



## JOHN P. WEBSTER LIBRARY

### A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings SEPTEMBER 2005

#### September 11, 2005

Psalm 114  
or Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21  
or Genesis 50:15-21  
Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13  
Romans 14:1-12  
Matthew 18:21-35

#### September 18, 2005

Exodus 16:2-15  
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45  
or Jonah 3:10-4:11  
Psalm 145:1-8  
Philippians 1:21-30  
Matthew 20:1-16

#### September 25, 2005

Exodus 17:1-7  
Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16  
or Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32  
Psalm 25:1-9  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Matthew 21:23-32

Exodus 15 contains the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam, which are thought to be two of the oldest passages in the Hebrew Bible. The Song of Moses, an elaboration of the Song of Miriam, “holds together a distinctive articulation of *the story of liberation*, with Israel moving from the world of Pharaoh’s oppression to the safe land of promise, and the undercurrent thematic of *a creation liturgy*, which portrays and enacts God’s victory over the powers of chaos and the forming of the earth as a safe, ordered place to live.”<sup>1</sup> God’s specific purpose for the people of Israel and God’s universal purpose for all of creation are inseparably linked. The liberation of Israel does not simply mirror or symbolize God’s creative goodness, it embodies it: the saving work of God and the creative work of God are one and the same.

This unity speaks against our tendency to think of lofty spiritual truths as existing in isolation from, and in opposition to, our daily lives on earth. In actuality, “such earthiness brings the questions and resources of faith very close to how we experience and live reality... We are (as the Bible recognizes) caught in a deep battle for humanness, a battle larger than we ourselves can manage.”<sup>2</sup> We should not be surprised that God is actively concerned with how we live out our humanity; humankind, after all, is created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-31) to play a special role in caring for the world: “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."<sup>3</sup> In the Exodus story, as in Jonah 3 when God spares the Ninevites because of their repentance, we see that God does not simply act *upon* people but *in relationship to* people.

The revealed nature of a good God in relationship with humanity is the foundation of our trust in the promises of God. Just as Israel received the promise of deliverance first, and only afterwards saw the promise fulfilled in the liberation of Exodus, we receive the Exodus story as promise and await its demonstration in our own lives: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 *NRSV*). Since faith is inseparable from hope, faithfulness to God consists in large part of "keeping hope alive" by remembering God's demonstrated faithfulness in the past. Psalms 103, 105, 114 and 145 all encourage us to praise God *now* for what God did *then* and will do *again*.

The early Christian understanding of deliverance, though, shifted away from purely an expectation of a successful outcome in our familiar material world. This shift, which is not at all surprising given the crucified Christ at the center of our faith, is expressed by Paul in Philippians 1: "The deliverance he has in mind is not contingent upon his being released or executed...whether Rome says yes or no over his life his witness by word and conduct will honor and magnify Christ."<sup>4</sup> Paul clearly believes that "God can be relied on for the assurance that, whatever happens, there will be an opportunity to turn the situation to good effect."<sup>5</sup>

This assurance is a great comfort to Christians, but we must be very careful that we do not allow ourselves to backside from the true hope of deliverance to a false sense

of an entitlement to material comfort. This misunderstanding of God's promise is not simply a mistake, but a turn from the way of life to the way of death. In Exodus 16 and 17, we see how "present anxiety distorts the memory of the recent past...the immediacy of food [and water] overrides any long-term hope for freedom and well-being."<sup>6</sup> In other words: "The lack of discernment of *God's presence in the ordinary* leads to a denial of *God's activity in the extraordinary*."<sup>7</sup> When we feel entitled to see the things we have hoped for, we can no longer be hopeful in their absence, and so we no longer act faithfully.

The parable of forgiveness in Matthew 18 and the parable of envy in Matthew 20 also speak of this danger. The unforgiving servant learns that he cannot expect to receive mercy without giving it in return, because forgiveness is not an object to be possessed: "Forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the previous one."<sup>8</sup> The envious laborers learn as well that God's grace "is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up...God doesn't make contracts with us...He makes **covenants**, in which he promises us everything and asks of us everything in return."<sup>9</sup> Manna given through generosity rots if hoarded from greed (Exodus 16); the grace and mercy of God are not ours to question (Jonah 4, Genesis 50).

In all things, we must recognize the ultimate providence and responsibility of God, from whom all valid authority is derived (Matthew 21, Ezekiel 18). We must pay heed to the warning of the Exodus story, which offers "a critique of utilitarian religion in which God is judged by the desired outcomes for the asking community"<sup>10</sup>; we must equally heed the warning of Paul in Romans 14, where he offers a critique of self-

righteous religion in which the service of God is judged by conformity to the practices of one community or group. We must always ask ourselves, “What should Jesus’ followers be doing today that would challenge the powers of the present world with the news that he is indeed its rightful Lord?”<sup>11</sup>—and we must know when to count ourselves among those same powers.

In Philippians 2, Paul addresses that very question of what Jesus’ followers should be doing: “There is, he says, a way of ‘minding,’ an approach to life, to others, to self, to God which characterizes those who are in Christ Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> We are to empty ourselves in service to God by serving others, as Christ did, and so eventually share in his exaltation as well: “The gospel invites us to forget, as Christ did, our own concerns and desires, and to find joy and salvation in offering praise and glory to God.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, by remaining faithful in our hope for deliverance, we turn our lives over to God to embody God’s creative goodness within them, and so play a small role in the great story of liberation. We are always living within the Exodus story, and God is always with us, leading us on to the promised land. Praise be to God!

---

<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 1 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1994), 799.

<sup>2</sup>Brueggemann 803.

<sup>3</sup>Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1991), 163.

<sup>4</sup>Fred Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, c1985), 28.

<sup>5</sup>Morna Hooker, “The Letter to the Philippians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 11 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2000), 494.

<sup>6</sup>Brueggemann 812.

<sup>7</sup>Fretheim 181.

<sup>8</sup>Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 2, Chapters 16-28*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2002), 39-40.

<sup>9</sup>Wright 57.

<sup>10</sup>Brueggemann 818-819.

<sup>11</sup>Wright 77.

<sup>12</sup>Craddock 38.

<sup>13</sup>Hooker 494.