

Sermon

Sept. 17, 2017

Based on Exodus 14:19-31

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*Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
whether cloudy or calm, and all the weather,
through which You give Your creatures sustenance.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water;
she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.*

- St. Francis

Today ends this mini-series on how creation reveals to us something about God and our relationship with God. We talked about fire, how fire draws us in but also demands our respect. In the same way, God draws us close to God and to one another, but God also demands our reverence. We spoke of death, which is our enemy but also a motivator to pursue life. We affirm that death is the servant of God, who places a limit on our earthly life, which makes life that much more precious and worth protecting. Today, we will consider wind, sky, and sea and how these forces of nature prompt in us both peace as well as terror. We will think about how God is active through these forces. We can sense the presence of and worship God through wind, sky, and sea.

First, let's go back to the story read to us this morning. The Israelites are being chased by Egypt's army. It's just unbelievable. After all those plagues, after the slaughter of the firstborn and the people begging the Israelites to leave, Pharaoh just will not let the Israelites go. He is determined to wipe this people out completely. So here they are in the wilderness on foot while Pharaoh's war horse drawn chariots chase them down.

The Israelites find themselves trapped between Pharaoh's army on one side and the Red Sea on the other. There is no hope for them. They will either be slaughtered by the army or drown in the sea. The sense of panic and bewilderment was thick in the air. How can it be, after all God

had done to get them out of Egypt, that they would end up being slaughtered in the wilderness?

Once again, God acts in order to deliver Israel from destruction. But God does not act alone. God instructs Moses to raise his arms over the sea. And as Moses lifts up his arms, God sends a strong east wind that blows a path through the sea, lifting up the water to the north and the south and drying out the sea bed. While this is going on, God in the cloud is placed between the Israelite's and the army, preventing the army from moving any closer due to the fog.

When the time was right, the Israelites then sprinted through the sea, staring at the walls of water on their sides. The fog lifts and the army sees what is happening. So they start chasing the Israelites through the sea. But then God causes the wheels of the chariots to get bogged down, stirring up panic among the army. When the last Israelite gets to the other side, the wind dies down and the sea closes in over the army. And for those who managed to get out of the sea, the story says, God threw them back in. God was determined to destroy the entire army. Neither man nor horse will escape.

And then, as the Israelites catch their breath, embrace each other, and give thanks to God for their deliverance from their sure destruction, they look to the shore and see one, then another, and then another, the bodies of the dead soldiers, and the dead horses, washing up on the shore. It is surely a sobering scene. They knew that those soldiers were determined to kill them. But now those soldiers lie dead on the shore, their lungs full of water. And as the Israelites looked at what God had done, they feared God and believed in Moses.

The Israelites experienced the power of wind and sea which God used to wipe out the army and deliver the Israelites from sure annihilation. God acted, not just to save them but also to impress upon them how powerful God is, and that God works with the forces of nature and with people, like Moses, to do amazing things. And amazing it was, something that those who were there and experienced it would never forget. The army bearing down on them, Moses' outstretched arms, the howling wind, the walls of water, the dead soldiers washed up on the shore, just an amazing experience. An experience that surely changed

their lives. The Israelites would not be the same. They would never forget.

But it didn't have to be this way. If Pharaoh would have just let them go. He had lost his firstborn son, as well as every other household. It was so obvious that Israel's God was more powerful than Pharaoh or any of Pharaoh's gods. But he just would not let them go. The need for revenge, to slaughter those Israelites, was too strong. Pharaoh forced God's hand. And God acted in a devastating way. So much death that did not have to happen if only Pharaoh had let Israel go.

There is an old Hasidic Jewish story that goes like this: According to one of the Rabbis, the angels were all rejoicing over the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea: playing their harps, singing, dancing. "Wait," said one of them. "Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping!" They went to God. "Why are you weeping when Israel has been delivered by your power?" "I am weeping," said the Maker of the Universe, "for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore — somebody's sons, somebody's husbands, somebody's fathers." Yes, God delivered the Israelites. But such a high price was paid for their salvation.

Now whether the parting of the Red Sea actually happened or it's just a legend, the moral of the story is a powerful one. God resists oppressors. God acts in order to deliver those who are oppressed. It doesn't happen quickly. After all, Israel was enslaved for many years. And God's deliverance isn't always as dramatic as the parting of the Red Sea. But in those moments, when it appears all is lost, God makes a way out of no way. Some way, somehow, God sees us through it all. And God does God's delivering work with the forces of nature and works through the actions of others to bring about this deliverance. For those who oppress, this story is a warning. God can use the forces of nature and work through the actions of others to bring down those who oppress and harm the innocent. For those who are crushed under the yoke of oppression, this is a story of hope. For those who oppress, this is a story of warning.

Still, there is a tension. This is a story of deliverance and destruction, of freedom and loss, of life and death, of joy and grief. This

story is tragic, just like real life. And most of all it is a demonstration of the devastating power of wind and water.

Of course, we have also seen recently how devastating wind and water can be. The flooding of Houston, the complete devastation of the Virgin Islands, in the aftermath of Harvey and Irma, have been shocking to see. And we know that the images on our screens do not do justice to being there, seeing for ourselves, smelling the rot, feeling the humid heat, hearing the sounds of chain saws and bull dozers, tasting the energy biscuits passed out by the national guard. I am certainly not saying that God was at work, sending those hurricanes to do that kind of massive destruction. I'm not saying that God allowed these storms to occur to teach a lesson. But I do know that God was at work through the storm and after the storm in order to protect life, motivating people to give of themselves to help others, to stir up resolve to rebuild and gratitude to still be alive. God is certainly at work in the midst of those storm tossed lands.

Just like fire, just like death, the parting of the Red Sea prompts us to respect the forces of wind, sky, and sea. We can join St. Francis and praise God through these forces of nature. How might these forces of nature help us connect with God?

The wind is like the spirit of God. It is all around us. It is in constant motion. The wind impacts everything, sometimes gently and sometimes with great force. In the same way, God is all around us. God is not locked up in heaven somewhere but is fully present everywhere. And we feel the presence of God if we are paying attention, often in gentle ways, but sometimes the presence of God can be overwhelming. God, like the wind, surrounds us and impacts us. We decide whether to resist the wind or allow the wind to direct our steps.

The sky is like a giant tent that covers the whole earth. Or better if we were to be able to see the earth from space, we could see the thin layer of blue atmosphere between the earth and outer space, like the membrane of a massive cell. The sky that circles and encases the whole earth is like how God cradles in God's hand the entire globe.

And then there is the sea, deep, mysterious, timeless. There is something very powerful about sitting on the beach, watching and

listening to the waves crashing onto the shore over and over again. It's mesmerizing. It calms the mind. And I think about how the continuous movement of wave after wave never stops. The ocean is never still. These waves have come upon the shores of that beach we are sitting on for thousands and thousands of years before you or I came to this beach. And when we are gone, the waves will continue to come upon that shore for thousands and thousands of years more. The waves of the sea are like God, who is constant, relentlessly in motion, endlessly moving. Before human beings came to beaches, God, like those waves, was present and active. And when the human species is gone from the earth, God will still be present and active, as waves crashing on the shore, always moving, never ending, a constant rhythm of life. Be praised, my God, through brothers wind and air and sister water. Amen.