

## **The God who does**

Exodus 15:1-11

September 14, 2014

What begins with a sacred sign and ends with a glass of wine? This Shabbat service!

It begins with a sacred sign. The sign is Shabbat itself, the Sabbath, a day set apart from all the rest each and every week as a sign between God and us. It is a sign of the special relationship, the mutual relationship, between God and us. We keep Shabbat and God keeps us. It is a sign, a mark, a reminder, of our identity. We are God's people,. We belong to the Lord.

And it ends with a glass of wine. The Shabbat service ends with the Kiddush, a blessing of wine, of the fruit of the vine. And wine is a sign an symbol of? It is a symbol of joy, of life, of full life, of good life, of pleasure and happiness and celebration. God keeps us and God blesses us and God gives us life and God brings us joy -- here and now!

This is the gift of Jewish faith and tradition to us, and, indeed, to all of humanity -- the gift of Shabbat. Shabbat is about rhythm, about the rhythm of life, about the rhythm of work and rest and about remembering what it is all for, remembering what it is, who it is, that sets the rhythm in motion and gives it direction and brings it to its end.

Shabbat reminds us of the path we are on, of the way, the destiny, that has been set for us, and of the One who shares that path and that destiny with us. Shabbat reminds us that this is our path, walking with God toward shalom, living in covenant with God, here and now, for the sake of God's kingdom.

It's solid. It's practical. It's concrete. It's real. It's not about some kind of mystical search for truth or meaning or enlightenment. It's not about undertaking a personal spiritual pilgrimage toward healing and wholeness. It's not about preparing ourselves, qualifying ourselves, for a life to come, for the hereafter.

Well, yes, it is about hereafter. It's about what comes here ... after! After God's will is done. After God's kingdom has come.

Keeping Shabbat keeps us in rhythm. It keeps us in the rhythm of acknowledging God, of honoring God, of doing God's will, of shaping the world according to God's will. Shabbat reminds us who we are and what we are for. We are God's people, people called by God to do God's will.

Jewish tradition reflects this profound sense of call. Who are we? We are the people God brought out of Egypt. We are the people God brought out of Egypt to make his own.

This morning's Torah reading is about the exodus. The song of Moses and the Israelites is thought to be one of the oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible, one of the oldest songs, oldest poems, remembered and passed down from generation to generation until written down and preserved for all generations as part of the Torah. This is the earliest shared memory of a people, the memory of coming out of Egypt, of leaving behind that land, that life, of oppression and desolation, emptiness and suffering.

And this is no metaphor! This is no parable. This is no religious fable. Egypt was real. The oppressor was real. Their suffering was real. The bodies of Hebrew men and women bore the ravages of forced labor and the marks of being beaten. Their souls bore the humiliation of slavery and the horror of watching their own children be taken from them and murdered. But they were brought out! They were delivered!

Who delivered them? Who brought them out?

God. God did it. Not Moses. Not them. "The Lord has won a glorious victory," they sang. "The Lord has thrown the horses and their riders into the sea."

What weapons did the Israelites use to defend themselves against the army of the Pharaoh, to win their freedom? None! They had no weapons. They stood by and watched. "The Lord is a warrior," they sang. The One whose name is unspeakable fought for them.

Now it would be a mistake to dismiss this song as the vestige of a bygone era, a hymn to an angry and violent Old Testament God, nothing like the loving and forgiving God Jesus taught us to honor. This is the God of Jesus! Love is not weak and forgiveness does not come without a price. But, in any case, this song does not glorify violence. This song glorifies the God who does, the God who acts. the God who delivers, not a God who remains distant and aloof and elusive, but a God who hears and loves and acts in love to set his people free.

For what purpose? To make them his own. God intervened in their history to make their history, his-story. God saved them so that they would become his priests, to be the means of bringing others to the One who can save them. God brought them out of Egypt to be a witness people, to bear witness to the God who brings people out of darkness into light. God made them a light, to the nations, showing the way by their lives and by their worship.

And so they pray -- as we pray today as we keep Shabbat -- for shalom. For whom? For ourselves and for our children and for all of Israel, and for Egypt, for Assyria, for Babylon, for Iraq.

They pray -- and we pray -- for shalom. For an end to war -- an end to war! For health and happiness, for friendship among nations. We pray for shalom. For food and shelter and clothing and a good harvest, for the peace to enjoy the fruits of our labors, for the peace to enjoy the fruit of the vine.

They pray and they work, we pray and we work, for shalom, for what God intends for us, and for what God intends for this earth and all who live in it. We pray and we work and we walk with the One who called us. We pray and we work and we walk with the One who saved us.

Who is us? Us is the Jews, the people called by God to be God's own. But we are Jews, too. We worship the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of Sarah and Rebecca and Rachel and Leah. We worship יהוה, the Lord, the Eternal One, the One who is beyond all praises and songs and adorations that we can utter. The same God who delivered the Israelites delivers us. The same God that saved them saves us.

And we, like them, are called to be a people -- not called to be people of God, but called to be a people of God. It is who we are together that matters, what we show the world by our worship and by our love, by our words and by our actions, by what we pray and by what we do. We, like them, are called to be God's servant people, God's witness people, a light to the nations, helping to shape the world according to God's will.

Their calling is our calling. We share it with them. Jesus calls us to take up this same high calling -- to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and being, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

May we be reminded, by this Word, by this worship, by listening to voices of our Jewish brothers and sisters, that our history is his-story, too. May Sabbath be a sign between God and us, a reminder to us of lives lived in rhythm with God, lives not full of sound and fury signifying nothing, but lives lived with purpose, toward an end, toward the end God has in mind, toward shalom.