

**God Delivers, We Rejoice**  
Exodus 14:19-31  
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First Central Congregational UCC  
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According to Jewish tradition, while the Children of Israel were walking along the bottom of the sea in the dark of night with the waters held at bay by the power of God, they began to sing. Miriam, the sister of Moses and herself a prophet, began the singing.

Sing to Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

She was first joined in song by the other women and, then, eventually all Israel began to sing this song of triumph and celebration.

Sing to Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

This worship began not after the event was over, but as it occurred. Once again, the worship itself was part of the act of liberation and deliverance. Worship isn't just remembering what has happened; worship is creative, it is powerful, it's liberating.

These two lines of song--"Sing to Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea"—are found in Exodus 15, just after the passage I read a few moments ago. Scholars believe that they may be the oldest lines in the Hebrew Scriptures. From this tiny two line fragment all the rest of the Exodus story is constructed.

It's significant to me that the oldest lines of scripture are a song.

Our contemporary lesson this morning came from a sermon on music preached by the Methodist Bishop Will Willimon. Here's some more from that sermon, as he spoke on the power of music.

Our whole cosmos throbs with rhythm and harmony, with sound and sense of music. In the beating of the human heart, the breathing in and out that is the origin of our human love of beat, rhythm, syncopation. We long for harmony, not just in our music, but in our lives, a sense that everything is "in synch," that we are "singing on the same page," that we are singing with one voice.

Something deep within us insists on song, never gets over the bedtime songs with which we were sung to sleep, or in the 60s when we stood and sang, "We Shall Overcome," or if you were there in the 40s when Kate Smith belted out, "God Bless

America.” [Willimon says:] I can tell you exactly where I was when the 60s began, at least for me, when, sitting in a pickup truck at a summer job I heard Bob Dylan sing, “Come fathers and mothers throughout the land, and don’t criticize what you can’t understand, . . . for the times, they are a changin’.” It was like one world ended and another began for me.

. . . When we get to the music, we have peeled away the superficial from our lives, overcome the body-spirit dichotomy that so plagues us . . . – the rational veneer with which we attempt to paper over our real selves and we get down deep, the primordial. I guess that’s why some of the fiercest church fights are over music. . . . Music is deep.

Is it possible that worship itself becomes our deliverance? When we join in singing and praising God, reading and proclaiming the word, offering our gifts, praying in silence, tasting the communion bread, are we becoming agents of our own freedom? Are the things we do here every Sunday morning empowering us, transforming us, healing us, and setting us free?

Theologian James Cone tells a story about growing up as a black child in Bearden, Arkansas in the years of segregation.

The most visible symbol of death’s power was found in the everyday experience of white people who violated black dignity at every level of black existence. Black people had to deal with the reality of whites on the job, in the stores, and at other significant areas of human affirmation. Sometimes the people were passive and speechless, not knowing how to respond to the extreme contradictions of life.

But on Sunday morning, after spending six days of struggling to create meaning out of life, the people of Bearden would go to church.

[They would go to church] because they believed that Jesus was going to be there with an answer for their troubled minds. At Macedonia A. M. E. Church, Sister Ora Wallace would line a familiar hymn, investing a depth of passion and meaning far greater than Isaac Watts ever intended:

O God, our help in ages past  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home.

Immediately, the entire congregation would join her in the singing of this hymn, because they felt the presence of Jesus in their midst, “guidin’ their feet” and “holdin’ their hands,” “while they run this race.” When the pastor would say, “I know the Lord is in this place! Can I get a witness?” the people responded with shouts of praise saying, “Amen” and “Hallelujah.” Through song, prayer, and sermon the community affirmed Jesus’ presence and their willingness to try to make it through their troubled situation. Some would smile and others would cry. Another person . . . would clap his hands and tap his feet. Then again another person would get down on her knees, waving her

hands and moaning the melody of a song whose rhythm and words spoke to what she felt in her heart.

The two most significant worship acts of the Christian church are baptism and communion. Do you remember your baptism? I was five years old when I was baptized, which is actually somewhat young for a Southern Baptist, which is the denomination I was born into. As with most Southern Baptist Churches, the baptistery was not like ours here to my side, but was a room behind the choir loft that opened up above their heads, usually with a partially glass front so that the water itself was visible to the congregation. The Sunday morning I was baptized they overfilled the baptistery. As I walked down into it, I couldn't touch the bottom, so I swam over to the glass front, grabbed a hold of the edge, and peered out over the congregation.

That moment when I was baptized at the First Baptist Church of Grove, Oklahoma in 1979 was itself a re-enactment of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John. My baptism connects me to the work of God in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. That's an awesome realization.

But there is even more meaning to that act of worship. The baptisms that John was performing in the wilderness were intended to symbolize a new entry into the promised land. John's baptism connected back to the exodus experience of the people. And there's even one more step back in this chain of connections. The people's experience of coming through the parted waters, is itself a symbol of God's work of creation, dividing the waters, bringing forth land and order and life where once there was only a formless void.

My baptism connects me to the power of God unleashed in the exodus and the creation of the world.

And we can do the same sort of connections with communion. Communion connects with the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. They were gathered there to celebrate the Passover meal, commemorating the freedom of the slaves from Egypt and God's provision of bread in the wilderness. Communion also looks forward to what is called, in the Book of Revelation, the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, when all of redeemed creation will gather at the end of time to celebrate and rejoice.

Communion connects us to the Exodus, to God's provision, to Christ's passion, and to the vision of a world of abundant blessings.

And, so, worship, in all its many forms, is one of the ways we participate in God's work, becoming agents in our own deliverance.

Willimon proclaimed:

When we sing the word, the word of God burrows down deep in our being. . . . Worship . . . gets at the heart of what God in Jesus Christ wants to do with us. The heart of the matter is transformation, conversion, metamorphosis, in which our desires and longings are transformed, redirected toward more appropriate objects. In praising God, we begin to want what God wants, we see the world . . . as God sees the world, as a place beloved, created, still being created, moving closer to that final great shout of praise called the kingdom of God.

Today we opened our worship with the hymn that Brian Wren wrote as a special commission for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this congregation. That hymn declares that God is still speaking by reminding us of ancient stories. Its third verse is about Miriam's song. As we sang it earlier, we were connected to the story of the children of Israel, set thousands of years ago, as they walked through the night on the floor of the sea with the armies of Pharaoh chasing behind them. As they sang and thereby became agents in their own deliverance and liberation. So too when we sing; we make real the presence and the power and the glory of God.

Show us how to sing with Miriam,  
Greeting with a grateful dance,  
every large or little freedom,  
new beginning, second chance,  
life released from domination,  
fear, captivity and scorn,  
foretastes of a new creation,  
all at last redeemed reborn.