have known fear, because we have been attacked, and we know it to be wrong, then we will not respond like our attackers. We choose not to become like them. We choose not to pervert the teachings of our faith into a justification for vengeance. We choose not to allow our fear to erode our commitment to liberty, to openness, to justice for all people. Bill Moyers, who calls himself a “Christian realist”—that is a sermon in itself—in an address given at Union Theological Seminary last Friday offers his perspective on the struggle abroad in our country and in the world, saying that “terrorists plant time bombs in our heads, hoping to turn each and every imagination into a private hell governed by our fear of them. They win only if we let them, only if we become like them: vengeful, imperious, intolerant, paranoid. They win if we become holy warriors too: if we kill the innocent as they do, strike first at those who had not struck us; cease to think and reason together.”

As a Christian theologian, I would throw in my lot in this struggle with those who still work to think and reason across the great divides of this day. I would throw in my lot with those who refuse to demonize either Muslim terrorists or conservative Republicans. I would throw in my lot with the people of God who out of their experience of pain called for an end to the inflicting of pain and in their best theological moments drew no circles that shut others out. That is my response. But I ask that you join your prayers with mine that the God of all people may be with us all as we struggle to choose where we will stand, and help us to write the end of this story as a story that ultimately makes the world closer and safer, building bridges across the divides of this country and of the world. Please join me in silent prayer. Amen.