

CONSTRUING THE CROSS: DELIVERANCE

Exodus 12 (selected verses)

John 6 (selected verses)

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a Lenten series entitled "Construing the Cross."

Exodus 12:1-7, 11-13

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it....This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.

It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

John 6:48-51, 53-58

I am the bread of life.

Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh....

Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.

During Lent at Westminster, the five sermons I am preaching form a series whose name is "Construing the Cross."¹ This series looks at *different* but *complimentary* ways our faith seeks to interpret the death of Jesus Christ: as sacrifice, as scapegoating, as deliverance, as tree, and as serpent. Today the association we explore is that of the cross as deliverance.

¹ The series grows out of a book: Frances M. Young, *Construing the Cross* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015).

Let us pray: *Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; Come kindle the flame of sacred love; in these expectant hearts of ours. Amen.*

I.

I remember learning in seminary that just as the *death and resurrection* of Christ are the most significant events of the Christian faith, the *deliverance* of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is the seminal event in the faith of the Israelites.

I also remember being taught that there are *linguistic links* between the Hebrew word for “deliverance” found in the Old Testament and the Greek word for “salvation” found in the New Testament;² and that even the name “Jesus” is derived from the Hebrew word meaning “God saves.”³

Deliverance and *salvation* are thus linked in the earliest understanding of the Christian faith, with the deliverance from slavery giving rise to the Christian understanding of salvation from sin and death through the cross of Christ.

All this coincided with something else that was occurring in theology during the time when I was in seminary: the stirring of liberation theology, in which Latin American, African-American, and third-world theologians were looking at the Exodus story and seeing in God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery parallels with God’s movement in history in our day liberating third-world peoples from tyranny and oppression and African Americans from the heritage of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. Though there were appropriate cautions against too close an identification of the Spirit of God with any *one* movement of human liberation, the overall message was clear: God’s action of deliverance from political and economic oppression is an *earthly* component of God’s action freeing us from the slavery to sin and death which inflicts us individually and collectively.⁴

This theological overview has always come to mind when I have considered moments in human history when people move toward freedom:

- The rediscovery of the individual during the Renaissance
- The freedom of conscience and interpretation of scripture Luther brought during the Reformation
- The ideals behind our own Revolution – “We hold these truths to be self-evident...that all men are created equal...”⁵ and the afterlife of those words as they took root and bore fruit in ways still unfolding to us today.

² Alan Richardson writes: “The principal theme of the Bible is God’s deliverance of mankind from the power of sin, death, and Satan through his action in Jesus Christ; and this mighty deliverance is foreshadowed in the history of God’s people Israel by his deliverance of them from such disasters as Egyptian bondage or Babylonian exile....the idea of deliverance [is] more usually expressed [in the Bible] by other words, particularly “salvation,” “redemption,” and their cognates.” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, George Arthur Buttrick, General Editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), page 814.

³ John D. Davis, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1929), 379.

⁴ In an address at Union Theological Seminary in New York, given by the late Dr. George Landes, sometime between the Fall of 1976 and May of 1980, I heard the Old Testament professor express to the entire community a wise caution that the story of Creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) precedes the Exodus story (Exodus 14), and the promise of a “a new heaven and a new earth” follows in Book of Revelation (Revelation 21:1), thus bracketing God’s movements of liberation in the Bible between original creation and final redemption, and thereby cautioning us against too close an equation of any one particular liberation movement with the activity of God, and reminding us that God transcends any of our experiences of human liberation.

⁵ *The Declaration of Independence* (1776).

I continue to think of God's work of deliverance when I consider:

- The Emancipation Proclamation
- Women's Suffrage
- The defeat of Nazism
- The Civil Rights Movement
- The collapse of Communism
- The dismantling of Apartheid
- The growing welcome in our country of people regardless of the most personal aspects of their sexual identity and affection.

The signs "I AM A MAN" I saw as a teenager held high by sanitation workers in my hometown; the images of people chiseling away at the Berlin Wall; the photos of the student standing down the tank in Tiananmen Square – each of these moved my heart and seemed to my faith as times in which the omnipotent, omnipresence, omniscient God of heaven had come down to earth and entered human history to lead people toward greater freedom.⁶

But even within these historical and political movements, the link with our ultimate fate is present. God is known through movements for deliverance, here on earth, even as God prepares a place for us in the "mansions" of heaven.⁷ Deliverance and salvation go hand in hand.

II.

Our Biblical readings for today construe the death of Christ on the cross with God's liberating and salvific action in the world. Such actions come through – of all things – the *distasteful* image of blood.

In the Book of Exodus, immediately before God leads the people of Israel on their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, God institutes the Feast of Passover, by which the people will commemorate their deliverance *annually*. In instituting this Feast, God focuses on "the blood of the lamb":

Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.... [and] then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it...

.... For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals...[yet] when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

In Exodus, it is the blood of the lamb that saves the people from destruction in order that they may cross the Red Sea into freedom.

**

⁶ This relates the distinction between what some have called the "God of the Philosophers," who is all-knowing, present everywhere, and all-powerful, but somewhat distant and removed, from what James Kugel calls the "God of old," who is more capricious, human, and active in and out of history. (James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 107-114).

⁷ John 14:2 KJV.

Likewise, in the Gospel of John, after the feeding of the five-thousand, Jesus equates the *bread* with which his disciples have just been miraculously fed with the *manna* God had provided the Israelites in the wilderness. It is hard not to see a connection between the *blood* with which God had protected the Israelites in Exodus with the *blood* he would soon shed on the cross:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life [Jesus said], and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

These references to body, bread, and blood – difficult as they are for us to hear – hearken back as well to the Passover in Exodus, where God prepares the people to depart for freedom. In this way, *deliverance from slavery* in the Old Testament is parallel to *deliverance from slavery to sin and death* in the New Testament, without in any way spiritualizing or replacing the significance of the Exodus deliverance.

III.

So what does all this mean for us?

First, on a political and historical level, it means that no movement for liberation is *pristine or complete*.

- When God enters human history, as I believe God does, he uses the *means* of history toward his purposes: a particular people,⁸ wind and sea,⁹ the reluctant voice of Moses.¹⁰
- God even uses means of history that *give us pause*:
 - The blood of the lamb as a sign of safety
 - The blood of Egyptians caught between the authoritarianism of their leader and freedom God is committed all ultimately to having
 - The blood of God's own son, shed for the greater cause of redemption and salvation.

Reinhold Niebuhr once referred to “the immoral elements of all historical success.”¹¹ Deliverance from slavery in Egypt was a historical success, but it was not pristine. When God leaves behind God's omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, God exacts historical success, but not without a price: the blood of the lamb, the blood of Egyptians slain on the seashore, the blood of the cross.

**

Second, construing the cross as deliverance means that we who are the beneficiaries of God's deliverance and of God's eternal salvation are recipients of God's *grace*, not of God's reward for a job we have done well. God wills human beings to be free. Most of us happen to have been born that way. In this regard, we are on the receiving end of God's benevolent will. Our freedom – as is our salvation – is a gift from God. We do not receive deliverance or salvation “the old fashioned way,” by earning them. They are given us by a benevolent God.

⁸ Genesis 12:1-4.

⁹ Exodus 14.

¹⁰ Exodus 4:10.

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections From the Shorter Writings from Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by D. B. Robertson, (Atlanta: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957), 298; originally in “Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility,” *Christianity and Crisis* 3 (October 4, 1943), 2. Thanks to novelist Tom Young in our church for pointing me to this quote many years ago.

The salvation God offers us out of his grace and larger purposes for all of humanity is larger than our individual decision to believe in God, our individual commitment to follow Jesus Christ, our individual decision to rely on the Holy Spirit. The salvation God offers us is the *eternal* version of the *earthly* deliverance God wills for all people: Israelite and Egyptian, Jew and Greek, male and female.¹²

God moves through history bringing freedom. God moves through humanity bringing salvation. These gifts are part of the larger movement of God's redemption of all of creation – *found within* and *jumping out* at us from the pages of Genesis through Revelation. Our singular and solo lives, the fate of our individual souls are included in this divine movement, but they neither exhaust its meaning nor constitute its whole focus.¹³ Personally, I have always taken comfort from the idea that the grain of sand which is my life, my fate, my eternal salvation is but a miniscule part of God's larger movement to free and redeem all of humanity. Hence, even with my non-singer's voice, I sing away: "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands"!

**

I'd like to close with words from Melito of Sardis, a second century writer, who expresses this inexorable link between deliverance and salvation:

Christ is the one who clad death in shame,
And, as Moses did to Pharaoh,
Made the devil grieve...

This is the one who delivered us from slavery to
freedom
From darkness into light,
From death into life,
From tyranny into an eternal Kingdom,
And made us a new priesthood,
And a people everlasting for himself.

So come all families of people,
Adulterated with sin,
And receive forgiveness of sins.

For I am your freedom
I am the Passover of salvation.
I am the lamb slaughtered for you.
I am your ransom,
I am your life,
I am your light,
I am your salvation,
I am your resurrection,
I am your King.

I shall raise you up by my right hand,
I will lead you to the heights of heaven,
There shall I show you the everlasting father.¹⁴

The cross as deliverance. The cross as salvation. We are invited to the cross and we come, we come.

Amen.

© Larry R. Hayward, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria VA

¹² Galatians 3:28.

¹³ Young 19.

¹⁴ Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, translated by Alistair Stewart-Sykes, page 68 (first quote) and page 103 (second quote), quoted in Young, 6-7.