

SUMMARY: GOD'S RED SEA MIRACLE (Exodus 14:19-31)

Functional Atheism is the term Quaker teacher Parker Palmerⁱ uses to describe how we are '**not the only act in town**' and how we as leaders can sometimes mistakenly believe that '**if anything good is ever going to come it's up to us to make it happen!**' We may match that to verses like 1 John 3:18, teaching how our faith needs not to be just about words but expressed in actions! We've all heard that bit of so-called wisdom mistakenly also attributed to scripture: that '**God helps those who help themselves**' right? And we may even be drawn into thinking how that's so very wise! But it's not scriptural – it's from Aesop's Fablesⁱⁱ and it's 'the **gods** who help those...' *In fact, scripture teaches us just the opposite - that God helps those who are prepared vulnerably to callout for help...*

And so the danger is this 'Functional Atheism!' We may say with our mouths that we believe in God as this great power of sacred holiness that infiltrates and undergirds everything, but then we behave as if it's all up to us! **Surely the power of God's love doesn't depend only on us and our ingenuity?** And that, I believe, may be just about the whole point of today's reading!

Fundamentalist Biblical historians argue *for ever* about just Slide **what exactly happened** here, and especially then about **what we are to make of it all now - today**. Scripture has varying accounts of this event. Today's reading seems to have been put together by two different writers: the so-called Priestly writer and the Yahwist. The firstⁱⁱⁱ is what most of us think about when we think of the Exodus crossing: the water dividing left and right with the Israelites moving through on dry land followed by the Egyptian army who, when Moses raised his staff, were obliterated with the waters crashing back. Interwoven is the other one^{iv} which describes a great pillar of cloud and fire which descended separating the Israelites and the Egyptians, who then panic, plunge into the sea, and die! The next chapter^v tells the same story but in poetic form - the so-called Song of Moses - with Israel praising God for redeeming them!

But what exactly we believe happened, historically, is not the point - the point which is not historical so much as theological. And so, what are we to make of this, theologically? Most modern scholarship agrees that it was written some 700 years later - during their time of Babylonian exile^{vi} - written as an inspirational saga^{vii} to encourage Israel at a time when so much of their faith was being questioned and challenged! We can imagine them having to explain to their children what they were to believe about God and themselves as an exiled people living as foreigners in the land of Nebuchadnezzar, where all sorts of influences were challenging their ideas about God and how God worked - their very identity and purpose as God's precious people! And so - drawing on oral tradition and all sorts of other imagery - the writers of Exodus told them. *They set out to write not just time bound history, but inspired for all time theology!*

THIS (they are saying) *is who God is and THIS is what God does!*
This is how we are to embrace God's working in the past!
And this is how we are to know God works every day of our lives!

And God does this by working God's grace through the faithfulness of very ordinary people like us – as we are at our best!

How does God help a vulnerable young family trying to restart their lives after a marriage had crumbled? *Perhaps, by giving them a caring community who are eager to provide for their needs, emotionally, spiritually and even physically.*

How does God help desperate moms, many single moms, with caring for their newborn children? *Perhaps, by providing organizations like Pregnancy Outreach who invite faith communities like ours to open our wallets and hearts.*

It's not necessarily the physical opening up of the Red Sea, but it might as well be!

Will Willimon teaches how in his experience, *'when contemporary people say they don't believe in God, they are not so much saying that they don't believe in some "higher power" or some vague, omnipotent force somewhere out there. What they really mean is that they doubt that there is any God out there **who is there for them.** When someone cries out in anguish, "Where is God?" They are not asking for God's address, they are asking, "Why is God absent in my time of need?"*

During this time of *BlackLivesMatter*, I was so blessed by a short Facebook post by Caroline Crockett Brock, who describes herself as a 45 year old white woman living in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. She describes her contact with Ernest, a highly competent, middle-aged, black home appliance repairman, and is shocked by the level of systemic racism that he has known. She got his permission to put his story on Facebook. The response of the community was quite wonderful. Deeply moved, she concludes: *This is how we change our country. Normal folks. One town at a time.* For Ernest in Myrtle Beach South Carolina, Moses was this very average white woman who cared enough to get involved, who was willing to raise the staff of her activism high enough to allow the Red Sea of racial prejudice to open up in front of him and for the worst effects of systemic racism, even just for this brief time, to be destroyed.

We see the ultimate freedom miracle for us all - in whatever circumstance we may be - *empowered* in God's whole event of Jesus' birth, life, death... and in the breaking-in light of Christ's resurrection, and sealed with the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit!

And it's not Functional Atheism because it's not about us believing in ourselves – it's about us believing in the God of all creation who is doing it – & choosing to do so through us!

It's as we are in Christ that we get to *appreciate, embrace* and *live out* his liberating purposes & peace in the lives of others.

Maybe the problem in our not seeing God's divine interventions is not that they don't happen, but that we are blind to them. When the Hebrews realized that through the mighty acts of God, they were free, they said not only, "Now we believe in Moses and Moses' God," but, "We were wrong in what we formerly believed about God's lack of concern and God's inactivity. Now we know the truth about God." If you are doubting that there is a God, and that this God is actively intervening on the side of the oppressed to punish the oppressor and to deliver the oppressed, well, just keep looking over your shoulder. God acted dramatically in the Saga of the Exodus—and might just well be doing so again. (Willimon, paraphrased)

What liberating, Moses-like, miracles of God have you seen happening in your life?

What Moses-like liberation miracles are you experiencing even now?

What liberation-miracles are you longing to see in the future?

What miracles of liberation for the freeing/blessing of others are you being challenged to become as a Moses?

DAYEINU - It is enough - God opened the Red Sea once, we're told – and God is still doing it – how are you being drawn even now to get involved?

Rev Robin Jacobson

ⁱ Online article from Center for Courage and Renewal entitled [Leading From Within](http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/leading-from-within/)

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Article drawn from Chapter V of Parker Palmer's book, [Let Your Life Speak](#) Jossey-Bass (May 18 2009)

ⁱⁱ See Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_helps_those_who_help_themselves

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 14: 21-23, 26, 28-29

^{iv} Exodus 14:19b-20, 24, 25b, 27a, 30-31

^v Exodus 15:1-18

^{vi} **(6th century BCE)**, based on earlier written and oral traditions, with final revisions in the Persian post-exilic period (**5th century BCE**).
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Exodus#:~:text=Exodus%20is%20traditionally%20ascribed%20to,period%20\(5th%20century%20BCE\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Exodus#:~:text=Exodus%20is%20traditionally%20ascribed%20to,period%20(5th%20century%20BCE))

^{vii} For use of the term Saga to describe the works of God in scripture, see Douglas Crawford [Saga of God Incarnate](#) UNISA (1985).