

God's Deliverance

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Exodus 14:10-18

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*God Creates,
Sin Destroys,
God Restores*

The British Humanist Association successfully launched a campaign this year to challenge religious advertising and promote atheism. The idea for this ad campaign originated with Ariane Sherine, a British comedy writer and journalist. Richard Dawkins, who wrote the recent atheistic manifesto *The God Delusion*, is one of its benefactors. The campaign has already raised seven times its goal to put ads on city buses and subway trains. The ad reads, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." The word "probably" was added to satisfy the transit system's policy of not running ads that disparage religion.

The second part of this ad, "Now stop worrying and enjoy life," got me thinking. The Christian life is most assuredly not about worrying. Jesus asked, "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?" (Matthew 6:35). How does belief in God stop someone from enjoying life? Jesus told his followers, "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Life is an indispensable part of God's Big Story. God creates life and knows best how it's meant to be lived. Yet, some of the things that promise life don't deliver. Sin is any thought, word or deed that

destroys life. But the good news of God's Big Story is that God will stop at nothing to restore life.

In God's Big Story, God Creates, Sin Destroys, God Restores could be summarized in three words: creation, fall and redemption. God Creates, Sin Destroys, but God Restores.

Nearly every good story, whether fairy tale, western or mystery, follows pretty much the same story line. Once upon a time, life was good. Then something dramatic or awful happens. As a result, a climactic battle must be fought or a decisive journey taken. At just the right time, sometimes at the last possible moment, a hero appears to set things right again.

Have you every wondered why so many good stories follow the same story line. Could it be that these good stories borrow from God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption?

God's restoration process begins with a covenant. God initiates a covenant with Abraham, Sarah and their descendents, called Israelites: "I will be your God and you will be my people." A covenant is not a contract. A contract can be abrogated by either party, but God's covenant is irrevocable.

When the Israelites become slaves in Egypt, God sends a series of ten plagues to liberate them. The last plague does the job. Only

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families that have the blood of lambs on their homes will be passed over and spared the death of their first born.

Pharaoh orders these Israelites to leave in the middle of the night (Exodus 12:1-32). They don't even have time to let their bread rise. This Pharaoh is so eager to get rid of these pesky Jews that he allows them whatever spoil they want to take with them.

The main caravan route to Canaan would have been the shortest route; instead, God sends them into the desert by means of the Red Sea. When Pharaoh realizes he has just lost Egypt's primary form of cheap labor, he experiences a sudden change of heart. What was I thinking, letting these Jewish slaves go free? So he mounts his chariot with 600 of his finest soldiers to retrieve them (14:6-7).

The Israelites see the approaching Egyptian army in the distance (14:10). They now realize their backs are against the wall. They are hemmed in to the north and south by mountains, to the east by the Red Sea and to the west by the Egyptian army. You might say they're between the devil and the deep blue sea.

The people complain to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we tell you this would happen? Didn't we tell you, leave us alone here in Egypt—we're better off serving as slaves in Egypt than dying in the wilderness?" (14:11-12). Egypt is

beginning to look like Club Med compared to their present predicament.

"Don't be afraid," Moses tells them (14:13). This admonition not to fear appears 366 times in the Bible, one for every day of the year, plus leap year. "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you; you need only be still" (14:14).

"Why cry out to me?" the Lord says to Moses. "Speak to the Israelites. Tell them to get moving" (14:15). Ah, but there's a problem, Lord. There's a huge body of water standing in our way. But as they move forward, an extraordinary thing happens. The sea parts and they walk safely to the other side. I can't read this story without Cecil B. DeMille's movie *The Ten Commandments* or the animated version, *The Prince of Egypt*, coming to mind.

God's people have their backs against the wall. They are facing an impossible situation. Could it be that God deliberately led them into an impossible situation in order to create an opportunity to reveal His power? The same God who leads us into impossible situations will lead us out.

You may find yourself in an impossible situation right now; between a proverbial rock and a hard place. Do not despair; there is a silver lining. You may be in the place of greatest potential to experience God's deliverance.

God didn't take people on the most direct route. He took them, you

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might say, on the scenic route. God leads them the roundabout way. God wants to show and tell them things along the way of their journey. God isn't in any particular hurry to get people to the Promised Land. God shows more interest in the journey than the destination. God is much more concerned about the transforming work He is doing in them to prepare His people for the responsibilities that accompany Promised Land living.

Exodus serves as the perfect metaphor to describe the Christian life. God wants to take us on a journey from bondage to freedom. Where is God calling you to leave something behind? It may be that you have trusted in your financial investments for security. Maybe there's a destructive attitude or behavior you need to break.

God's path of deliverance leads us into strange, uncomfortable territory. Maybe that's why we don't recognize God's escape route and revert to what is familiar. Sometimes, like the Israelites, we join the Back-to-Egypt club. We idealize the past and disparage our predicament. We actually prefer the familiarity of bondage to the unfamiliarity of freedom.

Why aren't these people more impressed with God's miracles? God delivers them from death through the Passover, only to find them along the banks of the Red Sea pining for the good old days in Egypt. God delivers them from certain destruction through the Red Sea, yet immediately, as we'll discover next Sunday, they start

whining about the food and accommodations.

I've noticed something about miracles in the Bible. They generate lots of attention, but they don't always translate into life-changing faith. Maybe that explains why Jesus shows a certain reluctance and ambivalence toward miracles. He realizes early-on that the excitement generated by miracles doesn't always convert into life-changing faith.

The easy way is not always the best route. We're living in uneasy times. Some of us have seen our investments shrivel and home values plummet. But you know something? I'm not cynical about the future. I'm actually hopeful that our economic crisis will help us come to terms with those things that are really important.

We've been living on easy street for some time now. The Staples Office Supply chain sells the ultimate symbol of our time. It's a plastic button labeled "Easy." If you invest in the stock market, you'll make lots of money. If you don't have the money to buy what you want, no sweat! That's what credit cards are for—to buy everything on credit. No doubt this economic crisis will wean us away from our over-dependence on easy credit and quick money.

People have been asking me how our church is going to weather this economic crisis. Charitable giving is down everywhere. Yet our church has the audacity to mail you a pledge card to support our 2009 budget in the midst of our worst recession in 60 years. I'm praying

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this economic crisis will bring us to our collective knees about those things worth our investment. In these uncertain times, the message of God's steadfast love is relevant after all. The investment we make in this church is paying an enormous rate of spiritual return. God is changing hearts and transforming lives through the ministry of this church.

I'm praying for our church to bust through this cultural malaise. I'm confident we will regain our sea legs and recover our stride. This is the perfect opportunity to put our faith to the ultimate test. It's the ideal time to find out whether following Jesus really works.

I have a dream for Vienna Presbyterian Church to become a church famous for its caring. Wouldn't that be awesome to become known in this metro area for our love of neighbor? I dream about breaking through this superficial, everything-is-fine, how-are-you DC culture to become a community of genuine spiritual friends who sincerely care about people. We're not interested merely in adding to our tribe. We want to introduce people to the abundant life Jesus offers. We not only want to be a church that preaches grace, we want to live gracefully.

I need you to take up the challenge. No more preoccupation with money, status or success. Whatever the cost, whatever it takes, Lord, we're ready and willing from now on to live for you.

