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## *What about the Egyptians...and their horses?*

**A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa**  
**Proper 19 – Year A**

Have you ever wondered how we choose the lessons you'll hear on Sunday? We use a lectionary, the Revised Common Lectionary. One of the great benefits—and great challenges—of using a lectionary is that it takes you through the full range of scripture. And that means that, sometimes, the lectionary gives you a text you'd rather not hear or preach on. Today is one of those days!

I'm talking about the end of the climactic Exodus scene, as the Israelites are fleeing from slavery in Egypt, and Pharaoh's army is bearing down on them. They've reached a dead end, with the waters of the Red Sea in front of them, and the Egyptian legion behind them. Just when all hope seems lost, YHWH parts the sea, so that the Israelites can cross on dry land. But, as the Egyptians go in after them, the sea closes back in and covers them. All of this, including the Egyptians dead on the shore, is attributed to the Lord and declared a great work against Israel's enemies.

It's a powerful story about the almighty God who never forgets God's people, hears their cries, and delivers them from bondage!

But what about the Egyptians who died? What about their horses, my daughter asked me, who did nothing wrong? It seems unfair and unmerciful and unlike the God I've come to know: the God who meets us in suffering and redeems it, but doesn't will it—neither for us, nor for our enemies.

It could also be a dangerous story, given all the dehumanization and violence that have been perpetrated in the name of God.

In fact, this story, and others like it, were a barrier between Christianity and me for a long time. I worried, "Does my difficulty with this make me less of a Christian, or not a Christian at all? Do I even want to be Christian, if this is what it means?" Perhaps you've asked similar questions.

It's actually an old problem and fairly common problem, and there are a lot of ways to get around it. There's the way of the second century theologian, Marcion, who decided not to deal with the parts of the Bible that he didn't like or understand. So he chucked the entire Old Testament, and much of the New Testament, too. Many Christians have adopted a similar strategy: "focus on the parts you like, and skip over or render irrelevant the parts you don't like!"

Another strategy is to pretend the elephants aren't there at all. This is what biblical literalists and fundamentalists do. Because they've so exalted the Bible and the way they read it, they tend to fear and reject any potential challenge to it. If there's a problem, it's YOU, never the Bible!

There has to be another way—a way that honors both the authority of the Bible and the authority of our experience.

A few years ago, my dis-ease with the Exodus story, and my search for another way, led me to meet with a local rabbi. Because the Exodus story is so central to Jewish identity, I reasoned that he had thought about this before. So I asked: "How do you deal with the violence and suffering attributed to God in this story?"

He answered with liturgy. He talked about the Passover Seder, a ritual meal accompanied by the retelling of the Exodus event—in many ways, a forerunner of our own Eucharist.

It's a celebration of Yahweh's cosmic victory over forces of tyranny and oppression and chaos, represented by the unnamed pharaoh and the waters of the Red Sea. And it's a celebration, and anticipation, of God's mighty acts of deliverance in Israel's own history, of being immigrants, slaves, and exiles.

But the celebratory note sounds against a sorrowful one.

In the haggadah, or liturgical script, he showed me, at the point where the Egyptians, and their horses, are covered over by the Red Sea, the leader says: "The ex-slaves rejoiced at the death of their oppressors, but God called to them saying, 'How dare you rejoice? The Egyptians are also my children. There is no joy in this. The cost of freedom is high. Respect it always.'"

So throughout the meal, every time the plagues are mentioned, participants pour wine out of their cup, in sorrow and compassion for the Egyptians, in respect for the cost of freedom.

In this way, another rabbi says, passages like this force us "to confront difficult subjects and conflicting ideas. But," he continues, "such difficulty is also an opportunity," because it "prompts the question of if we are capable of making space, for others' suffering, while in the midst of our own."

Such difficulty is an opportunity: an opportunity to make room for others' suffering, amid our own. To listen and learn from our objections and dis-ease, and from the strange, uncomfortable parts of the Bible. To be drawn back to the living God, who is still being revealed in Scripture *and* in our lives, tradition, and community.

And if we want to take the Bible seriously, we'll take its difficulties seriously, too, and will engage them honestly. We'll tell the truth about them and our own difficulties with them.

Taking the Bible seriously means also approaching it thoughtfully and critically: studying it; becoming aware of the lenses and agendas through which we read it; and exploring alternative interpretations that are consistent with the God we know.

Finally, taking the Bible seriously means approaching it, and faith in general, responsibly. It means taking responsibility for how our interpretations and practices affect others. "The Bible told me so," or "my priest or parents told me so," is no excuse for being mean or hateful! Of course, we're guided by our scriptures, and by our tradition and community. But we also have to trust what we know of God, and answer for ourselves, and assume responsibility for the integrity of our own faith.

This has implications for our church, too. In this world, where we have so many places to pretend and hide from responsibility, may this church never become one of them. May it never become a place we go to rationalize our prejudices, or to seek divine sanction for our vindictiveness or fear. May we never become so wrapped up in protecting our views, practices, institutions, even the Bible itself, that we stop listening to the living God and trying to love our neighbors and our enemies.