

Read [Exodus 15:1-11, 20-21](#).

Songs Worth Remembering

Today's reading from Exodus 15 is thought by most scholars to be among the oldest passages in the Hebrew Bible, dating from around 1200-1150 BCE. The reading includes parts of two songs that recount the Hebrew people's escape from the Egyptian army through the Reed/Red Sea (different translations use one or the other name).

The first song, Ex. 15:1b-11, is sung by Moses. The second song, Ex. 15:21, is sung by Moses' sister, Miriam, and "all the women." Both versions celebrate the strength and saving power of Almighty God. God controls the wind and the sea, churning them up to overthrow Pharaoh's chariots and soldiers. Out of this tsunami of chaos comes "overflowing victory" (v. 1) for God's people.

I wonder how different a song about these events written by the Egyptians would have been. Beloved Egyptian sons, brothers, and husbands were killed. Brave horses drowned, weighted down by weapons and chariots. The royal advisors would have been confounded. Pharaoh himself—considered divine—would have been confronted with the limits of his rule, as his mighty army was shattered by the mightier powers of his rival, Yahweh.

For the Egyptians, God defeated Pharaoh and the Hebrew slaves escaped. For the Hebrew people, God defeated Pharaoh and set the Hebrew people free. Whichever way the story is sung, then, it is a story about God's victory. Out of chaos and confusion, God creates a new order. For everyone.

It's worth reminding ourselves that these songs weren't composed mid-crossing. They were composed when the danger was over, from the safety of shore. In the middle of the Reed/Red Sea in mid-chase, nobody was thinking up lyrics or tunes. They were busy just trying to get through. With a wall of water on either side, Moses, Miriam, and everybody else were focused on putting one foot in front of the other as quickly as possible, keeping the kids and the animals and the old ones moving away from danger and toward dry land.

Once the people were on solid ground, however, the songs came. The people looked back at what they'd come through together and "Israel saw the amazing power of the LORD...The people were in awe of the LORD, and they believed in the LORD

and his servant Moses” (14:31). Then the singing began. From the vantage point of safety, Moses and Miriam looked back and saw not just “the Egyptians dead on the seashore” (14:30). They saw the work of God. That was their song.

They sang what they knew from first-hand experience: God was here. God came this way with us and we saw it all. We read those songs today, some 3200 years later, the songs that scholars accept as the late-Bronze Age/early-Iron Age beginnings of what we know as the Old Testament.

Confusion generally writes poor songs. Songs written in periods of confusion tend to be about the confusion: about fear, turmoil, frustration, and uncertainty. (Think of Led Zeppelin’s 1969 song “Dazed and Confused,” for example.) But songs written once we’ve had a chance to catch our breath and reflect on what we’ve been through and what it all means? Those will be songs worth holding on to.

This coming week may take you and your loved ones through deep, disordered waters. As the schools re-open, we begin yet again working, socializing, and moving about our communities in new ways. This will be a month of confusion and anxiety for so many. The routines and rituals of past Septembers that have helped us transition from summer to autumn have changed. Parts of church life that were eagerly anticipated—like Sunday school starting up, UCW groups meeting, or Wednesday coffee mornings in the church hall—are missing. And that’s okay.

We’re still mid-journey. And nobody is expecting anybody to have all the answers, to be 100% sure of everything, not yet.

Instead, in this time of ongoing confusion, we can sing what we know to be true while we experiment with a few new tunes. We know that God is still here, and so we continue to worship albeit in new ways: at home, online, or as a family. We know that God is journeying with us, and so we continue to pray and listen for God’s voice and watch for God alive in our world, though we are praying, listening, and watching outside of our usual church activities.

When the time comes for us to write a song of this strange Covid time, what will we remember? What will we want our children and grandchildren to remember? Will we hold on to our fear and frustration? Or will we celebrate that in the confusion of pandemic times we saw God at work, and we believed?