



There are sometimes those texts in the Bible that, when you read them, you think, “I don’t know if I get this.” Why would God want to destroy a nation, and toss them like toy soldiers into the sea, so that they are found dead on the shoreline? And what would possess the Israelites to rejoice in their destruction? Immediately following this text, Aaron’s sister, Miriam, takes her tambourine and leads all the women in a dance rejoicing, “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” It’s tricky.

Selective reading through the lens of modern sensibilities easily cause us to dismiss such texts and conclude that the God of wrath and judgement in the Old Testament is fortunately replaced by the God of love and mercy of the New Testament. Such a view was described in the early church as Marcionism - the heresy, first articulated by Marcion in the 2nd century, that completely dismissed the Hebrew Scriptures in favour of upholding the gospel texts exclusively.

But then you read today about Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant. The king throws the servant into debtor’s prison and tortures him demanding repayment for not forgiving his fellow servant. The difference in scale of the debts are almost laughable: ten thousand talents and a hundred denarii. The

parable concludes with the moralistic heavy weight warning that your heavenly father will do the same to you if you do not forgive others from your heart. All of this to suggest that you’d better do the right thing otherwise you will suffer divine punishment. It’s challenging.

I always find it helpful to remember that scripture can best be understood by allowing the entire narrative arc of scripture as a whole to interpret a particular text. This avoids the popular experience of quoting isolated verses of scripture to support some self-righteous moralistic argument or position.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can all relate to the very real human impulse of seeing the downfall of our enemy - and even their destruction. The enemy could be a cosmic force, a tribe or a group of people, or an individual person like the bully in the school playground. Depending on what they’ve “done to us” will determine the level of needed justice, retribution or deliverance.

For the people of Israel, they were oppressed as slaves in Egypt for centuries. For the Jews in first century Palestine, they were living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. In both groups they were displaced, marginalized and living with very real fears about daily existence. The enemy became the oppressor or the one in power, which left them powerless and longing for a day of deliverance.

It is significant that when we hear a story of parting of the sea and the conquering the oppressor, we also hear a story about forgiving the one who “owes” us something - whatever scale of indebtedness that may be. Indebtedness, deliverance, forgiveness and freedom all seem inter-connected.

If the Passover and Exodus story becomes a model of what is accomplished in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, then perhaps it's important to remember that Jesus becomes the cursed and helpless one who is swallowed up completely by the powers of the world. Like the Egyptians swallowed up by the sea, Jesus becomes the one who is swallowed up by the powers of abuse, denial, torture, condemnation and any other vehicle of hatred and violence that we are all capable of casting on one another. Jesus becomes the target, the container and the scapegoat to absorb it all and be sent out into the wilderness to die.

Uniquely, as Jesus was the incarnate One, whose authority was constantly questioned, he was the One who had the power to deliver people from their infirmities, cleanse them from their leprosy, restore their vision and absolve their sins. When Jesus walked on top of the water and calmed the stormy seas - that place where leviathan lurked and swallowed people up - people asked, “Who is this that even the wind and waves obey him?” Uniquely Jesus becomes the Anointed One, the Passover Lamb of

God who has the ability to break the endless cycle of self-righteous blame and release us from the bondage of oppression.

In the cross Jesus is swallowed up and tossed like a dead man on the sea shore. But the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is also a God of creation, the One who is able to create something new out of nothing, the One who shines a light in the darkness where the darkness has never overcome it. This is the One who, on the edge of being swallowed up on the cross, is able to say, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” On the cross, the events of deliverance and forgiveness are clearly connected.

There, Jesus becomes one of the Egyptians swallowed up by the sea. At the same time he also becomes one of the Hebrews delivered from their oppressors and he also becomes the unforgiving servant being released from prison. (After all, how could the servant ever repay ten thousand talents from prison? It is an impossible task.) We recount this great narrative arc of liberation from these stories in the eucharistic prayer every Sunday because these stories are foundational to our experience of deliverance and forgiveness. Through the One who becomes key to our liberation we are able to pray, “forgive us our trespasses, we we forgive those who trespass against us.” May you rejoice in your freedom, for God in Christ has set you free.