

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Holy Days: Letting Atlas Shrug”

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When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!” So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. The Egyptians—all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said 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 say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

Moses answered the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Exodus 14:5-14

A shorter sermon today due to the congregational meeting, but I’ve never heard anyone complain about that. We come back to the Book of Exodus in this series “Holy Days,” a look at God’s deliverance of his people from Egypt, but doing so through the particular lens of work and rest, because they’re all over the place in Exodus, and key to the life that God delivers his people into is out of a life of bondage, of exploitation, of a distortion of work, and into a life of harmony, not one of idleness, but one in which work and rest find their true purpose, that is, in him. The passage we come to today picks up the story in what might be the emotional peak of Exodus, and also one that might speak to the underlying problem to work being out of sorts. Israel is camped on the banks of the sea, with Pharaoh’s army in pursuit, Exodus chapter 14, starting in verse 5. Hear now the Word of God.

[Read passage]

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

In Rockefeller Center in New York City—that’s the place where the ice-skating rink and the really big Christmas tree are every year—but if you went there and went just around the corner, you’d see another striking monument in the city right on 5th Ave: a statue of the Greek Titan Atlas carrying the celestial spheres on his shoulders.

Some of you may already know that story from old Greek mythology. Atlas was a being known as a Titan, and at one point he led the Titans against the pantheon of Greek gods like Zeus. Atlas and his team lost, so Zeus exiled Atlas to the far western reaches of the world and cursed him to hold up the heavens forever. Stories come

and go with Atlas trying to get out of his lot in life by passing off the burden to others who come around, but he always gets stuck again holding the heavens on his shoulders.

That image of his straining under the weight of the heavens—or of the earth, sometimes he’s thought of to be holding earth up instead of the heavens—has for one reason or another continued to capture attention. Who could say why? Someone with the weight of the world on his shoulders, and if he lets up, then everything goes down.

It seemed everything was going down, and going down hard at that, for Israel on the shores of the sea. Pharaoh’s army bearing down on them, no escape route. It seemed that all the amazing things that had happened to bring them to that point were all for nothing, because it was all crashing down now.

A lot has happened since where we left off last week, arguably some of the most well-known chapters of the Book of Exodus. You might remember last week we saw the first clash between Moses and Pharaoh, Moses saying, as the Lord’s spokesman, “Let my people go.” The Pharaoh refuses, and that begins a sequence of events that brings the land of Egypt, the most powerful nation in the world at the time, to its knees. They’re known as the ten plagues. Gnats, frogs, locusts, hail, just to name a few, these were astounding, terrible displays of God’s power over and against any powers Pharaoh or his servants could muster. And along the way, Moses keeps going back to Pharaoh saying, “Let my people go,” and Pharaoh keeps refusing. It’s not until the final plague, when the firstborn of each Egyptian household dies, that Pharaoh finally lets the Israelites go.

And so, they leave. After hundreds of years of bondage and oppression, their God had delivered them. They follow Moses away from Egypt and into the wilderness until they come to the banks of the sea and make camp.

Since then, though, Pharaoh has had an epiphany, and this is where we pick up. He just let his entire workforce get away. All those projects he had going throughout Egypt, now there was no one left to do them. So he musters his army, his horses, his chariots, and pursues the Israelites to capture them and bring them back into slavery.

The Israelites see Pharaoh approaching, and they’re terrified. They cried out to God; they cried out to Moses: “Why did you bring us out here to die? Better to serve in Egypt than to die in the wilderness.” But then Moses told them powerfully, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

In some stories, you would expect the overwhelmed rabble of people to come together and mount a heroic defense. But that doesn’t happen; that’s not what Moses calls them to do. Instead, what does he do? He says, “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

You may already know what happens next. By a mighty wind, the Lord pushed back the sea, opening up dry passage through the water, and the Israelites go through. Pharaoh and his army still pursue even into the water. So after the Israelites reach the other side of the sea, God withdraws his wind, the seas crash back, swallowing up Pharaoh and his army. Israel had been delivered, and they hadn’t done a thing except take a walk.

Now that had to have gone against every instinct most in that crowd had. In the face of your doom, keep still; don’t take action. Goes against every instinct I have, and I’m not being chased by chariots.

There’s a part of me, whether it’s been engrained in me or what, I don’t know, but there’s a part of me that hears those words, “Keep still,” when the world’s burdens are bearing down, and I think, “What are you nuts?”

I have to do something!” You see, I’m the sort that if I’m honest, thinks that if there’s a problem, it’s just a matter of focus and persistence in order to solve it. A fixer, you might say. And the problem with fixers like me, is we can tend to think that the world rests on our shoulders, and it’s all up to us to fix whatever is wrong with it, because if we let it go, everything crumbles.

I remember years ago, I was faced with a lot of troubles within my family and among some friends, and because I’m a fixer, I thought, well, how am I going to fix this? It all depends on me. I went to my pastor and asked what I should do. What steps should I take? What should I say? What are things I need to do in order to make sure everything held together? And I’ll never forget what he said. “Jay, what if you didn’t?”

I’m not sure I fully understood it then. Not sure I fully understand it now, but it rings in my ears much like Moses’s words, “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” That embedded in this urge to work things out for myself is this thought that I am the sole captain of my fate, that I solely determine the outcome of things in my life, that it’s all up to me, and Word of the Lord comes, “You have only to keep still.”

But wait a minute, what about all of those things that will fall apart if I don’t hold them together? What about all those plates that are spinning, all those things arranged just so? If I’m not there to keep it going, then everything crumbles. And the Word of the Lord comes, “You have only to keep still.”

The past two weeks we’ve talked about how work can get distorted, twisted out of what it could be. And I wonder if on some level, some deep, underlying level, a reason work can get twisted, whether we are a Pharaoh seeking to oppress an entire and construct an empire unto himself, or whether we go about our daily labor with a single-minded focus, a reason work can get so twisted is because we can get sucked into thinking that it all depends on us.

Maybe that’s where you are today: the weight of the world bearing down on you, and feeling like if you don’t keep carrying it everything will crumble. This isn’t a call to shirk responsibility or to ignore the tasks before us, but for those of us who like me might sometimes feel like that it all depends on you, “The Lord will fight for you, you have only to keep still.”

Israel was shown something about the Lord that day on the banks of the sea. Their salvation, their deliverance, had nothing to do with something they did, and everything to do with what God did. How they responded to it was the work set before them. The same for us. Our salvation, our deliverance, has nothing to do with something we did or can do, and everything to do with what God has done in Christ. How we respond to it is the work set before us. And when we let the weight of the world shrug off our shoulders, like Atlas had hoped to do, amazing things can happen when we keep still.

Odd little story about that statue of Atlas on 5th Avenue. It stands right across the street from St. Patrick’s Cathedral. When it was erected, so the story goes, the Archbishop at St. Patrick’s protested to the sculptor, sharing his concern that his congregants would be confused to leave the church on Sunday morning only to be faced by the statue of a pagan demigod, arms outstretched, holding up the heavens on his shoulders. At that point, the sculptor asked to show the Archbishop something. Whether he was just trying to mollify him, I don’t know, but he took the Archbishop to the backside of the statue. And there the Archbishop, looking from behind the statue, saw the cathedral in the background, and in that view, the outstretched arms of this figure looked less like someone stoically holding up the heavens and more something else. Arms outstretched, framing the doors to the church, he resembled a man hanging on a cross. Curious what happens when we let Atlas shrug.

In the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

