

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰It 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.

²¹Then 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. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.

²⁴At 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. ²⁵He 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." ²⁶Then 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." ²⁷So 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.

²⁸The 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. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel 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.

“Liberation and Forgiveness”

All this week I the radio has been filled with retrospectives in honor of this tenth anniversary of the attacks on September 11th. One program was focused on hearing stories of where people were when they heard the news. In our time, that day is one I suspect most of us remember well what we were doing and where we were.

I was upstairs in my office when the secretary buzzed me and told me that a plane had flown into one of the towers of the World Trade Center. As I made my way downstairs to talk to her about another matter...something I have completely forgotten...I recall thinking, “whoa, that plane must have had some serious engine trouble after it took off from JFK or La Guardia.” When I got down to the main office, she already had the story up on the computer. Oh the joys of technology. That was when, in stunned silence, we watched as a second plane flew into another tower. It was obvious then that this was no accident.

Slowly dawned the emotions: fear, panic, anger, worry. The first reaction of those of us removed by the distance (we were in Brookfield, 50 or so miles from Manhattan) was to ask what we could do. We felt useless. A number of our church members worked in the city or had family members that did. One man lost a whole crew from his company that day. What stood out the most, though, was the reaction of our church. The first thing we did was go out front and open the church doors. It was a sign, we hoped, that anyone who had a need could come in and find sanctuary.

In the days and weeks that followed, we could have joined the ranks of many Christians who denounced Islam and cried out for vengeance. There certainly was precedent for vengeance in the Bible, as the story from Exodus demonstrates today. And yet, the prevailing mindset was to step back and take a look at what emerged as reasons for the attacks on such powerful U.S. symbols. It was mainly an outcry against the perceived immoral and licentious U.S. culture that was pervading and destroying lifestyles around the world. And people of faith, albeit a different religious faith than ours, took radical to stand up for their beliefs.

Many churches went with the immediate feelings of the surrounding culture and preached vengeance – and still do. Just as many did not. I wasn't here ten years ago but I can guess that we may have taken a similar path my congregation in Brookfield did. We could recognize the truth in the accusations because much of our popular culture is even distasteful to us. How often did we speak out against it? We also needed to learn more about Islam before we made our own accusations. We wanted to know more about teachings from Qu'ran. We studied books about Islam. We learned that not all Muslims are radicals and many seek compromise and peace. In the midst of this we realized that Christians are the same way. Radicals, progressives and liberals exist in all religious groups.

So we take time to reflect today. We ask ourselves what we have learned, what has changed, and maybe even more importantly, what has remained the same. We are human. Like that servant in the story from Matthew, we have a hard time forgiving a debt or sin against us. We see ourselves in the place of the Israelites, rejoicing at the defeat of Pharaoh's army. And why not? There is precedent for us right here in the Bible. So our very human response is to fight back when we are attacked. People of faith will pause, remembering the words of God who said, "vengeance is mine." We aren't very patient. To wait for retribution or justice in God's time is something we aren't very good at.

I've spoken with many people over the years who say they want nothing to do with the Hebrew texts. They say, "that is not the God Jesus talked about." Or, "my God is a God of grace, mercy and forgiveness." I agree with them, because I, too, have a hard time with the amount of "divine violence" that fills these ancient texts. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann helps clarify God's purpose in such actions.

"It is likely that the violence assigned to Yahweh is to be understood as counterviolence, which functions primarily as a critical principle in order to undermine and destabilize other violence." And so, God's violence is "not blind or unbridled violence," but purposeful in the service of a nonviolent end.²⁸ In other words, God's violence, whether in judgment or salvation, is never an end in itself, but is always exercised in the service of God's more comprehensive *salvific* purposes for creation: the deliverance of slaves from oppression (Exod 15:7; Ps 78:49-50), the righteous from their antagonists (Ps 7:6-11), the poor and needy from their abusers (Exod 22:21-24; Isa 1:23-24; Jer 21:12), and Israel from its enemies (Isa 30:27-33; 34:2; Hab 3:12-13).

"This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference" with respect to those who have suffered human cruelty.²⁹ In so stating the matter, the divine exercise of wrath, which may include violence, is finally a word of good news (for those oppressed) and bad news (for oppressors). (Terence Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament" in *Word and World*, VOL 24, #1 WINTER 2004 p 25)

Placing our faith in God's timing doesn't mean we sit back and do nothing. The faithful response is to prayerfully consider what God would have us do in be in response to what happens in our world and in our lives. We have learned over these last years that no matter what course of action we choose, there is always a cost. We do not go unaffected, and neither does our God.

I will close with a story from the Hasidic tradition that is an interpretation of our Exodus story:

According to a rabbi, the angels were rejoicing over the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea – playing their harps, singing and dancing. "Wait," said one of them. "Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping!" they approached God and asked, "Why are you weeping when Israel has been delivered by your power?" "I am weeping," said the Maker of the Universe, "for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore – somebody's sons, somebody's husband, somebody's fathers"

(In a sermon published in *Journal for Preachers*, Albert C. Winn told an old Hasidic tale. "A Way Out of No Way" Exodus 14:5-31").

²⁸Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 244.