

**September 13, 2026 • The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**The Rev. James Wyatt**

## **Who We Are (Again)**

Last week, I talked about the creation stories—two different stories—in the first chapters of Genesis, and I made the point that these stories tell us more about who we are than they tell us about who God is. That’s the point I keep coming back to: Our stories tell us who we are, and the reason we keep telling them, handing down these stories through the generations, is that we find meaning and purpose in our own identities in these stories we tell. And this morning I sort of feel like the lectionary has thrown these stories at my feet and said, “Oh yeah? Well, what do you make of these?” Because these are some troubling stories.

Let’s start with Exodus. This is, of course, the climactic moment in the story: Everything has been building up to this, from God speaking to Moses from the burning bush, and Moses challenging Pharaoh and all the plagues that beset Egypt, at last the Israelites are fleeing Egypt, the angry Egyptians hot on their heels. And in this climactic moment, the story says that God sends a wind to drive back the waters so the Israelites can cross the sea, and tosses the Egyptians into the waves.

This story is hugely important for our Jewish siblings and for us as Christians. This is the story of Passover, the reminder every year that God heard the cries of God’s people when they were enslaved in Egypt and liberated them from the hands of their oppressors. For centuries, this story has told the Jewish people that God cares for them and will act in history to rescue them from slavery and oppression. For centuries, this story has told other enslaved people the same thing, which is why enslaved Black Americans sang “Go Down, Moses” and found hope for their own liberation in the faith forced on them by their enslavers. And for centuries, Christians have told some part of this story at the Easter Vigil every year, because we believe that Christ is our Passover—just as Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea, so Jesus leads us from bondage into freedom, and from death into eternal life.

And this is a pretty terrible story, especially in the hands of the powerful. In this story, God the mighty warrior hurls the army of Egypt to their death in the chaos of the sea. In this story, God fights alongside the army of the Israelites to help them defeat the Egyptians. And when the forces of Empire co-opt this story and make it their own, it becomes a story about how God is on our side, fighting alongside our army to slaughter our enemies. The forces of Empire read this story about God’s triumphant victory and come away with a sense that they are God’s chosen people, and they can go right ahead and bomb their enemies into oblivion, because God is on their side.

So let me tell you another story. When I was in seminary, a college friend of mine invited me to celebrate Passover with her family in New Jersey. And the haggadah—the text this family used for their celebration of the Passover seder—included another story about the crossing of the Red Sea. In this story, the angels in heaven were gathered around the throne of God watching the people of Israel cross the sea and escape the Egyptians and at the climactic moment when the waters of the Red Sea closed over the Egyptian armies the angels began to celebrate. And God stopped them. God said no, we do not celebrate the loss of any one of the creatures I have made. This is not a time of celebration, but a time of mourning. This is not a triumph, but a tragedy—it should never have come to this.

I think that’s a really powerful story, and a really important one. I think it’s a good reminder that when the forces of Empire co-opt stories of liberation, those stories stop being liberating, they stop being good news for people who are oppressed and enslaved. They become, instead, tools for Empire to maintain control and hold on to its power.

So when we read the book of Exodus, what does it tell us about who we are? It depends on where we see ourselves in this story. We can see ourselves in the Israelites, fleeing from bondage into freedom, but that means we have to see ourselves as people who stand for liberation. The rest of the Torah stresses this over and over: because we were enslaved in Egypt, because we were foreigners in a foreign land, therefore we must see the enslaved and

foreigners as our kin. Our story is their story, too. Or we can see ourselves in the Egyptians, recognizing that all too often we stand in the way of other people's liberation, because our way of life depends on their misery. And perhaps then, this story can be a warning that God is not on our side when we oppress and exploit our neighbors.

The story Jesus tells in our Gospel lesson this morning offers us a similar choice: where do we see ourselves in this story? After telling Peter that he has to be far more forgiving than Peter expects, Jesus then says, "For this reason the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king" who at first is willing to show mercy on a slave who somehow owes him the equivalent of millions of dollars but ends up throwing that same slave in prison to be tortured until he can pay off the whole debt, because he failed to forgive a much smaller debt his fellow slave owed him. "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you," Jesus says, "if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart." Oof. This is another pretty terrible story, especially given that last sentence. If we read this as a story about who God is, it paints a pretty brutal picture of a slave owner, rather than a liberator of the enslaved and the oppressed, and also a tyrannical torturer, beyond that first moment of grace. But again, I don't think this is a story about who God is. I think the unspoken part of this parable is that God is much better than any merely mortal king. God's not a tyrant or dictator. God's not a slaveholder or a torturer. These are images of how we humans interact with each other and with the creation around us, not images of who God is.

So when we read this parable, what does it tell us about who we are? Well, again, it depends on where we see ourselves in this story. We can see ourselves as grateful recipients of God's abundant love and grace—and particularly in this season of creation, as recipients of the abundance of the earth, the beauty and resources and food provided for all of us in the bounty of God's creation. But that requires us to be mindful of that generosity and extend the same grace to others, and to ensure that those resources are shared and available to all. Our story is their story, too. Or we can recognize that we're often more like the king or the ungrateful slave: focused on what the world owes us and demanding that we get what's coming to us, and to hell with everybody else. We too often hoard the resources in our care, and are too slow to share with our siblings in creation.

Now, there's one more thing I have to say about our Gospel lesson this morning. This command to forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart should never be used as a weapon. Forgiving someone who has hurt you, even forgiving them seventy-seven times, does not require you to let them keep hurting you.

Let me say that again: Forgiving someone who has hurt you does not require you to let them keep hurting you.

Forgiveness, as this parable suggests, is about letting go of our need to be repaid for the harm done to us. It is not about forgetting it ever happened or pretending that no harm was done. And there is no requirement that we continue to be friends or continue in any kind of relationship with people who will continue to harm us.

So what if, instead, we read Jesus' words about forgiveness as an invitation to make this a place where it's OK to mess up? What if church is meant to be a place where we can be honest about our feelings and our failings without fear of judgment, and where we encourage each other to do better? I think the world rather desperately needs places and communities where we can "confront one another without hatred or bitterness" (BCP 824) when we do disagree or when we do something wrong, and where we can learn to do better without being canceled. Again, I'm not saying we should leave ourselves open to repeated and intentional harm. But we are all of us being worked on in this community—that's why we're here, so the Holy Spirit can continue transforming us more and more into the best version of ourselves, the best reflection of the likeness of Christ. All of us are recipients of God's abundant gifts. May we accept them with gratitude and share them freely with all.

Amen.