

# Good Always Wins

*A Sermon for Proper 19, Year A*

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*“Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 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.”*

I grew up going to Sunday School and, later, Christian schools with chapel services, and one result is that a substantial piece of my memory is held hostage by children’s praise and worship songs. One of the biggest earworms was about today’s Old Testament reading—it was called “Pharoah, Pharoah” and sung to the tune of “Louie, Louie,” and involved “Walk Like an Egyptian”-style moves and general raucousness and hilarity.

Especially hilarious was the line where we scream-sang, “I raised my rod and I cleared my throat / and all of Pharoah’s army did the dead man’s float” while doing “The Swim”—holding our noses and pretending to drown. Ha, ha, how great! It’s super cool how “the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea” and drowned an entire army of people!

Well, it took a while before this passage became troubling to me, but it happened. Now to read about God tossing the Egyptians into the sea and the Israelites seeing them dead on the shore makes me uneasy, even if the Egyptians *were* the enemy. It’s not exactly the way I usually picture the peace and love of God.

But then I remember that Scripture is all about story—the grand, incredible story of salvation, resurrection, and redemption for all creation. And I think about some of the other stories I love—especially the really big, cinematic ones like Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, or any number of Marvel and DC stories making it to the big screen. In these stories it is much less troubling for me to cheer for the “good” side, even when the “bad” side ends up “dead on the seashore,” because I know it’s all part of a narrative I believe in—the narrative of good triumphing over evil.

The Exodus is often referred to as the “charter myth” of Israel, the story that explains the culture and society of the Israelite people. When we hear the word “myth” today, it’s easy to see it as a negative, as widely held but ultimately false belief—if you’ve ever come across the show MythBusters, you have a great illustration of this.

In a literary sense, though, a myth is a story that explains why things are the way they are. It is a story that rings so true it is told over and over and over, and becomes part of the fabric of

existence. It is a story told to make sense of life—and telling stories to make sense of life is one of the things that makes us human.

The story of the parting of the sea is a key part of the story of Israel, and it is part of our story as well. It is part of the story of living enslaved to evil, with no hope in sight; the story of God making a way for freedom and life; the story of good winning out over evil in the end.

In 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on this same passage at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, and reached the same conclusion. “This story symbolizes something basic about the universe,” King said. “It symbolizes something much deeper than the drowning of a few men, for no one can rejoice at the death or the defeat of a human person. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil...The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good.”

King fought long and passionately for good, for the dignity and equality of all God’s children. And yet, the battle is not over. While King made great strides for civil rights, he was ultimately killed because of it, and we need only to turn on the news to see that the work is ongoing. Race relations are still fraught. Slavery and human trafficking are still all too common. This weekend we remembered the terrorist attacks of 9/11—19 years feels like a lifetime ago, and like no time at all. We’re having 8 and 10:30 services of Holy Eucharist today for the first time in over 6 months, but there are reminders all around that things are far from “normal.” Our world is laden with war and threats of war, with environmental disdain and natural disasters, with starvation and disease.

The story is the same today as in Exodus. We live in a world where we have been enslaved by evil. But God is making a way for us, a good way, a way that leads to life.

The other readings for today show us how to live into the way of good and life. [[In Romans we have a reminder to refrain from judgment as we try to live in unity. This is a common New Testament theme—perhaps because we need all the reminding we can get. Paul teaches that there will always be differences in practice and theology—and sometimes we won’t like it—but our identity as Christians is in Christ alone, not in the ways in which we choose to worship him.

The way of death is to assume that we have the corner on the “right” way to worship and the “right” way to believe. The way of life is to recognize that we represent just one beautiful expression of Christianity, and that in Christ we all are a new creation.]]

The Gospel lesson gives us a powerful teaching on forgiveness. Talk about a grand and cinematic story scope—Jesus liked to use hyperbole to get his point across, and he really went for it here. The first servant owed an inconceivable debt—ten thousand talents. A talent was considered somewhere in the range of nine to twenty years’ wages; in researching I read that a talent would be worth about one and a quarter million dollars today. At that calculation, the servant owed twelve and a half billion dollars. That’s a lot of money for the king to forgive.

And right after this debt being forgiven, he decides to collect on another debt—a hundred denarii. A denarii was about a day's wages for a laborer, which might put the value of a hundred denarii somewhere around ten to twelve thousand dollars. Another value calculator I found, though, places its worth today at under four dollars—so a hundred denarii might have been worth a bit less than four hundred dollars.

I have trouble imagining the need to collect four hundred dollars of debt after being forgiven twelve billion. It seems the king had trouble believing this, too, since he put the servant in jail to be tortured until his debt was paid—which, with a twelve billion dollar debt, we can probably assume meant eternal punishment.

This is another troubling story undercurrent—are we supposed to believe that God will punish us forever if we are unforgiving? Is that the God we know? I really don't think this story is meant to terrify us—unless, perhaps, we need to be terrified—and it is certainly not meant to be taken literally. With that said, I do think Jesus really, really wants us to know how integral to the Christian life forgiveness truly is.

We give forgiveness great lip service—even in our service. In the Creed we say we believe in the forgiveness of sins. In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Actually *living* forgiveness—forgiving others, ourselves, even God—can be harder, but it is the way of life, the victory of good. The way of death and evil is to deny forgiveness until our unforgiveness enslaves and tortures us.

This is all part of the Christian story, the great arc from death to life. Death and evil are all around us; we don't need to look far to see them. But death and evil do not have the last word. When we choose compassion over unforgiveness, unity over discord, forgiveness over bitterness, we are fighting for good.

And we know how the story ends—with good winning over evil, with life winning over death. We see small victories in our own lives, in those who work to make the world a better place, when we do as Mr. Rogers said and “look for the helpers.” But we also know a day will come when evil is destroyed—dead on the shore—and we are free. With this hope at the heart of our story, we have all we need to fight on the side of good.