

“Presence and Promise”

September 13, 2026

Exodus 14: 5-8, 10-18

As Pharaoh drew closer, the Israelites looked back and saw the Egyptians marching toward them. The Israelites were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, “Weren’t there enough graves in Egypt that you took us away to die in the desert? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt like this? Didn’t we tell you the same thing in Egypt? ‘Leave us alone! Let us work for the Egyptians!’ It would have been better for us to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert.”

But Moses said to the people, “Don’t be afraid. Stand your ground, and watch the Lord rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never ever see again. The Lord will fight for you. You just keep still.”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to get moving. As for you, lift your shepherd’s rod, stretch out your hand over the sea, and split it in two so that the Israelites can go into the sea on dry ground. But me, I’ll make the Egyptians stubborn so that they will go in after them, and I’ll gain honor at the expense of Pharaoh, all his army, his chariots, and his cavalry. The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, when I gain honor at the expense of Pharaoh, his chariots, and his cavalry.”

Exodus 14: 19-31

God’s messenger, who had been in front of Israel’s camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them. It stood between Egypt’s camp and Israel’s camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn’t come near each other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land. The waters were split into two. The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and cavalry. As morning approached, the Lord looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. The Lord jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn’t turn easily. The Egyptians said, “Let’s get away from the Israelites, because the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt!”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. At daybreak, the sea returned to its normal depth. The Egyptians were driving toward it, and the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry, Pharaoh’s entire army that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them remained. The Israelites, however, walked on dry ground through the sea. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.

The Lord rescued Israel from the Egyptians that day. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the amazing power of the Lord against the Egyptians. The people were in awe of the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Meditation

A few years ago, a popular Christian publishing company put out a VBS curriculum based on the Exodus story. The Scripture was paired with a safari theme, described as “an epic African adventure that engages the whole heart.” It was meant to emphasize that God is good when life is unfair, is scary, changes, is sad, and is good. Sounds great! Unfortunately, the curriculum also included a number of activities that were racially and culturally insensitive to say the least.

Parts of the curricula referenced Africa as a country, and in one activity, children were encouraged to imitate “clicks” from the Xhosa language and incorporate clicks into their own names, objectifying and appropriating a unique language and culture.

If this weren’t enough, on Day 1, the curriculum had adult leaders say the following: “I told you we’re going to *experience* the Bible story, so hop up! You’re going to be Israelite slaves! And I’ll pretend to be a mean Egyptian guard! Ready? Here we go! Get to work, you slaves, Pharaoh needs more bricks! Get over to one of those sand-colored tarps and get busy mixing that mud! What’s the matter? Afraid of getting your hands dirty? Too bad! You’re all slaves, you know. You have to do what I say. So, mix that mud! Faster! Pharaoh needs lots of bricks, and we don’t have all day!”

There was swift, strong criticism from pastors and Christian Ed leaders across several denominations; and many people shared resources on how to talk about privilege and unfairness without appropriating other cultures or playacting the horrors of enslavement. Offering some suggestions, the Rev. Melissa Collier Gepford wrote: “We will not force children to relive trauma or make light of the trauma of other people, and we will not ask them to appropriate another culture’s language for fun. Instead of perpetuating injustice, this is a wonderful opportunity to help children learn about seeking justice for all. When God called Moses to join in the liberating work in Exodus, we learn that God hears the cries of the oppressed. My prayer is that we will respond as Moses did and join in on that work. We worship the God of all nations, races, and cultures, and as Christians, we seek to do no harm.”

When we teach the Exodus story, we often sensationalize it, focusing on the signs and wonders – the burning bush, the 10 plagues, the parting of the sea. We focus on what seems like the magical and miraculous how, and (perhaps conveniently) we forget about the why.

Walter Brueggemann says that “the [Exodus] narrative is not really about frogs or gnats or hail or any of the pyro-theatrics. It is about the relative power of Pharaoh and YHWH, about the waning and defeat of Pharaoh’s power, and about the truth of YHWH’s resolve. The preaching task is to exhibit the way in which this drama is currently staged among us on the big public screen, the contest of power from above and power from below.”¹

We can find ourselves in this story easily as we wrestle with the power plays taking place today. We are witnessing the rise of a fascist, billionaire oligarchy. We are facing the emergence of the surveillance state through Flock and Ring and Axon. We are at the whims of the late-stage capitalist machine where corporations mine our data and

¹ ©2019 Walter Brueggemann, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, p. 50, 76

are rolling out “dynamic pricing” where you might be charged more based on your spending habits. Target and Walmart have installed sensors and cameras in their carts and on their shelves. Michaels refuses to price some products so you don’t always know what you will be paying until you get to the register. Humans are worth nothing to the industrial engine except what they can squeeze out of us. We can feel ourselves among those crying out for release and a return to human dignity.

And yet, we also need to recognize our own power and privilege – the ways we benefit from these systems - a task we spent much of Lent working on. Erna Kim Hackett pointed out the errors in white, individualist, American theology when she wrote the following:

As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story. They are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. They are Peter, but never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisees. They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt. For the citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when it is studying Scripture, is a perfect example of Disney princess theology. And it means that as people in power, they have no lens for locating themselves rightly in Scripture or society- and it has made them utterly ill-equipped to engage issues of power and injustice. It is some very weak Bible work.²

Most of us are standing with one foot in each camp right now – part Israel, part Egypt. We feel the injustices being perpetrated against us and our loved ones by those in power. And yet, we also participate in the economy that oppresses people. This contest between God and Pharaoh is playing out on our own global stage; and yet, it also plays out within each of us: the desire to stay the course and maintain the status quo, and the yearning to break to God’s freedom; our decision on whether to go or to stay, to conform or to risk.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of this narrative in both the Jewish and Christian imagination. If this is a story that forms us, if we are committed to this story of God hearing the cries of God’s people and overthrowing Pharaoh’s power to set them free, we must be committed to addressing the ways it plays out in our own day and age. Are we committed to being free from Pharaoh and his power, even if we have benefited from it? What side will we choose?

Cameron Howard wrote this week:

God is never a neutral observer in any biblical account; God always takes sides. In the Exodus story, God chooses to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. God has no patience for Pharaoh’s delusions of godly grandeur, nor for his vicious grasping at power and glory. Similarly, Jesus’s death on the cross is no affirmation of the Roman Empire, but rather an indictment of its cruelty. Jesus’s resurrection may not overthrow the Roman Empire, but it certainly exposes its ultimate impotence and the farce of its claims to absolute dominance.

² Erna Kim Hackett, “Why I Stopped Talking About Racial Reconciliation and Started Talking About White Supremacy,” <https://www.liberatedtogether.com/feisty-thoughts/why-i-stopped-talking-about-racial-reconciliation-and-started-talking-about-white-supremacy>, posted August 23, 2022

Throughout Scripture, from Exodus to the Gospels and everything between and beyond, God sides with life over death and humility over power.³

Are we committed to overthrowing unjust power, or have we simply resigned ourselves to accept it? The contest of power on the global stage is also the contest within us. With whom will we side?

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Scripture: *Common English Bible* (CEB) ©2011 by Common English Bible

³ Cameron B.R. Howard, Commentary on Exodus 14:19-31 for September 13, 2026.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24/commentary-on-exodus-1419-31-7>