

“A Way Out of No Way”

“Pharaoh’s army got drown-ded.” That’s not such good news for Pharaoh, I suppose, or for his army. More on them in a little bit. But ultimately this story isn’t really about Pharaoh. It’s a story about God. More precisely it’s *the* story about God. We can’t say it enough: “God makes a way out of no way.” And don’t you forget it.

There are a dozen different ways to preach this story. It’s a story about power and powerlessness. It’s the richest, most technologically advanced war machine in the history of the world—these people have chariots!—against a ragtag collection of former slaves staggering toward freedom. Pharaoh has the horses and the spears and the skilled warriors, and Moses is carrying a stick.

Speaking of Moses: there’s another mismatch. Pharaoh, if you believe his press releases, is a descendant of the gods. Pharaoh is divine, proclaiming the purity of his pedigree. Pharaoh’s word is law, his every utterance means life and death. Moses is a stuttering old man. And while he, too, will gain some notoriety as a lawgiver, he’s just the messenger. Moses is a misfit, a man between two cultures, a Hebrew by birth and an adopted member of Pharaoh’s own household, a fugitive from justice—Richard Kimball herding sheep in the boondocks—whose most powerful word, the holy and sacred name of God, is an unpronounceable mouthful of consonants. This mismatch makes David and Goliath look like a fair fight.

And then there is the clash of religions. The cult of the state, where ruler and god are one, with priests and pyramids and pomp and circumstance and clarity and certitude; and over against that a collection of ancient stories told around campfires, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of a promise that is so old that the slaves have all but forgotten that this promise makes them a people. There is no way the slaves come out on top, no way Moses prevails in this contest; no way... except for God’s way.

This story is about the arc of history. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the long arc of moral history bends toward justice.¹ The God of the Bible intervenes on behalf of the downtrodden and the oppressed. God favors the poor. King knew that because he knew this story.

This story is about the judgment of history on mighty empires that amass their wealth on the backs of the poor and oppressed. It is about worldly glory coming to naught when it has been gained from the forced toil of others. We might be moved to feel sorry for Pharaoh, especially since the Bible says that God “hardened his heart.” But Pharaoh’s cardio sclerosis has at least as much to do with the hold his power has on him as it has to do with God. Pharaoh has countless opportunities to do the right thing, to “let my people go” because justice requires it. At each juncture of the story Pharaoh has an

¹ King said this on numerous occasions, among them in a sermon entitled “Remaining Awake Through a Revolution” that he delivered at Grinnell College in 1968. A Grinnell freshman at the time, I was singing in the College Choir for the service.

exit ramp off the expressway to destruction, each round of plagues a chance to play this differently. But even after the death of the firstborn at Passover he first lets the Hebrews go... and then chases them down with his chariots. Pharaoh's outcome in the story is the consequence of his determination to be Pharaoh.

The story is about all of these things; but mostly and finally it is a story about God. If we want to know how we should read this story, a huge clue is found in what follows it: the children of Israel sing and dance for a whole chapter. The story just stops while Moses and his sister Miriam lead the people in rejoicing. They were up against it, hard against the sea that was to these desert people a symbol of chaos and death. And then, as at creation, God separated the waters from the waters to make a way out of no way. "I will sing to the LORD for [God] has triumphed gloriously... the LORD is my strength and my might and has become my salvation." This song is believed by scholars to be among the oldest material in the Bible. We have not learned this story until we have joined the song. The God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel; the God of Moses and Miriam and especially the God of Jesus Christ, fashions new beginnings out of dead ends and makes a way where there is no way.

We know this story. It is the story of the young pastor Martin Luther King, Jr., bent over his kitchen table in despair in the middle of the night—fearful, confused and overwhelmed—and then hearing in the stillness of his empty heart the promise of Jesus Christ always to be with him. It is the story of John McCain languishing in a prison cell. It is the story of Barack Obama, a biracial kid raised in poverty by a single mom. It is the story of an alcoholic on his or her knees, life a shambles, attempts at reform failed once again, praying out a sense of helplessness because there is nothing else to do. It is the story of the submission of the spirit that is at the heart of all true religion, the acknowledgement that our attempts to fashion the universe after our own design have failed. I have fallen and I can't get up; this is the end for me. "It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." From here, but for you, O God, there is no way.

I know this story, from the time when I went through a divorce as a young man. It wasn't what you would probably think. Initially there was mostly huge relief in the flight from a mutually destructive relationship, release from the burden of trying to be somebody else, freedom in days where blessed solitude replaced bitter conflict. But it was a few months after the separation, while I was working in a church and preparing to lead a Bible study, that the real enormity of it hit home to me. I was reading along in Romans and came to the part where it says that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And suddenly I realized that Paul didn't just mean everybody, he also pointedly and specifically meant me. And when he said that he couldn't do the good he wanted to do, that was true for me, too. I hadn't just escaped from a bad relationship, I had failed in a moral commitment, and I needed to face into that failure and find forgiveness, and I had no power to forgive myself.

I realized that I could not make myself be the person I wanted to be. But I could let myself be molded into the person God wanted me to be. On my own, there was no way. But the reality of the way for me came through some words from a sermon by Paul Tillich, who wrote:

Sometimes at that moment [of despair] a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, “You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.*²

That’s the great irony in the life of the spirit. The power to change begins with acknowledgement and acceptance of ourselves as we are. That’s where it starts: facing the truth. For me God made a way out of no way when I realized that I could accept the gift of my life as it was... and offer that gift back to God.

Oh, yes: we know this story.

And so probably I should quit right there, because that all sounds pretty neat and tidy and that’s the place where we all live happily ever after, or at least we sing and dance for a while. But the story doesn’t really stop there. What happens *after* the crossing of the Red Sea? Well, what happens is forty years of wandering around in the wilderness with the people moaning and complaining about how hard it is there and wanting to go back to Egypt. In the wilderness they learn the lesson over and over and over again each day as the manna from heaven gives them their sustenance and the water that keeps them alive flows from the pitiless rocks of the parched desert. There are new moments of great clarity, to be sure, like the giving of the Ten Commandments. But even as Moses is up on the mountain getting the stone tablets of the law, the folks are down below in their little desert disco worshipping a golden calf because it’s something they can see.

And what happens *after* the resurrection of Jesus Christ? The immediate aftermath consists of eleven disciples and assorted other followers huddling together in terror for fifty days while they wait either for Jesus to return or for the Roman authorities to arrest them. And then comes another peak moment, the visitation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But soon enough the church morphs into disputatious little communities that scratch each other’s eyes out over arguments that when you come right down to it aren’t so very important.

For some strange reason we expect life to be perfect on the other side of the Red Sea, on the day after Easter, on the bright morning after the dark night when we accepted the fact that we are accepted, or when we asked Jesus Christ to come into our hearts and be Lord of our lives. But once God shows us a new way we soon enough revert to a variation on our old ways; and then we need to hear the story all over again, and to live it all over again, and to let it live in us and through us all over again. And by the way, we do this—coming together to remind one another of the stories and to sing the songs and pray for forgiveness and a new beginning—we do it every week.

Even as we sing and dance with Moses and with Miriam and proclaim the gracious love of the God who makes a way, tomorrow we strike out again across the wilderness. But we don’t go alone. We never go alone. Thanks be to God.

² Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted.” Reprinted in *The Shaking of the Foundations*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948, p. 162.

Amen

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