

Commentary on Exodus 12:33—14:31

After hiking with a girlfriend this last weekend, words of thanks tumbled out of my mouth at the end of our time together.

“Thank you for always reaching out, for sending me texts, for pursuing me,” I said. “I’m usually a pretty good friend, but the pandemic has done something in me. Sometimes it feels like I don’t know how to be a friend anymore.”

She nodded her head, graciousness oozing out of her. The two of us then spent another ten minutes talking about the strange and confusing nature of friendship in the age of Covid-19, before yet another round of good-byes actually bade us farewell to the parking lot and to our conversation.

While our particular encounter may be unique, strange and confusing themes abound in this week’s readings. One theologian calls Exodus 14 “one of the Bible’s strangest military engagements,” while another describes the human experience in the same chapter as “deeply confusing.” Either way, the very nature of Exodus 12, 13 and 14, which has resulted in some of the most popular and well-known movie scenes of Hebraic history, can also prove terribly troubling and upending.

What can we do with this strange and confusing text but seek understanding?

In order to grapple with the hard parts, we have to first root ourselves in the heart of the Exodus story, which is to say, in identity.

Who is God to God’s beloved people, the Israelites? What story is communicated, now and throughout the generations, of God and of God’s people? Why does this matter to us, as a Christian audience, no less, thousands of years later?

These chapters are a reminder of “God’s deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt,” of the God who chases after God’s people with wild abandon. Theologian Jacqueline E. Lapsley says that the “story has profound meaning for Christians both because it reveals that delivering people from oppression is a core feature of God’s character ... and because of its connections to understandings of the death of Jesus in the New Testament.”

As such, God calls upon Israel to remember, always, not only that first Passover, but also a military engagement fought on the promise of mere words alone. This epic

tale, of the God who chases, who loves, who fights for, and who will do anything for, is the story of God's saving power. If we do not tell this story, Lapsley warns that "other stories will rush to fill the vacuum, and many of them do not lead to flourishing." So, we tell the story, even it leaves us feeling strangely confused in the process.

Of course, for theologian Michael J. Chan, there are two battles at play: Pharaoh's ongoing conflict with the Israelites and "the fight to believe God's absurd command."

When the Israelites presented Moses with a laundry list of questions, his reply was one of simple profundity: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (14:13-14). This last week, I went back to those sentences, reading them over and over again, underlining entire swaths of the paragraph.

Even if I know how the story ends, I needed that declaration to be true, because as time went on, the situation grew more dire. The probability of a real win seemed to diminish.

As Chan reminds his readers, though, the "true conflict is between forces of creation and chaos. Nothing less than cosmic order—the state in which life can flourish and abound—is at stake." When put that way, as readers, we are then forced to remember who we are dealing with in the first place. We are asked to recall whose identity is at stake: the God of the universe. The one who is called Peace. The one whose "peaceable kingdom must follow upon the defeat of evil and chaos," according to later prophecies in Isaiah.

Strange as it often seems, God's identity remains true—even when we find ourselves on our own "messy and confusing journeys," as theologian Cory Driver makes of these same chapters.

Immediately following the aforementioned underlined verses, Driver notes that God reverses the "seemingly wise guidance of Moses," in what he also deems his second-favorite verse of the bible: "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward" (14:15). Just as Moses told the people to keep still and wait, the Lord told the people to stop their whining and get a move on already. The Israelites, God said, were instead to move forward into an uncertain future, then trusting that God would harden the hearts of the Egyptians (14:17), so that "the Egyptians shall know that I

am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers” (14:18).

This reversal is only the beginning of a number of reversals that follows, when God continues to reverse Godself. Driver begs us consider the human experience of the narrative: “to their right and left walls of watery death, behind them only the holy fire that they had counted on to lead them, and in front of them only uncertainty and their own shadows.”

How true this story feels today, when the human experience of our world being turned upside-down by a global pandemic can make us feel like the only thing in front of us is uncertainty and our own shadows.

Like a toddler, I want to pound my fists on the ground, shouting for certainty and for a non-reversing sort of God.

But then, through Driver’s interpretation, I am reminded that even when everything feels topsy-turvy around me, sometimes the only thing I can do is to stop standing still and crying out, and instead, simply go forward.

Could it be the same for you?