

The theatre darkens, the initial images on the screen transport you back into ancient Egypt, a story written by God, produced by God, directed by God. In the opening scenes the Israelites are hurriedly eating the last of the lamb (from last week's Passover story) and putting their possessions into sacks. They are defiantly marching out of town, gathering in strength and numbers as they go. They head off into the great unknown wilderness, following the pillar of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night.

Then the scene switches to Pharaoh's compound. And you see an agitated Pharaoh, second guessing himself and ordering a massive military deployment. All his cavalry and all his infantry march off after the Hebrews with orders to capture them all and bring them back. The defenseless Israelites against the military might of Egypt. The scene is set for a massacre. The terrified Israelites curse their leader who calls on them to stand by and see the deliverance of the Lord. The clouds descend, the waters part, Moses leads the Israelites on to safety and the Egyptians with all their heavy military equipment get mired in the mud and swallowed up in the waves of the returning sea.

What a great story. You have a reluctant hero, a plot full of suspense, wonderful special effects, a great chase scene, good versus evil with the good ones winning in the end! Someone should make a movie out of it.

And, of course they have.

But for us this is more than just a story and we don't appreciate Hollywood taking one of our faith's most significant stories and making millions on it by capitalizing on the drama and violence or by adding things that just are not there in the Biblical story.

We want to claim that this is not just a story but a true story. The Bible is true, this really happened, sort of. When we try to read the story in the Bible as history, we find ourselves mired in all kinds of contradictions and confusions. Maybe some of those jumped out at you as you heard the story today. Were the Israelites "wandering aimlessly" or "going forth defiantly"? Did Moses split the sea with his magic rod or did a mighty wind from the east blow the waters away? Did the Egyptians get mired in the mud or did Moses use that magic rod to bring back the waters and drown them all?

We are not the first ones to notice such inconsistencies. Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived about the same time as Jesus, retells the story and just doesn't mention the wind. It is all Moses. Eusebius, a Greek historian from about the same time concludes that it all can be explained by natural causes. It was just a case of Moses knowing the tides and choosing the right moment so that the Israelites would get across but the Egyptians would be caught by the returning tide. Modern scholarship acknowledges that the story as we have it now is a combination of two or maybe more different versions, each with different sources. It is an old story. It may be rooted in history, but it is much more than history. It may have started out as the story of the fortuitous escape of some rebel slaves aided on their journey by a quirk of nature but it is much more than that. And however you read it, it is obvious that historical accuracy was not the author's concern. The story is preserved for us because it tells us something about God and God's people. It is theology, not history and certainly not Hollywood spectacle. So the writer is not concerned about any inconsistencies that come from a blending of the ordinary, natural world with the extraordinary, supernatural world. The point is that God's hand is in all of it. The supernatural is in the natural; theology is worked out in history. Our God is incarnational. God does not remain above and beyond in a safe heavenly realm. God gets down and dirty and acts in the muck and mire of our lives. When slaves are escaping, God is there. When military powers are headed to destruction, God is there. I don't think God plans for or wants the destruction of the Egyptians or their kind, but sometimes if we insist on following blindly the ways of the world, we bring about our own demise. But God is there waiting to show us how to pick up the pieces.

The Biblical story-teller pits two great powers against each other in this story, God and Pharaoh. Pharaoh stands, not as a particular person in a particular country but as the embodiment of all the empires of world down through the ages. Pharaoh's Egypt and Caesar's Rome and Elizabeth's England and Putin's Russia are all the same and although we do not like to admit it, Trudeau's Canada and Trump's America share the same empire characteristics. Empire relies on military might to control others, empire measures itself by riches amassed and resources consumed, empire cares about people only as far as they serve its purpose, empire comes and goes. God's reign, on the other hand is eternal, it cares for the least as well as the greatest, it measures itself by how well creation is cared for, in God's reign righteousness flows like a mighty river across the land rather than with armoured tanks. Pharaoh's way is the way of slavery and violence; God's way is the way of freedom and justice. When the story says that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, it is saying that really there is only one plan, God's plan. Pharaoh may think that he is in control, but this is God's world. It is interesting

to note that both the Egyptian and the Israelites think that God's plan won't work. The Israelites were reluctant to leave Egypt in the first place, and when they are almost free and see the cavalry and infantry pursuing them, gaining ground, they cry out, "We told you this would never work. Now we are all going to die out here in the wilderness. Better to live as a slave than to die." God's way is just too hard.

In the face of the empires of our world we may think the same thing. There is nothing we can do about the growing gap between the rich and poor. We just hope we don't get too close to the bottom ourselves. We know that we need more affordable housing and better public transit 'but' we might as well vote for the politician who promises to lower my taxes because they are all crooked anyway. International corporations are beyond the control of anyone. We just have to accept the ways of the world, the ways of empire. Better to live as a slave than to die. Contrary to this thinking, Moses says "Do not be afraid; stand by and see the deliverance which God will work for you today...the Lord will fight for you. You only have to keep still." But then, in the next verse God says, "Why are you crying to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward." If we were to distill all of that into modern conversation, I think it would translate: Don't worry! Just shut up and listen and do what you are told.

Stand by and see what God is doing. God has always been leading us from death to life and from slavery to freedom. Sometimes God does that in big ways. In the beginning God brought order to the watery chaos and out of darkness and nothingness created the world and all that is within it and beyond it. Leading the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom. That's another big one. As is the resurrection of Christ, God's victory of life over death. But there are lots of little ones too: the addict who is led from self-hatred to self-giving life, the cancer patient who experiences healing regardless of the final outcome, the woman who escapes an abusive relationship, the family who resists the overwhelming pressure of our consumer culture and buys less not more.

In the end of the story, the Israelites fear God and trust Moses. "When Israel saw the great act which the Lord had performed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and had faith in the Lord and his servant Moses." God didn't save the Israelites because they were faithful, left to themselves they would have remained slaves in Egypt. But upon seeing the salvation of God, they responded faithfully and joyfully. The next chapter is a joyous song of praise, a new song to the Lord praising God for the wonders he has done. God gave the Israelites not just freedom from slavery, but freedom to live faithfully and joyfully and responsibly. Now they didn't always do that. Sometimes they fell back into their slave mentality, they encountered difficulties and forgot to trust in God.

Freedom from/freedom to; Israelites going forth defiantly

Freedom for joyful praise, responsible living

Relatively mundane acts we do, shut up and listen, do what you are told, make a difference, part of a cosmic plan, get with it or try to act against it, but God will prevail

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