

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
September 17, 2017 Pentecost 15/Proper 19/Year A
Texts – Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

When I first took a look at the gospel passage for this morning, the first thought that came to mind was a slight amendment to Peter's question to Jesus. "How often should I preach about forgiveness? As many as seven times?" If you've been paying attention over the past year and a half, you know that forgiveness has come up a lot in my sermons – more than seven times, I'm sure. How could it not? It keeps coming up in scripture. We touched on it twice just in the past month.

But today, despite the fact that the theme of forgiveness is staring directly at us again in the Gospel, I thought I'd take a break from addressing it directly. That does not mean we can take a break from forgiving each other when we need to. To forgive someone is to inhabit the Good News. It's what we're all about.

Instead, I want to start by singing the first verse from an old Bob Dylan song, one that made him very unpopular with certain people in Washington and all around the country in the 1960's. You'll probably recognize it.

Oh my name it ain't nothin'
My age it means less
The country I come from
Is called the Midwest
I was taught and brought up there
The laws to abide
And that land that I live in
Has God on its side

We'll get back to that in a moment.

This past Tuesday at the Bible study we focused our attention on the passage from Exodus, which we heard a few moments ago. We all know it, if for no other reason than we have that famous image lodged in our minds of the buff Charlton Heston as Cecil B. DeMille's Moses standing before the waters and commanding them to part. Ah, those classic 1950's special effects! The story of the parting of the Red Sea, and the larger narrative of the Exodus of which it is a part, is not only important to the people of Israel. It is utterly *foundational* for their self-understanding. It is the core biblical proclamation. And it deeply informs the whole Christian story of Christ. Indeed, the Exodus is to the Jews what the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is to Christians. We reference it each Sunday when the Celebrant breaks the bread and utters these words: "Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us." Christ our Passover. Christ our Exodus. Christ our savior. It's a story that was instrumental in keeping hope alive in those chained in brutal slavery in our own nation's history. "God's a gonna trouble the water." The Exodus is the archetypal story of God as liberator. It's a story of incredible power and hope.

But the story itself has a troubling aspect to it, one that everyone quickly picked up on at the Bible study. God is plainly fighting *for* the people of Israel *against* the Egyptians. Israel has God on their side. The story makes that graphically clear. Moses' earlier attempts at negotiating with Pharaoh went nowhere. So God had to pull out the big guns: the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians, including the killing of the first-born of the Egyptians, which we heard about last week; and now the clogging of the chariot wheels and the drowning of the Egyptian army in the sea. All this to effect God's liberation of this band of Hebrew slaves. God is nothing if not dramatic.

Does God take sides in human conflict, in our wars? It's not an easy question. We all know that there are plenty of Christians in our country who answer it with an unequivocal "Yes." We are God's city on a hill, the light to the nations, and God is with us, including in our battles. That conviction goes back to our Puritan beginnings. It's part of our DNA.

But those of us who think of ourselves as liberal, enlightened Christians are easily offended by that notion. The idea that God takes the side of any nation, most especially in a nation's war, is deeply repugnant. That's what offended the young, sensitive Dylan. And rightly so, I think. Nations, including our own, or pseudo-nations and terrorist groups, have been far too quick to enlist God in their wars. Dylan's song goes on to recount the slaughter of Native Americans, our conquests in the Spanish-American War, the carnage of the Civil War, in which, as honest Abe pointed out, both sides claimed Divine sanction, WW 1, WW 2, and Vietnam. In every case, we claimed God was on our side. And in every case, there was an army left lying dead in the depths of the sea and on the fields. "Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war. With the cross of Jesus, going on before." Yes, I know there's an inward spiritual battle that hymn might legitimately refer to. I completely get that. Nonetheless, there are far too many examples of the cross and the flag marching too closely together. The whole thing just makes you want to leave God out of the whole mess.

But before we do that, before we write God out of our battles completely, there's an aspect of this whole phenomenon that we tend to conveniently forget and that complicates things. When you pay attention to the entire biblical narrative, you begin to realize that God does not always fight for Israel, God does not always fight for his chosen people. Sometimes God fights *against* Israel. God sometimes brings destruction *upon* them through another invading force, such as the Babylonians. God is not nation's unqualified ally. It's not *Israel's* flag God gets behind. Nor is it our flag, or anyone else's flag. It's something else.

That something else is a society's honest pursuit of justice. It's the commitment to the well-being of the poor, the aliens, the outcasts, the widows, the orphans. It's their flag that is embedded in the Hebrew Law. It's their flag that the prophets courageously wave. It's their flag that Jesus carries to the cross. When we wave their flag, God is with us. When we don't, watch out. God might just be fighting for the other side.

Truth be told, we need always to be vigilant respecters of God's ultimate freedom and transcendence, which means we need to resist every temptation to co-opt God for our programs, schemes, causes, and wars. The question is not whether God is on our side. The question is whether we're on God's side.