

Might It Happen Again?

Luke 1:26-38

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How the church interprets the Bible is strongly linked to the way the church interprets itself... Christians believe that God the Spirit who ... inspired the Scriptures, continues to constitute the inner life of the church through the ages, so that the Bible and the church compose one story, one reality.

- James William McClendon

[Biblically] it is in this history, in this time, Eden and the Fall, Jerusalem and Babylon, Eschaton and Apocalypse converge here and now.

- William Stringfellow

My old teacher Fred Craddock used to tell this story of visiting the Holy Land. He was in a tourist van as the guide drove the group to the next stop on the itinerary. On the way, the guide stopped and pulled off the road, got out and looked at a nearby hill and the road that made its way around the base of the hill. The guide said to Craddock, "Right there is where it happened. We were hidden in those rocks above the road and caught them as they came around the bend."

Dr. Craddock asked, "What are you talking about?"

The guide said, "We ambushed the enemy as they came around the hill and won a great victory."

Dr. Craddock said that looked at the spot the man was pointing to, and asked, “During the 1973 War?”

The man said, “No.” Craddock, “The 1967 War?” And the man said “No” again.

Craddock said, “Was it the 1948 War? You don’t look old enough to have fought in the 48 War but maybe so.”

The man said, “No it was the Maccabean War.”

The Maccabean War was fought 160 years before Christ. But the man had told the entire story as if he had been there. Not “my ancestors won a great victory” but “we won a great victory.”

Here is an example of the particularly Jewish and biblical understanding of how we remember and how we read the Bible and live our faith. In Deuteronomy 6:20-25, the people of Israel are told that when their children ask, “Why do we have to keep all these laws and observe all these decrees?” The parents are to answer their children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.”

Again, not “our ancestors were slaves,” but “*we* were slaves” and “the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand.” We read the Scriptural story as our story. We were there. We were in it. But at the same, it is here. It is now.

Theologian James McClendon says, “The whole force of Scripture’s truth rests upon just such a vision... The story you are living out now *is* the story related in the text... because in God’s mysterious way the past is present” (*Doctrine*, p. 466). What was “then” is “now.”

In the New Testament in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit blew through the room and gave birth to the church. Skeptics looked at all that was going on and figured that everyone was drunk. Peter stands up and says, “No, they’re not drunk. It’s too early, it’s only nine o’clock in the morning. *This is that* which was spoken through the prophet Joel, ‘In the last days, the Lord declares, I shall pour out my Spirit on all humanity...’” (Acts 2:13-17).

Peter understood the story they were living out now is the same thing Joel talked about in the Old Testament. Joel was correct when he spoke nine centuries before Christ while at the same time, Joel was correct for the event of Pentecost. But also, Joel is true for the future.

It’s not that it will happen now exactly like it did centuries before, but it might happen again. That’s why when we learn to read and think, imagine and discern through this biblical lens, we learn to see what the living God is doing. God is still surprising us, showing up today, empowering the church to do the ministry of Jesus today, converting us and calling us – now. God acted then but we are to be ready and hopeful, because God is acting now, and God will keep on acting in the future. These old stories are our stories. We are in them now.

That’s why the early church read Scripture and worshipped standing on tiptoes. Every Sunday, indeed, every day, was like standing on the edge of a

precipice, leaning forward, straining their eyes toward the horizon, with the wind blowing in their face. Things might be bleak and dark and chaotic, but Christ was alive, God was at work, and something might happen. They were ready to be surprised. The living God was intervening in the world – again.

In America, the black church has practiced this kind of urgently present reading of Scripture probably better than anyone. For example, in the spring and summer of 1963 in Birmingham when black children marched against White Segregation with its police dogs, beatings, and high-velocity water hoses, there was a climactic moment when a thousand children marched singing hymns and freedom songs. They walked right up to Police Commissioner Bull Connor and his line of snarling dogs, policemen, and firemen with their hoses. The children and civil rights workers knelt to pray, and Connor yelled for the hoses to be turned on point-blank on the children. But nothing happened. None of the firemen moved. The kids kept praying and finally, they stood and walked forward, right through the policemen and dogs and hoses, all the while Connor was yelling. Bystanders said it was God parting the waters just like God had done long before when he parted the waters of the Red Sea for Moses and the children of Israel to escape the Egyptians. God had done it before, and God was doing it again (see Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters*).

Earlier this week I was in a webinar with James Forbes and Mahan Siler, two of the great ministers in this country, both retired, and both mentors to me. Dr. Forbes said he had been meditating on Genesis 15:12-15, which says that Abram went into a deep sleep and dreamed that God told him that Abram's offspring someday will be aliens in a foreign land and will become slaves who are oppressed for four hundred years. Then God will deliver them from their oppressors.

Dr. Forbes went on to say that he continued reading and meditating on the Exodus story that Abram dreamed about. Exodus begins with the statement “Now a Pharaoh arose in Egypt who knew not Joseph” (Ex. 1:8). In other words, a pharaoh came to power who did not know and did not care about the history of the Hebrews in Egypt. Exodus goes on to explain that this new Pharaoh was ruthless, and along with his priests and religious leaders, Pharaoh instructs his administrators and taskmasters to be ruthless and cruel in order to control (Ex. 1:11-14). It explains that Pharaoh and his priests and taskmasters are fearful because the demographics of Egypt are changing. The Hebrew slaves are increasing in population and pretty soon there will be more Hebrews than the Egyptians can control. Therefore, Pharaoh the king, and with the support of his religious leaders and priests, must double-down power and control or they fear, they will lose their power and control.

The Exodus story says God responds. God hears the cries of his people and sends Moses to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. God says, “I know that Pharaoh will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So, I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders. After that he will let you go” (Ex. 3: 19-20). Moses later says, “Indeed, by a mighty hand God will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of Pharaoh’s land” (Ex. 6:1). A few verses later God says, “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my people and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:6-7).

This image of God’s hand and God’s arm delivering the people comes up multiple times in Exodus. The other image that keeps coming up is the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart. Again and again Pharaoh’s heart is hardened, he refuses to see

anything but what he wants to see, denies anything that is contrary to his own opinions and views. As a result, Pharaoh digs in his heels and refuses to let the slaves go free.

But again and again, God acts. Again and again, God's mighty arm intervenes and sends plague after plague upon Pharaoh and Pharaoh's people. The Nile River turns to blood, they are infested with frogs, then lice, then flies, then diseased livestock, then skin boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally, the great passing over – the death of the Egyptian's first born. Each time, Pharaoh digs in with a hardened heart. Each time God acts, God intervenes, God intrudes with God's mighty arm or mighty hand to save and liberate his people.

Four hundred years in slavery. Four hundred years of oppression. Four hundred years of ruthlessness and sustained trauma and violence. But God hears the people's suffering. God hears their cries and God stretches out his mighty arm. The living God acts.

This is the question Dr. Forbes asked this week and the question I ask this morning: might it happen again?

Once again, we have a Pharaoh and all who Pharaoh represents, with a hardened heart, blind to everything that he or they or we do not want, blind to anything that is threatening, and doubling down on control and coercion on a population that is changing. Hardened hearts represents the wholesale abandonment of truth and inability to make good choices any longer or to even be able to see good choices. In other words, if we live by lies and falsehood, violence and manipulation long enough, eventually God gives us up to what we keep

choosing, and we can't see or do anything else. Meanwhile, people of color have been enslaved, segregated, oppressed, lynched, shot, intimidated, discriminated against, and dehumanized and the planet is being exploited and destroyed in the same way.

Perhaps God is saying, "I have heard your cries and I am reaching down with a mighty arm to save you and save this whole planet."

Might it happen again? Maybe, I don't know for sure, but what if instead of flies and frogs, locusts, and darkness, God's mighty arm sends plagues of floods and 19-inch snowfalls, hurricanes, and melting ice caps. What if God's people say, "We're not going to take this any longer. We're going to march. We're going to vote. We will not live in Egypt any longer. What if instead of a plague of boils and flies, there is a plague called Covid?"

I don't know. I'm certainly not a Fundamentalist about this. I'm not looking for a timetable or hidden code or clean set of predictions. I know God works according to God's own time and God's ways. At the same time, I don't want to become blind to the living God at work. I don't want to become so hardened that I can no longer be surprised by God.

All of this brings us to our story we read this morning from Luke chapter one. It has been four hundred years since the Bible says God spoke and God acted. Four hundred years since the close of Old Testament and now, Luke says, "In the days of King Herod, there was a priest named Zechariah" (1:5), and we discover God sends a messenger, sends Gabriel. Uh oh, God is up to something. After four hundred years God is going to do something. Get ready.

We know about King Herod. He rants and raves, and he's a builder of things that demonstrate his own glory and power: palaces, cities, and the great Temple. He's insecure and is hypervigilant to any perceived threats against his power. And when threatened he acts ruthlessly – as Matthew tells us over in chapter 2, when upon hearing of the birth of the Christ-child, Herod responds by killing all the boy babies in Bethlehem.

And Luke tells us there is a priest named Zechariah. Zechariah is not a bad guy. He knows how to go along to get along with those with power. He is not corrupt but most likely he has been handling the holy for so long, that he is inured to being surprised by God. He just does his job, but he's been doing it for so long that he can't see what the living God is doing.

Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel speaks to Zechariah of the new that God is about to do. God is intervening again, but Zechariah can't believe it or won't believe it. So, Gabriel says, "Sorry Zechariah, when you become numb to the holy, you have nothing to say, therefore you will become silent."

But there are two women who are ready to be surprised by God. They still think in terms of "might it happen again?" Elizabeth discovers that she is carrying a son who the reader knows will become John the Baptist.

Meanwhile, way over in the little town of Nazareth, in the rural part of Galilee, is a teenaged girl name Mary, who is a cousin to Elizabeth. Gabriel comes to Mary, who is open to the living God. Though it has been four hundred years since God spoke, Mary is still listening. And Gabriel tells her, "The Holy Spirit of

the Living God will come over you and you will conceive a son whom you will name Jesus.” Mary responds, “Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word.”

The living God comes not to powerful kings or to priests or tall steeple preachers. God comes to this young woman in a small town who is ready and open to God. God still acts. God still intervenes in this old world of hopelessness and helplessness. And Mary responds. Mary sings, “My soul magnifies the Lord...” (Luke 2:46ff).

Might it happen again?

You know this story. It’s your story. We are in it. It didn’t happen just a long time ago. Then is now.

You remember. All of the Herods, the Pharaohs, the Caesars and the Powers-that-Be gather their forces and join with all the priests and preachers and police and soldiers to do their worst. Jesus, Mary’s son, God with us, is arrested and tried on trumped-up charges and taken outside of town and lynched, hung on a cross. Powerful forces have done their worst.

But on Easter morning, just as Mary sang, “God stretched out his mighty arm...” (Luke 1:51).

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Oh, and one more thing, I've just remembered. Did you know that it has been four hundred years since the first slave arrived in America? Four hundred years... I'm just saying...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.