

“BREAD OF HEAVEN”

a sermon on Exodus 15:20 – 16:4a, Philippians 2:1-13, and Matthew 21:23-32
for World Communion

October 1, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
Sumner, Mississippi

The Book of Exodus records in the opening verse of chapter 15, that the very first “act” of Moses and the people of Israel in response to God’s miraculous saving act of allowing them to cross the Red Sea on dry land, and then consuming the Egyptians by allowing the water to return, was to break out in *song*. “I will sing to the Lord,” begins the chorus, “for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. . .”

And then toward the end of the chapter we read specifically about *Miriam*, Aaron’s sister, taking a tambourine in her hand, and leading out the *women* of Israel who sing, play, and *dance* – repeating the “chorus” with which the celebration had begun.

Scholars have a good bit to say about these “songs of salvation,” one of which is that Miriam’s song was probably actually composed before the lengthier version that continues on for several more verses after the opening chorus.

But one of the most insightful comments on this passage that I’ve come across is from Dr. Fretheim from Luther Seminary, who writes this:

While God’s *work* is central, the human *response* is not incidentally reported. If there were no human response, what God has done would not become known; it would be like a rock falling in the sea. The human response make a *difference* to God . . . That response has five *facets* in chapters 12 – 15. The people (a) fear Yahweh and believe in him; (b) believe in his servant Moses; (c) sing praises; (d) engage in rituals – Passover, unleavened bread, redemption of firstborn; and (e) retell the story of what God has done” (*Interpretation, Vol. 2*. John Knox Press, 1991, pg. 163).

In other words, these songs are about Israel’s “rituals” and *liturgy*, in commemoration of what they remembered as God’s most powerful acts on their behalf – the Passover, and the Crossing of the Sea. And in Fretheim’s view those rituals and liturgy *matter* to God – because it is through our *human* acts that *God’s* acts are known, and remembered, and live on.

And the same is true of the central acts of our salvation that we Christians recognize, and around which we have built our rituals and our liturgy – God’s powerful act of taking flesh and becoming one of us, and Christ’s *obedience* in dying on the cross (followed by the power of the Resurrection).

You can’t tell in English, unfortunately, but our reading from Philippians this morning contains what scholars consider to be one of – if not *the* – earliest Christian hymn ever written. And it does *exactly* that – *quoted* by Paul the way I might quote a line of a familiar hymn to you in a sermon – *because it triggers your memory* of the hymn, of the occasions when you have sung it, perhaps where it comes in the liturgy, and because it definitely adds *richness* to what I have to say. The hymn is contained in verses six through 11 of Philippians two:

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Clearly, Jesus’ message is the Good News of our salvation – and as our Gospel lesson this morning makes clear, that salvation isn’t just for some, it is for all who believe, and who “do” the Will of the Father.

And the Good News is then “lived” – *done* – through our human acts of praise, and ritual, and liturgy.

Furthermore, just as Israel’s salvation events are re-told, re-lived, *remembered*, to this day, through the Passover Feast and all of its liturgy and traditions, so is our Christian salvation re-told, re-lived, and *remembered* in our annual celebrations of the incarnation and the resurrection, but really most quintessentially in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper that we are celebrating this morning. Its symbols of bread and wine are *rich* with memory and meaning – tying the last supper, and Christ’s Sacrifice on the cross to the Passover, and God’s miraculous *sustenance* of His people in the wilderness with “Bread from Heaven,”

the eventual *feasts* of Israel celebrated with “wine and fat things” once they had reached the land “flowing with milk and honey,” and symbolic, of course, of Jesus’ own body (broken) and blood (shed).

While there are Christian traditions that celebrate the Sacrament weekly – and even *daily* – this first Sunday of October remains the one day of the year when it is celebrated by more Christians than on any other. “World Communion.” It is a name for the day. But it is more than that. It is a *prayer*, really. As we praise God today, recalling His mighty acts effecting our salvation, *sustaining* us with the bread of life, we also pray for God to bring our world *together*, in Christ. We pray for unity, as we celebrate what we have *in common* with people everywhere, and with people of faith in every land, and at every time in human history – past, present, and future.

As long as Christians continue to gather at the table, give praise, remember, and celebrate this Sacrament, there is *hope* for where we are headed – hope for all people, everywhere. Hope for *us*.

Come to the table today *grateful* for all God has done and is doing in the world, and praying for opportunities to share Christ’s love with others. Together, let us keep the feast.

To God be the Glory.