

“REMEMBERING WHAT GOD DID”

Exodus 11:1 – 12:32

February 24, 2019

Rev. Jerry Duggins

You can't believe everything you read in the Bible. "The Bible said it. I believe it. End of story!" I've encountered a few people over my years with this attitude. They are, of course, lying. The Bible says that women should be silent in church, that wives should submit to their husbands, that slaves should obey their masters, that homosexuality is an abomination, that it's wrong to eat pork. Those who rely on the Bible to speak the truth in all things are content to believe these things. But the Bible also says that if a woman's husband dies, the brother is obligated to take her as his wife; that if a woman remains barren, she may give her servant to her husband for the purpose of bearing children; and as we read today, that God killed the first-born of every Egyptian and their animals.

If you were here last week, you may have been taken aback by the severity of the plagues that God sent on the Egyptians, but today we are talking about life and death. If you have any humanity, your heart aches for them and your conscience is disturbed by this latest activity of God. No one rejoices in the death of a child. Stories like these cause many Christians to avoid the Old Testament altogether.

One of the difficulties with these "heart" questions is that we become reluctant to think about them, to apply our reason to the problem. I want you to bear with me for a couple minutes while I sound a bit academic. I sometimes despair that our culture has cast rigorous thinking as irrelevant to living, but you will never make much use of the Hebrew scriptures unless you are willing to mute the emotion briefly while your mind turns over what is happening in the story. I promise I will come back to the heart before I'm done.

I want to acknowledge my debt to Walter Brueggemann's *Old Testament Theology*, largely accessible only to scholars. The main point of this massive volume is that the Old Testament is largely testimony. It is not an unbiased attempt to discover the facts about certain historical events. It is not a scientific explanation for the creation and order of the universe. Most scholars today believe that most of the people from the tribes of Israel that entered the Promised Land never spent any time as slaves in Egypt. There is some evidence of an Exodus, but they probably formed only a small portion of the people of Israel. You can't believe everything you read in the Bible.

And yet this story forms a central part of Israel's self-understanding. It forms their core sense of identity. It's not history, but it is testimony. It is a witness to their understanding of God, themselves and the world in which they live. What makes it scripture and not fantasy is that the testimony is formed by their experience of God.

This is the important point: what the Bible says about God is based on its writers' observations about the world. Just as we infer the existence of a creator from the beauty and intricacies of the natural world, so too did the biblical authors. What is

remarkable is that they inferred a single creator in a world which ascribed the various parts of creation to different gods. The biblical writers observed a basic flaw in human beings and ascribed it to human resistance to the will of God. So the Bible sometimes ascribes actions to God that reflect certain observations about the nature of the world in which they lived.

Let's go back to the story and I think you can see what I mean. When God slays the first-born, the testimony being offered is not just about God in a vacuum but about the world. You can see this when you ask the question, "Who's responsible for the death of these children?" The Bible says that God performed the act, but we know that's not the whole story. The storyteller observes that there is injustice in the world, that people are often divided into oppressors and oppressed. Israel is born in the crucible of slavery. These people initially come together in their suffering. That suffering comes at the hands of Pharaoh. So the first thing to say about God is not that God is a child-slayer, but that God is partial to those who suffer, to the vulnerable. That's where the story began when God called Moses. "I have heard the cries of my people."

The second thing to observe is that oppressors don't give up easily. They like to hold on to power. When Exodus tells us that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, it is not so much an affirmation of God's cruelty as an observation about the nature of God's world. Hard hearts only get harder. That's the way the world is, and so implicitly, Israel is not afraid to lay that at God's feet. We would say it differently today, but the tendency to blame God for bad things that happen to us persists. Is that about God? Or is that about us? Head and heart don't come together very well on this. I can get my head to say that God didn't do it, but if it's my child that dies, my heart cries out to God, "Why?"

And so Israel, in its testimony, refuses to shy away from pointing the finger at God. It doesn't explain it, but it does contextualize it. And when we read scripture, we need to be careful to hear the full story and not dwell on a single point. In the full story innocent children die. When Moses is born, so are many other Israelite children, and they die at the command of Pharaoh. Our hearts are appalled at God's activity as described in the story, but the death of innocent children is a reality in our world as well, and whether we see that as the activity of God or the "permissive will" of God, doesn't ease the pain. Israel, in its testimony chose to see God at work powerfully, rather than impotent in addressing the wrongs of the world. The story reflects a theological position, not an historical fact. The truth of what God does in the world, of how God acts in the world, remains a mystery. You can't believe everything the Bible tells you.

God does a lot of appalling things in the Bible. Don't ignore them. They remain a challenge to faith today, just as they were in biblical times. But after you've pondered those things, read the rest of the story, where the important truths that apply to us and to our world are often more clearly stated. There are other things for the heart to acknowledge.

"This day will be a day of remembering for you," is what God tells Moses. This verse stands at the core of the meaning of Passover, at the core of Israel's self-understanding. It is a call to remember how they came together as a people of God. But what should they remember about the day? First, they should remember that innocent

children died. There is a cost to those who oppress others. And that cost may sometimes be that which they love most. This is a warning to the people of Israel. This is why the law that Moses brings commands them to welcome the stranger among them. This is why Jesus commands us to love our enemies. The price is too high for hating them. Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt.

The Bible isn't a history book, but it affirms the importance of history in the formation of a people. You can see why this story speaks volumes to African Americans today, whose ancestors were slaves in this land, whose ancestors built the wealth of this country, against their will, without remuneration, without personal benefit, and with a great deal of suffering. Passover calls the Israelites not to forget this history, to put it behind them, but to remember it, lest they fall into the trap of oppressing others. Remembering so that compassion can well up within them.

The story also teaches us to remember that you can't change course with a hard heart. The end of hardness is always death. Better that it be the loss of privilege, than the loss of life. As Martin Luther King Jr. was noted for saying, "We are none of us free until we are all free." Pharaoh realizes this only too late, when he asks for a blessing as the people depart.

Along with the loss of life, the consequences of oppression, remember God's commitment to the vulnerable, God's desire and strength to rescue and to preserve life, and to bless life. The Passover is not just a warning; even more, it's a celebration of life and hope. Deliverance does come. Hope plays as big a role in the coming together of the people as does the shared suffering. Read the stories of the other plagues again and you will see that even as Pharaoh's heart hardens, the hearts of the other Egyptians open up to the slaves. Evil is almost always perpetrated by the few. This is not to say that people are basically good, that we don't often let our interests get in the way, but to say that we are made for love and we will eventually get there. It is as inevitable as the collapse of evil. Communities are formed and sustained by compassion and love. To lose this is to lose everything. But to remember is to gain it all.

You don't have to believe that God killed children or hardened Pharaoh's heart for personal glory, though the Bible says that. You don't have to believe everything you read in the Bible, but when the stories are challenging, when our hearts are repulsed, remember that they also contain truths to nurture and build a community of faith. Remember, too, that there are warnings against the all-too-tempting practices by which community is destroyed.

Remembering the story makes sacred the history and instructs us in the way to life and wholeness. May God grant us, our minds and our hearts, memories to sustain our life together. Amen.