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March 8th: Exodus 15 & Matthew 17:1-23

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The Song of the Sea. The Mount of Transfiguration.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Exodus chapter 15. Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him, my Father's God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a man of war, The Lord is his name.

Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them. They went down into the depths like a stone.

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, Your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries. You sent out your fury.

It consumes them like stubble. At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. The floods stood up in a heap.

The deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake. I will divide the spoil.

My desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword. My hand shall destroy them.

You blew with your wind. The sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand. The earth swallowed them. You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed.

You have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. The peoples have heard. They tremble.

Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed. Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab.

All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them. Because of the greatness of your arm, they are as still as stone.

Till your people, O Lord, pass by. Till the people pass by whom you have purchased. You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain.

The place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode. The sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established. The Lord will reign for ever and ever.

For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea. Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing.

And Miriam sang to them, Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur.

They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, because it was bitter. Therefore it was named Marah.

And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? And he cried to

the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord your healer. Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.

Following the deliverance of chapter 14 of Exodus at the Red Sea, chapter 15 contains two great hymns of praise. In some respects the Song of the Sea or the Song of Moses could be compared to a sort of national anthem for Israel. Both of these parts of the song are preceded by a reference to God's great act of deliverance.

In chapter 14 verses 27 to 29 and in chapter 15 verses 19, the first of these great songs is led by Moses, and Moses leads the people in this song of worship and praise to the Lord. And it's followed by a refrain led by Miriam the prophetess as she sings to the women. Perhaps we should see this as a sort of antiphonal singing, as they're singing back and forth to each other.

And it seems to be part of the liturgy of victory more generally. In the book of 1 Samuel, chapter 18 verses 6 and 7, the women come out to meet King Saul with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments, and the women sang to one another as they celebrated. Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.

A similar song can be found in chapter 5 of the book of Judges, as Deborah and Barak sing concerning their victory over Sisera and his men. This song, like the other elements round about, the legal elements, are part of the liturgical aspects of Israel's continuing life that are associated with the deliverance. This is not just a historical song.

It's a song that they would have been singing in the future to memorialise this particular event and the significance of what God achieved through it. It connects the Red Sea crossing with future events, preparing us for the conquest of the land, the passing over of the Jordan, and finally the planting on God's holy mountain. It isn't just about leading them out, it ends on the theme of leading them in.

The people have heard, they tremble. Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed.

Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab. All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them.

Because of the greatness of your arm, they are as still as a stone. Till your people, O Lord, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased, you will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain. The place, O Lord, which you have made for your

abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established, the Lord will reign for ever and ever.

It's looking forward not just to the time in the wilderness, but to the time when they'll be settled in the land. They'll be worshipping God on his holy mountain, on his abode. This song then deals with the whole range of the founding events of Israel, leading up to the completion of the significance of those events, as they are finally established in worship in the land.

We can see something of this in the building of Solomon's temple, where in the context of the building of that temple, there are a number of references back to the Exodus. The Exodus was always looking forward to the completion of the establishment of worship. And once that worship is established and instituted, then the Exodus has reached its purpose, the end for which it always existed.

This is similar to songs of deliverance that we might find in the Psalms. And there's a sort of realised eschatology then. This event is definitive.

It's definitive for Israel's deliverance. And everything else that comes next is already in this event by implication. Being led out of the land is already by implication connected with the event of being led in to the promised land.

God is creating a new heavens and a new earth. And we should attend to the language of creation that's employed here, because it's drawing the events of redemption into the orbit of the symbols of creation. It's testimony to God, grounded in historical acts, in which his character and purpose are revealed.

The character and purpose of a God who both creates and redeems. A God who demonstrates his power over his creation, but also his faithfulness to his people. A God who proves his supremacy over the false deities and his enemies.

But on the other hand, he is the God who comes near to his people. The God who is faithful, who will lead them in, who has demonstrated his commitment to them. God has never before rescued a people, delivered them from oppression in quite the way that we see here.

The event produces a number of responses. The praise of Israel, most notably. This whole song is a response to what God has done.

It leads to the overcoming and humbling of his adversaries. And the trembling of other oppressors as they hear of the example of Egypt. The whole world is seeing this and marvelling.

This is a declaration of divine purpose and of divine identity. And as we read through this song, maybe we should notice that there is a certain deparicularisation that occurs. This

song does reference Egypt in verse 4 for instance.

But as you go further into it, it's not just about Egypt. It's about something more expansive. It's about God's power over his creation.

It's about God's power over oppressors and adversaries. Beyond their historical particularity, the Egyptians also stand for the chaotic forces of the world. And all that might be arrayed against God.

God's victory here is of cosmic significance. And it goes out to the world in its message. The importance of song more generally should be reflected upon here.

Song is not just an ascent to some divine truths that we sing about. But it's a stirring of emotions. A declaration of God's glory from the heart.

It's a taking up of these statements in the form of the first person. Where it's not just a word that God has declared that you're agreeing to, but it's something that you are declaring from within as your commitment, your belief and your desire and your animating passion. This exists also for the benefit of memory and for memorialisation.

We memorise songs. We don't necessarily intend to, but songs stick in our heads. And so if we're singing something over a period of time, it's very hard not to memorise some of the words.

And putting the great deliverance of God into song is one of the ways in which these events are memorialised. So that they will not be forgotten. So that they provide the foundation for the understanding of God's self-revelation in history.

As people looked back, they could see what God had done and learn who God was through his past actions. It should be noted that as we go through the book of the Psalms, again and again we encounter the event of the Red Sea Crossing as a fundamental testimony to who God is. To his faithfulness, to his power, to his strength of his arm and his supremacy over all opponents and adversaries and oppressors.

God is the great warrior. He's the great king. He fights not with human weapons, but with his very creation.

With the winds, with the deep, with the sea, with the flood, with the earth that swallows up his enemies. God wields nature itself against all his adversaries. This is a song of historical deliverance, but it's also a song about God's creational power.

And throughout the story of the plagues, this is what we've been seeing again and again. It's God's hyper-natural power. That God is using nature itself in the most powerful way to achieve his ends.

In the book of Genesis, it's God using history to achieve his ends. In the story of Joseph,

this comes to the forefront. And now we see God's power over nature and of history together.

God is the God who controls all the forces of the world, the forces of time, the forces of space, the forces of the things and the elements that are within the creation. From this, though, there is quite a step down. They end up in a place called Mara and they're thirsty.

And there's no fresh water to drink. Perhaps this should draw our minds back to the result of the first plague where the water was turned to blood and it could not be drunk. And that bad water was a cause of great distress and annoyance and frustration and irritation to the Egyptians.

And now Israel is facing the same problem. Can God deliver them from the plagues, from the problems that these other nations might experience? This water that can't be drunk is healed by a log or some wood being placed within the water. There are a number of references to wood in the story of the Exodus that might be worth connecting with this.

Perhaps we should connect it with the theme of the rod. The rod, as this wooden object, performs all sorts of miracles and wonders. Putting the log or the wood into the water has a desalination effect.

It removes the salt, brackiness from the water and the water can be drunk. Now, is this a miracle or is it some natural power of this particular type of wood? It could quite possibly be the latter. God instructs Moses to do this thing.

It's not a command as he was commanded to stretch out his rod so that the waters would be divided in a miraculous way. Rather, maybe God is instructing Moses in how to use elements of the world itself to achieve his ends. Maybe God is equipping Moses to engage in the use of nature itself to achieve great purposes.

The event here, however, shows that God's power over creation is not merely to destroy or to use it as a weapon, but it can be healed. God can restore the creation. God can make the creation a life-giving source, not just a source of death and destruction and judgement.

This is the reversal of the first plague and now Moses and the people can drink from water that was formerly undrinkable. One interesting feature of this narrative is the possibility that it may be playing upon the name of Miriam. Miriam has just been present in the story of the Red Sea Crossing and the worship afterwards.

That calls our mind back to the original deliverance from the water that Moses experienced as an infant, where once again Miriam was present, and she was active just afterwards. She provided nursing for the child that was delivered from the reeds. Now the people have been delivered from the Sea of Reeds, and she is the one who sings

with Moses at that great deliverance.

And following that singing, water is provided. Miriam's name seems to mean bitter sea, or maybe it means rebellion. But the same letters are found in a number of different words within this passage.

The name of Mara itself, the word for bitter, the word for the waters, the word for the name of the place itself. Maybe there is some association with Miriam and the waters. Now this might all seem very speculative, and it is speculative.

But when we go further on in the story, there seems to be some hint of a connection between Miriam and the water in the wilderness. And as we look through the Book of Numbers, perhaps we'll study this in more detail. Here, however, God is testing his people.

He's testing if they're going to be obedient. God is giving them commandments and instructions, not just as a testing of whether they're absolutely loyal to him, but in order that he might be their healer. The purpose of God's instructions and commandments to his people is in order that they might know well-being, that they might be people who rejoice in his presence and his good gifts, not people who are just obedient because of command, but people who delight in what God gives them, who know him as their provider, as their healer, and as their guide through the wilderness.

God will heal them and deliver his people. This is not just negative. A question to consider.

There are 70 palm trees and 12 springs of water at Elim. Why would we be told those details? Why do those numbers have some significance? Matthew 17, verses 1-23. And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his eyes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good that we are here.

If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah. He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, Rise and have no fear. And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, Tell no one the

vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. And the disciples asked him, Then why did the scribes say that first Elijah must come? He answered, Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah has already come.

And they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him, and kneeling before him said, Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures, and he suffers terribly, for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him. And Jesus answered, O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.

And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, Why could we not cast it out? He said to them, Because of your little faith. For truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day. And they were greatly distressed. In Matthew 16 and 17 we've moved to a turning point in the narrative of the Gospel.

If baptism initiated the first phase of Jesus' ministry, the transfiguration initiates in part the second. Jesus announced the kingdom at the beginning of his ministry, and now he announces his forthcoming death. A great shadow has come over the scene, and we are being prepared in these ominous statements for this great movement towards Jerusalem, at which Jesus will die.

In the final verse of chapter 16, Jesus declared that some of those standing there would not taste death until they saw the Son of Man coming in glory. The presence of this statement before the transfiguration is common to all of the synoptic Gospels that record this event. But yet, it does not seem to be a fulfillment of the statement in total.

It would be strange to speak about some not tasting death before they saw this thing, when no one actually tasted death before some people saw that thing. Rather, I think this is an anticipation of something that will be revealed more generally later on. What Peter, James and John are seeing here is a sneak preview, as some sort of trailer of what's going to happen in the future.

In the book of 2 Peter 1, verse 16, Peter writes, many years later, For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord

Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was born to him by the majestic glory, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. We ourselves heard this very voice born from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you do well to pay attention, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Now the problem that faced Peter when he was writing this letter was that many of the other apostles had died.

Many of those who were standing there here in Christ at the end of chapter 16 of Matthew had already passed on. And Jesus had said that he would do these things, that they would see the kingdom, before some of them had tasted death. And it seems as if the clock is ticking.

Peter is still alive, but he seems to be hastening towards death. And so somehow this promise has to be fulfilled. Now what Peter does at this point, I think, helps us to understand the connection between the Transfiguration and Jesus' earlier statement.

He points to the events of the Transfiguration, as were a full dress rehearsal of this later revelation of Christ's glory. That they have seen Christ's glory on that mountain. And they know that it's there.

It's just a question of when it's going to be revealed to the world more generally. To understand the event that's being referred to here, we should go back to Daniel chapter 7, in verses 13 and 14. I believe that the event that Jesus refers to, in saying that some will not taste death before they see, the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.

I believe that's referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But this event of the Transfiguration anticipates that later event. It's the revelation of the glory of the last Adam, and the second man, placed on the mountain.

There are a number of details here that should make us think back to the story of the Exodus. The appearance of God in that glorious theophany to Moses on Mount Sinai. Where Moses' face shone in that transfigured glory.

But there's a difference between Moses and Jesus here. Moses went up on the mountain and his face shone. But his face shone with a reflecting glory.

In the story of Christ going up on the mountain, the glory comes from Christ himself. The glory is not a reflected glory so much as Christ's own proper glory. On the Mount of Sinai, there is this glorious appearance of God in a theophany.

There is the plan given for the tabernacle. There is the gift of the law. And here Peter wants to build tabernacles for Elijah, for Jesus, and for Moses.

There is also the establishment of the high priest, and the glorious garments of the high priest. Christ's garments shine with him. It's not just Christ, but it's his glorious garments.

Christ is being revealed as the glorious high priest on this mountain. And he's also being revealed as God's glorious revelation. As we look through the Old Testament, there are many stories where God appears in glory to his people, to his prophets, and to others.

We see it in the beginning of the book of Ezekiel. We saw the heavens opened and saw visions of God. And Ezekiel's description of the throne chariot vision of God is one in which we see this human-like figure, but the language is elusive and it can't quite capture or describe what he is in fact seeing.

We have descriptions of some features of this figure, but we never see the face. We never have a direct description. Same thing with the vision of Isaiah in the temple in chapter 6 of his prophecy.

In that chapter, the Lord is seen high and lifted up, the train of his robe filling the temple. Moses sees the back of God on the Mount of Sinai. In all these cases, God is revealing his glory in the glorious angel of the covenant perhaps, but no one sees the face completely.

I believe what we see in part here on the Mount of Transfiguration is the face of God's glorious theophanic presence being revealed. And as we read back through the Old Testament, we know who this person is. When Moses sees the glory of God on the top of Mount Sinai, when Isaiah sees the glory of God filling the temple, when Ezekiel sees the throne chariot of the Lord, they're seeing Jesus.

They're seeing the Son in his glory. And in the book of John, this is particularly emphasized as he can speak about Isaiah's vision and say that Isaiah said this when he saw his glory, his referring to Christ. And so this theophany, this event of the Mount of Transfiguration helps us to read Old Testament narrative, to understand that all these events in the Old Testament are events of the revelation of the glory of Christ, but we only see that retrospectively.

Once the face has been revealed, everything else is known. God gave the law to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai, and on the Mount of Transfiguration, God declares the gift of his law, the gift of his word in Christ. This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Listen to him. As Hebrews chapter 1 declares, He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High,

having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

And the Mount of Transfiguration is precisely a revelation of this truth. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that Christ is the great word of the Father. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the radiance of the glory of God.

It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is so much more superior to the angels. It's on the Mount of Transfiguration that we see that he is the one who fulfills all these revelations of God in the Old Testament. He is the High Priest, he is the one with the glorious garments, he is the one who will sit down on high once he has made atonement for sins.

And as Christ reveals himself in these glorious high priestly garments on the Mount of Transfiguration, we begin to understand as he moves towards Jerusalem that he is not going to Jerusalem under compulsion. He is not going to Jerusalem as one who is weak and forced by circumstance, but he is going to Jerusalem as the great High Priest, committed to completing his mission, committed to doing his great work and then sitting down at God's right hand, having completed it, having wrought atonement and deliverance for his people. Moses and Elijah stand alongside him.

Moses, the one who gave the law. Elijah, the one who is seen as this great prophet, the paradigmatic prophet. They're the great witnesses, they're the wilderness forerunners.

Moses went before Joshua as Joshua entered into the land. Elijah went before Elisha as Elisha led this conquest in miracles and signs of the nation of Israel. And Jesus is the one who goes and completes this great Exodus work.

He is the greater Joshua. He is the greater Elisha. He is the one who will lead his people into the truest and most complete rest.

And these forerunners in the wilderness prepare the way for him, just as John the Baptist did. Jesus tells his disciples to keep the vision under wraps until after the resurrection. There are things that can only be known properly in their proper time.

The significance of the Transfiguration only becomes apparent from the vantage point of the cross and resurrection. Until those times, it might seem this vision of glory detached from suffering. A vision of glory that would nullify the importance of suffering at this point in Jesus' story.

But the Transfiguration and its association with Jesus' teaching concerning his future suffering, they cannot be separated. They belong together. To understand the Transfiguration, we need to see the suffering.

To understand the suffering, we need to see the Transfiguration. The disciples ask about

their understanding of the future. They believe that Elijah was to come first.

And Jesus has been speaking about the resurrection, and that seems to come at the end of all things. So what about Elijah that was to come? Jesus says that Elijah has come, and they understand that it is John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the one who came in the spirit and the power of Elijah, as we see in the declaration of Gabriel to Zechariah in the temple.

He's the one who dresses like Elijah. He's the one who has the conflicts that remind us of Elijah, with Herod and Herodias like Ahab and Jezebel. When Jesus reaches the bottom of the mountain, he finds that his disciples have failed to cast out a demon.

Their failure in this regard maybe could recall the story of Moses descending down Mount Sinai and finding that in his absence Aaron had failed dismally. He had given in to the people and they had built a golden calf. And that fashioning of the golden calf leads to great judgment upon the people.

Now the failure of Jesus' disciples at this point is nowhere near the same magnitude. But they are judged in a way that recalled the judgments of Moses upon the unfaithfulness of the people. O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? This is the language of Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 5 and 20.

Jesus declares to them that if you have faith like a mustard seed, it would be sufficient to tell a mountain to move from here to there. And that mustard seed maybe draws our mind back to chapter 13. The mustard seed is that smallest of all the seeds, but it will grow into something great.

The point here is not just the faith being small in and of itself. It's the fact that that faith can grow. What does it mean that faith can move mountains? In the context of the eschatological visions of the Old Testament, there are often mountains being moved, mountains and hills being brought low and valleys being raised up.

In Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 23 to 25, I looked on the earth and behold it was without form and void, and to the heavens and they had no light. I looked on the mountains and behold they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked and behold there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled.

I looked and behold the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the Lord, before His fierce anger. In Zechariah chapter 14 verse 4 to 8, On that day His feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives that lies before Jerusalem on the east, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley, so that one half of the mount shall move northward and the other half southward. And you shall flee to the valley of my mountains, for the valley of the mountains shall reach to Ezal.

And you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah the king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with Him. On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost, and there shall be a unique day, which is known to the Lord neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter. And then finally in Revelation chapter 6 verse 12 to 14, When He opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale.

The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Maybe what Jesus is referring to is this great event in which things will be moved and the whole order will be transformed at this culminating eschatological event in history. And their faith will be part of that.

Even if it may be like a small mustard seed now, it can grow to a great tree and participate in that event in the future. A question to consider. Looking from the vantage point of the Mount of Transfiguration, it could be argued that the glory of Christ is the very centre of the story of Scripture, both Old and New Testament.

How would you make this case?