

Don't Mess With God, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 18080914
Exodus 14:19-31 and Matthew 18:21-35
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 14 September, 2008

Don't mess with God! After that terrible Passover night when there was so much death and mourning among the non-Israelites, Pharaoh let the Israelites go free. A day or so later, when he realized what he had done, he decided to send his army after the former slaves and bring them back. Without them, Pharaoh and his advisors could only envision economic ruin. They had built their economy on the backs of Israelite slaves. Now that the slaves were gone, Egyptian leaders could not see how they could survive. So it goes for those who fail to invest in respectful labor practices! Egyptian leaders held their stock share holders in higher esteem than their employees.

Chapter fourteen of Exodus is the story of what happens when you mess with God. Pharaoh's army was drowned in the depths of the sea because Pharaoh had little esteem for his workers or their God. This story is the high point of God's salvation story in the Old Testament. Abraham was the first to recognize Jahweh as the one God. Because of his faith, he was blessed through his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. When Jacob wrestled all night with an appearance of God, his name was changed from Jacob to Israel. Jacob's son Joseph, sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, rose to great power in Egypt and saved the people and their neighbors from famine. But, after Joseph's death, and the death of that Pharaoh, a new Pharaoh, fearful of the growing Israelite population in Egypt, enslaved them. God called a reluctant Moses to lead the Israelites to freedom after the Passover.

So, here we are, on the banks of the Sea of Reeds stuck between Pharaoh's army and an ocean—or a lake, or at least, a swamp. This may not have been as spectacular as the scene portrayed by Charlton Heston in the Cecil B. DeMille movie, the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew word is *Yam Suph*, "Sea of Reeds." Although the Greek Septuagint translation is "Red Sea," it is probable this great event took place in a swampy area of Lake Timsah, to the north of the Gulf of Suez, an extension of the Red Sea. A strong steady wind from the north can blow the waters back and if it blows long enough, can actually dry out the land. The point is not so much the depth of the water that was pushed back, but that it was pushed back at the precise time the fleeing former slaves needed in order to escape the pursuing Egyptian army. This was how God provided salvation.

The Israelites were not sure they wanted salvation. When they saw Pharaoh's army coming after them, they complained to Moses. This would not be the last time they would complain. They said, when they saw those enemy soldiers, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?"¹ They wanted to be left alone and serve the Egyptians. They could die just as easily in Egypt as they could out here in the wilderness facing Pharaoh's army.

If God's salvation were left to a democratic vote, we would still be slaves in Egypt. "Well Moses, you didn't ask me if I wanted freedom from slavery."

I can hear the debate in the congregational meeting: "I may not be free, but at least I have food on my plate and I know what the rules are."

"I don't want to go to any promised land. My grandma and grandpa are buried here, and this is where I'm going to stay!"

¹Exodus 14:11

“Why do we have to change? I’m comfortable with everything just the way it is.”

That’s how we are, you know. We all want a voice, and when we aren’t asked about something first, we can get all huffy— as though someone were trying to put something over on us. “No one asked me about this. I’m not going to do it. I don’t have a better suggestion, but I’m sure not going have someone tell me what to do.”

Often, we resist God’s salvation. We say it is better for us to be slaves and to serve our compulsions than to be free. It is easier to be a slave to food, cigarettes, or, in my case, computers, than to accept God’s freedom.

It is our fear that most holds us in captivity. Imagine the fear of those Israelites on that Passover night. “What’s going to happen to us out there in the wilderness?” Those were not the happy hopeful smiling faces of the Hebrews in the Cecil B. DeMille movie. They were grim, frightened faces.

Somewhere along the line, we have to trust in God. We have to trust in each other, or we will never be free. God *wants* us to be free. God led the Israelites to freedom in spite of themselves.

Sometimes we are caught between the army of an enemy and the waters of the sea in front of us and we have no boat. Not even a canoe. We fear something chasing us: insecurity or aging, or we dread that someone might discover our flaws. A sea might come crashing down upon us.

God wants us to be free, yet we are slaves. The great symbol of freedom, the automobile, holds us in slavery. How many roads in your neighborhood have bicycle paths or lanes? (Thanks for the Town of Elon that is proposing future construction of bicycle lanes.) How many buses per day do you see in our county? What happens to fuel consumption when we drive faster than the speed limit? Our love for the private automobile, and our reluctance to provide support to fund mass transportation will keep us dependent upon foreign oil. We will continually be forced to protect the oil we Americans guzzle.

God asks us to free ourselves from our compulsions. God provides us with a way through the waters, but we say, “No thanks, we like our dependency on things.”

God provides us with the cloud and the pillar, but we would rather be independent of God and others. The word “Interdependency is a good word! We are not alone!

God wants us free: free from thinking we have to hide our inner thoughts and doubts from each other. Can’t we open ourselves up to each other? Can’t we trust each other?

This is a story not so much of miracles or even of Israelite freedom. It is a story of God’s sovereignty. In the end, the Israelites recognized God’s power. “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.”²

What does it take to get us to recognize God’s power? I suppose I’m preaching to the choir here, because many of you know of God firsthand. I’ve heard some of your testimonies: eyesight restored, new employment opportunities, healed bones, and recovery from grief. But, there are many who refuse to recognize God’s power or even that there is a God. Will it take a drowning in the sea to produce belief?

Don’t mess with God. God wants you free: free from fear and free from loneliness.

God calls you to be free. What will be your answer?

²Exodus 14:31 NRSV