

**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church**  
**The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson & James Williams**  
**Proper 19 Year A**  
**September 17, 2017**

MOTHER BARBARA

When we come across challenging texts, sometimes classified as “texts of terror”, as we have today in both our Old Testament and Gospel reading, we have to decide how to approach them faithfully. It is tempting to embrace one of two less-than spiritually healthy responses – one, to ignore the tension or negative characterization of God and choose not to see or believe it, or, two, to focus on the harsh and judgmental portrayal of God and imagine that wrath to be thrust upon our enemies or those who disagree with us and believing that this is God’s will.

Dealing with challenging texts reminds me a bit of wading through a stream, kicking up the sediment at the bottom, the dirt and the debris and the broken glass, so that, for a brief moment, the water is muddied and filled with litter, and in the first situation, rather than looking at and into the messiness, we strategically look away for a split second, while the dirt and debris settle once again, so that when we return our gaze, the water appears sparkling clean, as light from above dances on it. We choose not to see the negative or dangerous parts of the river, or of God.

If we were to take that approach with today’s passages, we would glance away from God killing the Egyptians, and when that image settles at the bottom of our minds, we only see the freedom offered to the Israelites, and we get to stay with the image of the God we like better and are more comfortable with.

Or we would divert our attention away from God’s fury toward the servant who refuses to forgive another’s debt, even though he himself was just forgiven a debt of greater magnitude, and discard the notion of God’s sending him off to be tortured for the rest of his life. This is such a scary thought that what goes around comes around, and if we chose not to forgive, we will be not be forgiven by God, that we may want to block this thought completely from our mind, burying it deep below, so it can never resurface, and focus rather only on the exuberant mercy of God showered initially on the slave in debt to his master. This glancing away from the hard truths in our passages is one approach, perhaps a survival tactic to keep our

image of a wholly loving and compassion God intact, but I fear it's not a complete and faithful response. We need to look into the messiness.

Another way to avoid the messiness is to move with gusto into the hard parts and call upon the wrath of God to crash the sea upon our enemies, and forget that mercy part. For example, we may want to believe that God will smite our enemies, will right the wrongs done to us by punishing those who inflicted pain upon us, that God will destroy the peoples who oppress us, that God will show up with power and might to eradicate the people who we imagine are on the other side of the line we have created in our stance of judgment. And truth to be told, if I had had relatives living in Florida or Texas and the hurricanes were approaching, or if I lived at the edge of the encroaching forest fire in the Northwest, I would have prayed my heart out for God to use God's holy power and might to push that hurricane out to sea or rain down upon the fire until was extinguished. There are times when we want a powerful and mighty God to act on our behalf, eradicating those who oppose us or that which threatens our safety. But then we have situations like Charlottesville, and although there is one side of the confrontation whose beliefs I disagree with, I don't imagine I could call upon God to destroy these people with an opposing point of view, asking God to cause them to be lying dead, as the Egyptians were along the shore, for that would go against the other part of God I know, the loving God, for somehow, I can't forget that part of God too. Here we are in the messiness. If I want a God of power and might to always line up on the right side of my judgment and take decisive divine action to eradicate my enemies, then I have to imagine that I might be on the opposing side of someone else's judgment, and then I would want God's exuberant mercy to be upon me, so I must in turn, want God's exuberant mercy to be upon them. We need to look into the messiness.

It is complex to know how to read faithfully these texts that tell us that YHWH brings both life and death and that our lack of mercy to one another rescinds God's mercy toward us. Somehow, we need to hold those truths together with God's power which is always about liberation and always with exuberant mercy, which are also shown in our stories.

I needed some help in making this real to you, in helping you figure out how to walk into the swirling waters, before the dirt and debris settles out of sight, so I've asked my friend James to help, for he has worked out how to hold the hard truths of God together with the desire of God for us to be made whole. So I turn the homily over to James now, who will draw us into the story of Moses and then share his own poignant truth.

## JAMES –

In the Old Testament story today, the angel of the Lord was going before the Israelite army wherever it moved, and the pillar of cloud took its place right behind them too. God was protecting them, in the front and in the back. But then both armies, the Egyptians and the Israelites, were facing each other, head to head.

So the cloud was all alone by itself in the darkness yet the pillar of fire lit up the battlefield. It seemed to keep the armies apart because they didn't come near one another all night long.

In the morning, Moses stretched out his hand and the sea divided, and after the Israelites came through the opening, Moses stretched out his hand again, and the sea came crashing back together again. All of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers were killed. Many people died because God was protecting the Israelites.

Maybe you think that God's power is for good, but how then did this happen to the Egyptians? How was the killing of these people good?

Here's what I am thinking.

God is about creating life, but when people do things that destroy other people's lives, God works to destroy that desire in people, or in the case of the Egyptians, since their hearts would not change, God destroyed them.

I remember one time someone inadvertently hit me in the face with a basketball. Now, instead of asking if I was okay, he laughed at me. Oddly enough, that same thing, except worse, happened to him. So, I think that, when that basketball hit him, it probably took away the anger that had made him hit me, because God works to take away wrong desires in our hearts, sometimes by helping us experience what we caused someone else to experience. God didn't necessarily hurt him, but God gave him a chance to see what it felt to be hurt.

Returning to the Old Testament story, the Lord saved Israel that fateful day from the Egyptians, and they saw their captors, the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. The people of Israel saw the amazing power of the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. They learned a lot that day.

## MOTHER BARBARA-

They learned that God's power is mighty, and God is always in control of what happens, and God's strength is always used to free the oppressed, and that, when God is involved, it is always a birth to freedom. And they learned that they were worthy of God's love, that God was entrusting this ragtag group of people who had been beaten down with building a nation which would carry YHWH's name, and draw the whole world into relationship with each other and with God.

This is true for us too. These messy stories, with both the light and dark characteristics of God, told in hyperbolic fashion, are for us an invitation to grow in our faith, by allowing them to stir our imaginations from a spiritual numbness of an always-easy-to-like God, by allowing the chaos of the messiness to seep into our hearts, to allow God's goodness and mercy to find those hard and vengeful parts within our souls and loosen the bonds on the goodness within. The messy stories remind us of the chaos out of which God created order in our Genesis stories. They remind us that God is creating with us all the time. Growing in faith involves us imagining ourselves as capable of more than we believe ourselves to be, a better person than we've ever been before, a person strong enough to bear the costs of forgiving others, a person able to acknowledge our own faults and shed our protective self-image, not so God can find our most vulnerable spot and destroy us, but so that Jesus' resurrection power can create something holy within us. This is the resurrection power of Jesus given to us in our baptism and nourished through the Eucharist—the vision that we are worthy of God's love, entrusted with God's mission, forgiven through God's mercy, and infused with the power of new life. This power is neither contained nor owned by us, but passes through us into others. Our work is to open our eyes to this power in our lives. And here's a good way to do that.

## JAMES –

At my summer camp, we had a high school group counselor offer a devotional. He talked about when he went to a different country. His morning started like any other day - he left his home and went about his day. Then, everyone met at night. They were asked, "Where did you see God today?". That question really stuck with me. It made me wonder how I would answer that question. Where did I see God today? The Israelites saw God that day when they were saved from what was hurting them. Sometimes we see God that way too. Sometimes we see God in the caring others show us, or that we show them. Sometimes we see God in our own hearts, when we see how we may have hurt someone else and we feel sorry. Sometimes we see God

in all the good things that happen to us. I've thought a lot about this question. I see God in a lot of places throughout each day.

My question to you is, "Where did you, or where do you expect, to see God today?"

MOTHER BARBARA –

God's power can show up in powerful and mighty ways, as in the crash of the waves which separated the Israelites from their enemies, or in a quiet moment of revelation, as shared in James' story of the boy's heart who had done harm, only to have harm done to him. God needs just a sliver of spiritual space for God to make a change happen. It can be in a tiny whisper, uttered in a time of gentle intimacy, or in a clap of thunder, erupting during explosive conversations, in bright flash of lightning, when it seems that our pain is exposed for the world to see, or in the breathless vacuum set around a gently falling autumn leaf, as when people transition from life into death, for even there, we are held by God, and if held by God, then loved by God and showered with God's mercy.

Look for God today in the places where you're asked to forgive; when your heart is telling you to forgive; when you have even been asked for your forgiveness and you think it's going to cost you too much; where you need to be forgiven; in places where you can set people free, or where we are in need of mercy or in giving mercy.

Look for places where God shows up in your life, create sacred spaces for God to enter and grow us in our faith. Imagine a person, a way of life in which we are more capable, more faithful, and more dedicated than we could ever have believed. That's the resurrection power within you that takes the chaos of the messiness of our sacred stories and of our own humble lives and creates for good. Amen.