

SERMON for September 24

SCRIPTURE; Exodus 14: 19- 31

14:19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them.

14:20 It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

14:21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.

14:22 The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

14:23 The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.

14:24 At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.

14:25 He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

14:26 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers."

14:27 So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea.

14:28 The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.

14:29 But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

14:30 Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

14:31 Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

CONTEMPORARY READING

How the Milky Way was Made by Natalie Diaz

My river was once unseparated. Was Colorado. Red-fast flood. Able to take

anything it could wet—in a wild rush—
all the way to Mexico.

Now it is shattered by fifteen dams
over one-thousand four-hundred and fifty miles,
pipes and pumps filling
swimming pools and sprinklers
in Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

To save our fish, we lifted them from our skeletoned river beds,
loosed them in our heavens, set them aster —

‘Achii ‘ahan, Mojave salmon,
Colorado pikeminnow—

Up there they glide, gilled with stars.
You see them now—

god-large, gold-green sides,
moon-white belly and breast—

making their great speeded way across the darkest hours,
rippling the sapphired sky-water into a galaxy road.

The blurred wake they drag as they make their path
through the night sky is called

‘Achii ‘ahan nyuunye—
our words for *Milky Way*.

Coyote too is up there, crouched in the moon,
after his failed attempt to leap it, fishing net wet
and empty, slung over his back—

a prisoner blue and dreaming
of unzipping the salmon’s silked skins with his teeth.
O, the weakness of any mouth

as it gives itself away to the universe
of a sweet-milk body...

SERMON: The Miracle and miracles

(Exodus 14:27) “So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea.”

Moses had a very close relationship with water. He had floated for some time as a child in a basket in the Nile until the Pharaoh's daughter had found him. And he continued to live for his childhood and adolescence next to the Nile in the Pharaoh's palace. Later on this Fall we will learn of the water which poured from rocks in the desert at the behest of the same hand which we just learned split the sea... So it should come as no surprise that when the Nile needed crossing they would find a way.

Yes, I said the Nile....not the Red Sea.

After centuries of scientists trying, researchers at the National Centre for Atmospheric Research (NCAR)¹ and the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU) claim to have used computer modelling to reconstruct the various wind and wave combinations that could have produced the dry land bridge described in Exodus.

Just forget about the Red Sea.(they write) Their conclusion relocates the scene of the Israelites escape to the Nile delta. The researchers determined that a strong east wind, blowing overnight, could have driven back the waters on a coastal lagoon in northern Egypt long enough for the Israelites to walk across the exposed mud flats before the waters rushed back in, engulfing the Pharaoh's cavalry.”

It was a watershed moment for Moses and the Israelites, not the first or last time slaves would break free from their masters, or the lower class would escape from the brutality of the elite but one in which this man who had lived cloistered among the wealthy claimed his true identity and a whole race of people dared to be free .Our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate it each year at the Passover and our children learn it right along with the story of Noah and the Ark.

These were people who had looked to the hills for help and to the God, who made heaven and earth. Now mystery and majesty brought forth a miracle of timing and possibility.

Our psalm today includes the beautiful phrase: “*The sun shall not smite you by day nor the moon by night*”² And so it was with the Israelites, who then traveled by night with the guidance of a cloud, who found food and water in what appeared to be barren land and who survived, growing closer and closer to God and Creation.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/sep/21/moses-red-sea-exodus>

² Psalm 121: 6

And as for Moses, he found miracles everywhere, the burning bush likely just the beginning of natural phenomenon which called to him on his journey which helped him and his people survive day by day.

By the way there are scientific explanations for the burning bush as well -- whether the "Dictamnus albus plant" which exudes a variety of volatile oils that can catch fire readily or "earth quake lights" which have been reported around the world for centuries, or perhaps a hallucinations as suggested by some or a particularly amazing combination of light and autumn foliage-- they are miraculous nonetheless.

Our poem today can remind us of what it might mean to travel by the night sky with the Milky Way as a guide. Natalie Diaz writes with intimacy:

*Up there they glide, gilled with stars.
You see them now—*

*making their great speeded way across the darkest hours,
rippling the sapphired sky-water into a galaxy road.*

*The blurred wake they drag as they make their path
through the night sky is called*

'Achii 'ahan nyuunye— (achee ahan neeoonee)

our words for Milky Way.

When I was in South Dakota with young people, living among the Lakota, elders would inevitably surprise us with food gathered from what appeared to us as barren grasslands...chokecherries, wild radish, ground beans and plums. They knew just where to look as I imagine the Israelites may have done in those long years.

So day by day, year by year the Israelites survived and began to thrive in relation to what others perceived as desert until they came to the land between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan, the land of milk and honey.

Phillip Pullman writes: "If you wanted to divert a mighty river into a different course, and all you had was a single pebble, you could do it, as long as you put the pebble in the right place to send the first trickle of water that way instead of this." Moses was that single pebble in the lives of the Jewish people in Egypt now sixteen thousand years ago. And Hitler was another people which sent humanity coursing in its current trajectory of division and strife.

Watershed moments are those in which all rivers and rivulates flow to the sea, gaining momentum and force if let flow naturally-- or alternatively, in which a large flow of water is split by a ridge or barrier like a mountain range and is divided.

Our poem for the day speaks so the same trajectory:

Natalie Diaz writes:

*My river was once unseparated. Was Colorado. Red-
fast flood. Able to take*

anything it could wet—in a wild rush—

all the way to Mexico.

*Now it is shattered by fifteen dams
over one-thousand four-hundred and fifty miles,*

Last week tens of thousands of people marched in New York City to stop the use of fossil fuels. Just this week in my casual reading and news watching there have been tree plantings around the world. People along the Massachusetts coast have been clearing old lobster traps from the coastline where animals were trapped. The Whetstone Brook is being strengthened and supported here in town so it can follow its natural trajectory. And up and down Vermont consideration is being made about where to build and not to build to make way for the rivers and rivulets which have been here for centuries.

Part of this is happening in relation to extreme events but also because we are relearning the ancient truths of watersheds, rivers and their power. Whether the ancient peoples of the middle east or the indigenous peoples of America, our forebearers knew the power of the mighty rivers and the importance of living near and in right relationship with them. And now, God willing, we are learning quickly how important that wisdom really is.

There is an irony in our psalm today which reads:³ *“Jerusalem built as a city which is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up.”* The temple was built again and again on a hill because the people knew well the power of the mighty river to destroy but also to provide the food and irrigation they needed through the ages.

It is not mine to say how tuned in Moses was to the winds and tides of his homeland but we can certainly take heed of how important his relation to God’s creation was on that day when his very life and the lives of others depended on that harmony.

³ Psalm 122:3-4