

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 19, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Exodus 14:19–31

Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the LORD threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. (ESV)

Or,

Exodus 15:1b–11, 20-21 (Omitted verses included in italics)

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.
The LORD is a man of war;
the LORD is his name.

“Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea,
and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.
The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,
your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.
In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;
you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.
At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.
The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.’
You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

*You stretched out your right hand;
the earth swallowed them.*

*“You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed;
you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.
The peoples have heard; they tremble;
pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.
Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;*

*trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;
all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.
Terror and dread fall upon them;
because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone,
till your people, O LORD, pass by,
till the people pass by whom you have purchased.
You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain,
the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode,
the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.
The LORD will reign forever and ever.”*

For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea.

Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 14:1–12

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 18:21–35

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

While it would make for an unusually long first reading on a Sunday morning, after reading what I have about our two choices for a first reading in Track One, I would suggest that you think about combining them. They form a whole that I had not seen before. Not just a narrative whole, but a theological/anthropological whole. I'll come back to that in a moment.

Commentators on the crossing of the Red Sea (or the Sea of Reeds, as some now translate it) have noted the hands of two authors, here, J and P. I'm mentioned the four major sources of the Old Testament before, J, E, D, and P. Here in the crossing of the sea we see clear evidence of two very different viewpoints. From the J source we have the waters driven back by a strong east wind. His interpretation of events is that the receding of the waters was largely a natural event. But when P edits the story, the images are much more supernatural, the waters stand up, a wall on either side of the Israelites as they cross.

Brevard Childs, in his commentary on the book of Exodus (I bought it because there was so little available online about these chapters, which I found amazing. Kindle is most helpful when you have limited bookshelves!) helped me to understand why we have these two different emphases within the narrative. For the J (and E) author, the crossing of the Red Sea is the beginning of the narrative of wandering in the wilderness that will follow. It is marked as such in part by the introduction of the theme of the people grumbling against Moses when they find themselves trapped between Pharaoh and the waters. So the saving act bears greater relationship to the ones that will follow, that appear to result from natural phenomena, like the coming of the doves or the manna.

But P sees the crossing of the Red Sea as the culmination of the Exodus narrative, and so the splitting of the waters bears greater resemblance to the mighty acts of God when He strikes Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. What Childs asks the modern interpreter to do thorough, is to read the narrative as a whole, as the final editor intended. It isn't a matter of dividing the overlapping stories and choosing one or the other, but seeing this more as a "both/and" moment. The preserving of both traditions really demands that we understand it this way.

Then we get to the song that is sung on the far side of the sea, after Pharaoh and his armies have been destroyed.

First, I'll make reference to the request that I made above, that the story of the crossing and the song be read as a whole. In one very helpful article that I did find, the author points out that by preserving this whole, we preserve a "hymnic pattern" that is described in Psalm 40.

Psalm 40:1–3

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
 out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
 making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
 a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
 and put their trust in the LORD. (ESV)

This pattern consists of three elements: The cry to God (Exodus 14:10, just before our reading starts), God's deliverance (most of the rest of 14), and the "new song" (the song of chapter 15). The correspondence of this Psalm to the Exodus event is too obvious to be ignored. It seems entirely plausible to me that our final editor had every intention (this editing coming long after David's writing of the Psalm) that this song be viewed as the final element of this pattern. What is more, in the singing of this song by later worshipers, the generations that follow will be able to enter in the the fear and the belief in the Lord that is the result of the original event.

(I'm tempted here to go down a rabbit hole on the relationship of this pattern to the power of testimony in healing ministry, but instead I'll just make note of it and come back to it at a later time.)

There remains one significant aspect of this pair of texts that I don't want to overlook. It is the role of Miriam and the women who follow her in the story. Commentators on this and other texts, Phyllis Trible perhaps the most prominent among them, have noted the way that women's voices have been minimized or erased altogether in the editing of biblical texts. By careful examination, they have often been able to unearth earlier layers of these texts in which women played a much larger part than they do in the final canonical forms. Chapter 15 of Exodus appears to be one of those moments. Moses and the people lift up their voices in song, and only at the conclusion of the song does Miriam cry out, "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea." The author of the article I mentioned above (I'll cite the article below) also very carefully laid out the likelihood that Miriam's call to song was the impetus for the song listed above it, not a response to it. He sees the song of Miriam and the women as an antiphonal one, with the women offering a verse and the

gathered people singing their responses, *but it would have been led by the women*. (The pronoun “them” to whom Miriam sang is in the masculine plural, used for men or mixed genders, so Miriam was clearly not instructing only those women who were with her to sing.)

This does make better sense of 15:1 to me, if we read it this way:

And Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.” (15:21)

followed by:

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. (15:1)

and the following verses.

Here is a link to the article to which I refer above: [“Song of Moses, Song of Miriam.”](#)

Second Reading

Last week, because I got caught up in a discussion of the place of the “Summary of the Law” in first century Judaism and Paul’s version of it in chapter 13, I didn’t give any real attention to this letter’s contingent nature and the way that plays into how we read each segment. This week draws me back into that in a big way. And before I get to the way my understanding of Paul’s purpose in writing Romans affects our reading of the opening verses of chapter 14, I would like to go back to the opening verses of chapter 13.

We don’t read these verses at any point in the lectionary, and it’s probably just as well. They’re troublesome if they’re read outside of (the right) context. I’ll quote them here.

Romans 13:1–7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.

Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed. (ESV)

Read out of the proper context (as they have been for millennia) we are inclined to believe that Paul is saying of Nero and his obscenely corrupt administration that "whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad." The sheer absurdity of it makes me wonder why we still cling to this reading and apply it to all governmental institutions (unless we don't like the current administration, then we employ some remarkable mental gymnastics to get around what we've said before).

But let's put Paul's words back into their situational context. He writes to a group of Christians who worship alongside their Jewish siblings, still in the synagogue. The differences between groups that occasioned the letter are not between Jewish, Law-obedient Christians and Gentile Christians, but between Christian and Jewish believers. (I hate to keep reiterating this, but I never know who's read the earlier Divergences where it was more thoroughly discussed.) Once we understand and accept this, the meaning of 13:1-7 becomes clear. The "governing authorities" of whom he speaks are the synagogue authorities. Paul is exhorting the Christian believers to be obedient to the authorities who govern the synagogues in which they worship.

And keeping this setting in mind, our reading for this week takes on new meaning. The "weak" or "weak in faith" of whom Paul speaks are not Law-obedient Christians, but his Jewish siblings who have not yet come to faith. ("How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" 10:4) As he has done throughout the letter, Paul calls upon his Christian kindred to be respectful of and (in the case of 13:1-7) even obedient to their Jewish friends among whom they live and worship. One of the things that Paul holds dear is the idea that, while we are free in Christ and much that would have been forbidden to us is now permitted, it is also the believer's responsibility to curtail their freedom for the sake of the "weak." In 1 Corinthians, the "weak" are those whose consciences are still affected by the eating of foods sacrificed to idols, in Romans it is broader, including all Paul's Jewish siblings who honor different days, eat different foods, pray different ways. While Paul doesn't

specifically suggest that Christians abstain from behaviors that are offensive to Jews, he does criticize those who stand in judgment of them for their different ways of living. As he puts it, “Whether we live then, or die, we are the Lord’s.” (Sorry, had to toss that translation of this week’s verse in from the Book of Common Prayer.)

Gospel Text

Early in our reading, we have the ESV’s translation of Jesus’ answer to Peter, in which He says that we are to forgive the sibling (brother) who sins against us, “seventy-seven” times. I am reminded that in the translations I grew up with it read, “Seventy times seven” times. After spending some time with the Greek, I think the older translation makes better sense. The word translated “seventy” is an adverb, the word translated seven is the adjective that describes the number of times one is to forgive. Adverbs describe adjectives, they don’t just add onto them. Seventy “sevens” makes better sense than “seventy-seven.”

And why make this change? It reminds me of a preacher I heard once who was talking about tithing. He told the story of someone who came up to him to ask, “Does the tithe apply to my income before or after taxes?” His answer? “The only reason I can think of to ask this question is because we’re trying to figure out how to give God less.”

The only reason I can think of to substitute seventy-seven for seventy times seven is because we’re trying to get the number of times we have to forgive down to something manageable.

Of course, that doesn’t change the truth that the repetition of “seven” in “seventy-seven” still uses the perfect number 7 in a way might suggest something outrageously high. But “seventy times seven” sounds a lot more daunting. Like the thing we said when we were little, “infinity times infinity!” Regardless, Jesus’ answer is, “so many times that the number doesn’t matter. Just keep going.”

And then we get the parable of the unforgiving servant. Jesus’ point? That God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are inextricably entwined. But not the way that you may think. It isn’t a cause and effect thing. Well, it is, but not the way it looks initially in the parable. That is, we don’t limit God’s forgiveness of us by our forgiveness of others. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want that much power over God.

But God’s forgiveness of me does change what I do. It is simply impossible to stand in the light of God’s profligate forgiveness and *not* extend forgiveness to others. The only way I can do what the unjust servant did is to refuse to accept that the forgiveness God

has bestowed upon me isn't real. That His forgiveness can't be that simple or that complete. Somewhere, that debt of mine is still going to come back to bite me in the hind quarters. Once I've decided not to believe in the forgiveness that is mine, of course I still scramble to be sure everything that is owed to me comes to me.

Parables read us more than we read them. Jesus used this one to show us how tempting it is to put a limit on "seventy times seven" and make it somehow conditional on what the other does. If they show remorse, if they forgive someone else, *then* I'll extend to them the grace they deserve. It's an easy trap to fall into, and the parable lays it out beautifully.

Because the real point of the parable is this. "If you find in your heart that you are still capable of withholding forgiveness from anyone, *anyone*, then you haven't yet known the fullness of the forgiveness that God has poured out on you."