

Message for September 13, 2020

Exodus 14:19-31

Was it one of the greatest archeological discoveries of all time or was it nothing more than a product of wishful thinking? What I am referring to is the claim that there is actual concrete proof that God parted the waters allowing the Hebrews to escape from the Egyptians.

Almost thirty years ago an amateur archeologist by the name of Ron Wyatt claimed to have discovered the actual site where, during the exodus, the Hebrews had crossed over the sea to escape from the pursuing Egyptians. He said that the location was just off the coast of the modern day town of Nuweiba in Egypt. Nuweiba is located on the Gulf of Aqaba which is an extension of the Red Sea. Wyatt said that his divers had found the remains of chariots as well as human and horse bones scattered across the ocean floor at depths of 60 to 200 feet. Furthermore Wyatt also claimed that on the Saudi Arabian shoreline opposite Nuweiba, he had found an ancient pillar with an inscription on it. This pillar was supposedly erected by King Solomon to commemorate the Hebrews crossing over at that exact spot. Wyatt had no doubt that he had located the site of the event described in today's scripture passage but not surprisingly he had his critics.

Some people were skeptical because of the long passage of time since the exodus. Most historians agree that the exodus did take place and that it happened about 1300 BC or about 3300 years ago but, given the time factor along with the water currents and the build-up of silt, what are the odds that these remains would just be lying there on the ocean floor for all to see? And as for the pillar that Wyatt claimed to have found? It has disappeared and no one knows where it is. We can only take Wyatt's word for its existence and what the inscription said.

In addition many historians doubt Wyatt's claims because they don't believe that the route of the exodus went anywhere near Nuweiba. To be sure Nuweiba is located on the Gulf of Aqaba, an extension of the Red Sea

but contrary to what many people think, the Bible does not say that the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea; rather it says that they crossed the Reed Sea. This being the case, the crossing probably happened at another spot altogether, about 200 miles away. So where does all of this leave us?

Most reputable historians do not take Wyatt's claims seriously. Even so, most historians do believe that the exodus does have a historical basis. For starters, they do so because it is so rooted in Biblical tradition. Furthermore the exodus is not the sort of history that people would usually invent for themselves either. We can think of this parallel for example.

When people work on their family tree, many if not most usually hope to discover that their ancestors were not just ordinary people. Rather they are hoping to find a link to someone who was rich and famous; even a king or queen perhaps! And so it is with nations. Despite the recent tendency to remove or even topple statues of people whose lives and actions are deemed to be wrong by our modern standards, most people still like to think that those who created and built their nation were larger than life individuals; indeed this is why their statues were put up in the first place. With this in mind, most historians believe that the exodus did in fact take place because people inventing a history for themselves would never willingly claim that they were descendants of runaway slaves.

While there is a general consensus that the exodus did in fact take place, there is no consensus that the actual event described in today's passage did; that Moses lifted his hands, the wind blew, the waters parted and the people were able to cross over on the seafloor. There is no consensus about this because while the exodus may be history, the parting of the waters is a miracle, and so a matter of faith. As the disciples of Jesus and the people of God though, we are a people of faith. Indeed with the eyes of faith, today's passage does not just tell us about what God did for his people so long ago; it also reminds us about what God is still doing today.

As I mentioned in a previous message, this past summer I have been reading Andrew Root's book "The Pastor in a Secular Age". One of the

many things that Root does is emphasize the importance of the “Age of Enlightenment” and the impact that it has had on how we think of God. Prior to the Enlightenment people lived in what Root calls, “The Age of Enchantment”. To most people back then the existence of God was accepted without question. It was also firmly believed that God was present and active in the world around them. Everything that happened was understood to be God at work; God sent the storms, droughts and sickness for example. God was also responsible for such as the good crops and healing as well. This was the world they lived in but then came the Enlightenment.

During the Enlightenment it was realized that there are scientific explanations for so much of what happens in the world around us and that the world operates according to natural scientific laws. Events that were formerly attributed to God were now understood “scientifically”. It was also firmly assumed that God would never break any of these scientific laws either. By definition, miracles became an impossibility. Slowly but surely God was pushed to the sidelines as if it were and seemingly became more irrelevant all of the time. This process has been going on for the past 300 years leading up to where we are today.

While many and perhaps even most people will grant the existence of God, to them he is either just an intellectual concept or else a remote being with no role to play in their lives. In fact it is said that even most Christians today would be as shocked as the most vehement atheist if God were to clearly answer a prayer or perform a miracle; we may pray but deep down many of us don't really expect him to do anything. This is the secular world that we live in today but then we are confronted by the event described in today's passage.

The message of today's passage is that God is not just a concept that we can use to explain the origins of the universe. Nor is God a remote being who created it all and then just stepped back to let the universe and all therein go on its merry way. The message and the promise of today's passage is that God is involved in the lives of his people. This passage though also reminds us of something else too.

It is perhaps too easy to get so caught up in the wonder of the parting of the sea, just think of Charlton Heston in the classic movie “The Ten Commandments” for example, that we lose sight of what the following verse is telling us.

“Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land.”

Yes, the parting of the waters was God’s miracle but Moses still had an important role to play, and we should remember this. God may choose to work through events that are seemingly inexplicable, events that we refer to as being miracles. God however also works through his people and that includes every single one of us. In the words of a prayer taken from the Iona Community:

“Christ, the Master Carpenter,
who, at the last, through wood and nails,
accomplished our whole salvation,
wield well your tools in the workshop of your world,
so that we who come rough-hewn to your bench
may here be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand.
We ask it for your own name’s sake.”

As humble, unimportant, weak or even as unsuitable as we may seem to be, individually and collectively we are the tools of God in the workshop of his world. Too often perhaps we may feel like small cogs in a big machine and that our lives are of little value, purpose or meaning but this simply isn’t true. We are a part of the Body of Christ here on earth. We are the light that shines in the darkness. We are the ones who, each and every day not only proclaim the reality of God but the truth that he is present and involved. And we dare think that we are unimportant or irrelevant? We may live in a secular age but living in the uncertain times that we do, our presence and ministry are as needed today as ever before.