

This scene of the Exodus drama
is the stuff of Hollywood special effects, isn't?
What would CGI,
computer-generated-imagery,
do with this pivotal moment in Jewish history?
If we could go to the theaters
and see this in 3D,
what do you think it would be like?

This story is miraculous
and, violent.
It is victorious
but also, deadly.
It is the final act of liberation
for the Israelites;
the Pharaoh's army,
and therefore, Pharaoh himself,
finally, once and for all,
defeated.

Many of you remember
the 1956 movie,
The 10 Commandments.
I remember it took
a lot of VHS tapes
to cover the 3 hrs. and 40 mins of that epic.

Do you remember the scenes
as the Israelites leave Egypt?
Joshua, riding on a horse
and gathering the people
to get them ready...
the movie has such vivid colors and textures.

In the film,
as the Israelites are leaving the pyramids behind them,
they don't get far
until they encounter the sea in front of them

and Pharaoh's army
coming quickly behind.
They have fled the slavery of Egypt
and find themselves trapped—
by watery chaos that blocks the way forward
and a vengeful army
of violent chaos
closing in behind them.

In the film the confusion and fear
are apparent.
There are animals running around;
women and babies crying,
and men planning mutiny against Moses.
You can also see the dark cloud of God
beginning to form on the horizon.
As Yul Brynner,
I mean Pharaoh
gets closer, a pillar of fire appears
blocking the Egyptian army from advancing.

The music soars as Charlton Heston,
excuse me, Moses
stands on a rock overlooking the water,
and claims in a mighty voice,
“the Lord of Hosts,
will do battle for us.”
And then he turns to face the wind,
raises his staff and spreads his arms
as the dark cloud plunges into the sea
and the water is divided in half
to form a dry middle ground.

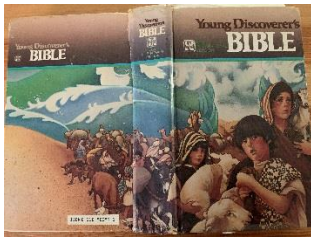
Vintage cinematography at its best.

Scholar, H.L. Ellison comments,
“One of the reasons
why so many do not take
this entirely credible story seriously

is the pictures they saw in Sunday school
showing a wall of water
standing up on either side of the Israelites,
as though they were held up
by sheets of glass.”¹

He isn't wrong.

This Exodus image,
the parting of the Red Sea,
adorns on the cover
of my childhood Bible.



Of all the images
that the publishers could have chosen,
this was the one:
a picture of Hebrew children in the foreground
in tan and white robes,
blue head scarves and walking sticks,
carrying lambs on their shoulders
—crossing the on dry ground
next to a wall of water.

Why not the image of Noah and God's beautiful rainbow?
Why not Adam and Eve
naming animals in the garden
and eating oranges?
Or why not the image of Jesus
welcoming and blessing the children
after his Sunday sermon?

¹ H.L. Ellison, The Daily Study Bible Series: Exodus (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1982)

That same Bible, now 30 years later,
still has the same illustration on the cover
—I checked Amazon.

Perhaps the parting of the Red Sea
was chosen because,
“both Jews and Christians
know this story above all the stories
of the Hebrew Bible.”²

It is a story of our long ago
Sunday school lessons
and Vacation Bible School themes;
it is the story told at the tables
of Jewish families on Shabbat.

This is *exodus*,
a way out,
which is exactly what *exodus* means.

Here, at first glance however,
the water is a barrier to Israelites freedom.
An impassable obstacle
of uncertainty and hopelessness.
How can the exodus continue?
How can the people
reach a land of milk and honey,
a land of freedom and abundance,
a land where parents are no longer slaves
and children are not plagued
to being thrown into the waters
of the Nile?

Hemmed in and panicked I imagine,
the newly freed people of God
find themselves trapped by dangerous waters in front
and dangerous chariots behind.

² John Holbert, Victory At Sea: Reflections on Exodus 14:19-31 in this “Season of Creation”
<https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/victory-at-sea-john-holbert-09-08-2014>

The way out is hidden.
The way out is not clear.
Either way out
seems like the way of death.

I know we have all been there.
In places where there seems
no way out.
A time when things seemed on the uptick
only to fall,
to plummet into the depths.
A job loss;
where is the way out?
A failed marriage;
where is the way out?
Death of a beloved family member;
where is the way out?
Cancer, illness, stroke, hemorrhage;
where is the way out?
A pandemic;
where is the way out?
A broken system
that for hundreds of years
has prioritized one race over others;
where is the way out?

It is in verses just prior,
to the ones in our reading,
where we hear Moses tell the people,
“Have no fear!
Stand by and witness the deliverance
which the Lord will work for you today;
for the Egyptians whom you see today
you will never see again.
The Lord will battle for you;
hold your peace!”

And that is the power of **this** story
and it's hard to believe imagery.
 "Witness the deliverance
 which the Lord will work for you today;"
 in other words,
 the Lord will provide the way out.

Our brothers and sisters
in the African American church
resonate deeply with this promise
of the Lord providing the way out.
 As with the examples above,
 we usually focus on the individual aspects
 of God's deliverance,
but this passage reminds us
that it is primarily about **a people,**
 God's people;
a people enslaved and oppressed.

Spirituals that many of us know
retold the story of the Exodus saga
as way to give slaves hope and the song and story
became a way out.

Spirituals like,

*Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't you mourn/
Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't you mourn/
Pharaoh's army got drowned/
Oh, Mary don't you weep.*

This song predates the American Civil War
and was called a slave song,
for its message of hope and liberation.³

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Don%27t_You_Weep

The song is sung to Mary of Bethany
who grieves deeply over her brother,
Lazarus', death.

The song reminds Mary
of her own traditions' central story,
the Exodus;
that when there seems no way out,
the Lord provides a way.

Mary, don't you weep over Lazarus' death,
remember, God will provide a way out.
Enslaved people of God
don't weep and mourn,
the Lord will provide a way.

For African slaves,
this song and others like it,
along with the Exodus stories,
provided a necessary hope
for a promised liberation:
a way out, in the midst of crippling bondage;
a way out when it seemed like there as none.

Prolific Presbyterian pastor,
Albert Winn says, "The story of the Red Sea
is...about a people,
a nation of slaves,
who had no way.
It is, to use a nasty word in church,
a political story."⁴

Political because
when those in charge,
use the poor and disadvantaged for gain;
political because
when those at the bottom are used
at the disposal of those at the top,
it shows how sinful our political systems are.

⁴ Albert C. Winn, A Way Out of No Way, Exodus 14:5-31 (Journal for Preachers, 14 no. 1 Advent, 1990 Pgs. 14-18)
<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=08eee0c9-0abc-414f-9211-9a29836880b7%40pdc-v-sessmgr04&bdata=jnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=ATLA0000831995&db=a6h>

Winn goes on to say
that the African American community
has connected with **this** Exodus story
so closely because,
he writes, “we all need to understand,
that God is one the side of the stateless,
the homeless,
the unarmed,
the powerless,
the marginalized,
the oppressed.
God’s justice is not equity,
but a tilt towards the poor.”⁵

I admit,
I—as a white, educated,
middle class, woman with certain privileges,
I struggle to hear that.
That doesn’t describe my situation.

Winn preached a sermon
at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta,
a church that sits right across the street
from the capitol building.
With humility and boldness
Winn asked the mostly white congregation,
“Can it be
that we white Americans
know somewhere, deep down in our subconscious minds
that we are the Egyptians?”⁶

I don’t know what to do with that,
other than like Mary, to weep.
To grieve.
To feel ashamed,
sometimes defensive,
and suddenly to feel like asking the question,
how then can there be a way out?

⁵ Ibid

⁶ ibid

Are we hemmed in,
chaos behind and chaos in front?
Are we wedged between a history of shame
and future of guilt?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

is a Nigerian author.

She was featured in our 21-Day-Racial Equity Challenge
—for her TED Talk,

The Danger of a Single Story.

She explained that when we have
a single view of anyone,
we lose the ability to truly see them
and honor the complex story they bring;
we lose the ability
to let them be complex people.

For me, and maybe for most of us,

this story of the Red Sea,

has been a single story about
the triumph of God!

This story was about saving Israel,
which in a way,

I saw myself a part of
because of our

Christian heritage and tradition.

The danger of the single story,

was for me,

to hear only the rejoicing of Israel.

As the walls of water retreat back to normal in the Red Sea,

Miriam, Moses sister, sang this song,

“Sing to the Lord,

for He has triumphed gloriously;

Horse and driver

He has hurled into the sea.” (15:21)

I have been singing with Miriam,
with Israel,
with the oppressed
even as I sit 2000 years later,
a faithful yet privileged, oppressor.

Certainly, white Americans
are **not** history's only oppressors.
Any government or people
who take power for themselves
and leave the poor and orphaned out
are guilty.
History is full of examples.

So, we ask, is there a way out?

The Jewish Study Bible
offers textual notes on this passage
that I think can help us move,
from the danger of our well-known, single story
into the much larger and complex story
of a loving and merciful God.

According to the study bible notes,
within Midrashic interpretation,
there were angels
that sought to sing a hymn
praising God as the Egyptians were drowning;
God rebuked them saying:
'while my creatures are drowning in the sea
you would sign a hymn?!'⁷

Suddenly I see a God
who frees the oppressed
and weeps over the death
of the oppressor.

⁷ The Jewish Study Bible, Second Ed. Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh Translation (Oxford University Press, New York, 2014)

So, as I look,
not for antidote to make us feel better,
but deeper into the complexity
of the God we worship
I am reminded of how this Exodus event
has influenced our ritual
of baptism.

In Christian baptism,
we claim that we go into the baptismal waters
to die like Christ;
die to our old selves,
die to former oppressive agendas
—like the Egyptians
we die in those waters.

But we come out of the water
into new life.
A life that mirrors Christ's own.
New life that in the power and guidance
of the Holy Spirit
would have us to follow the will of God
so that all God's people would flourish
and have life in abundance
here and now.

Our scripture tells the complex story of our God.
And the more we read it,
the more we tell it,
the more we sing it;
the story is alive in us;
the more complex and beautiful it becomes.

We worship a God
whose heart belongs to the forgotten,
the lonely,
the suffering,
the marginalized.

But also, a God whose heart extends
to the powerful,
the privileged,
the influential
and the advantaged
by the grace and power of Jesus Christ.

Now, I think I understand
why the image of the parting of the Red Sea
is on the front of my old Bible.
Because **that** story is just a piece
of the beautiful complexity
of our stories.

That story is a witness,
that when it seems
that there is no way out—
God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit
is always the way out.
For all of us.
Thanks be to God.

Benediction

Alice Walker in her book the Color Purple
Uses her characters
to remind us
of the complexity of God,
Shug said, "Listen, God love everything you love
—and a mess of stuff you don't."