

## ***What We Saw – Exodus 14:19-31***

**Rev. Matt Nieman**

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Here are a few things I saw this week:

I witnessed the young American tennis star, CoCo Gauff, win her first major title, the U.S. Open, last week Saturday. Following her title-clinching point, she knelt by her chair—almost as if not to be seen—to issue what looked like a prayer. The sense was not that she thanked God for her victory, but for the blessing of such good fortune following the tireless effort she had put in to reach this moment where her hard work had paid off.

I saw New York Jets fans not believing what they saw last Monday night when their new quarterback, Aaron Rodgers—their savior and answer to a 50-year winning drought, left his first game after four plays with a season-ending injury. Seemingly departing as well were their hopes that this might finally be their year.

Related to all this is the fact that football is back, and I saw how the moods and focus of so many people are determined by the outcomes of young people playing games on fields on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays in the fall.

I also saw this week the news of a grim reality in America (really, another one?) of the state of teaching.

*“The current state of the teaching profession is at or near its lowest levels in 50 years,” according to a working paper published in November by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. In it, the authors painted a dire picture of the profession: Perceptions of teacher prestige have fallen between 20 percent and 47 percent in the last decade to be at or near the lowest levels recorded over the last half century. Interest in the teaching profession among high school seniors and college freshman has fallen 50 percent since the 1990s and 38 percent since 2010, reaching the lowest level in the last 50 years. The number of new entrants into the profession has fallen by roughly one third over the last decade, and the proportion of college graduates that go into teaching is at a 50-year low. Teachers’ job satisfaction is also at the lowest level in*

*five decades, with the percent of teachers who feel the stress of their job is worth it dropping from 81 percent to 42 percent in the last 15 years. (Jessica Groce, New York Times, Sept. 13, 2023)*

That's not good news for schools and, more importantly, for our children and youth.

I also saw pictures from Libya and Morocco, where flooding and an earthquake killed nearly ten thousand people combined in the last couple of weeks. They were a reminder that suffering never stops.

And yet, I also saw this week an interview with the comedian and late-night host Stephen Colbert that interviewer Anderson Cooper did in 2019. Colbert, who is the youngest of 11 siblings and a devout Roman Catholic, lost his father and two teenage brothers Peter and Paul, in a plane crash near Charlotte, North Carolina, on September 11, 1974. He was just 10 years old at the time.

Colbert told Cooper the loss of his father and brothers "shattered" his and his mother's lives, but it did not "destroy" them. "It's a gift to exist," Colbert told Cooper, "and with existence comes suffering. There's no escaping that, but if you are grateful for your life, then you have to be grateful for all of it." All of it—even the suffering.

Despite all this, maybe the best thing I saw this week was the beauty of each morning—now headed into fall after a hot summer. Sun shining, despite the grim news, the never-ending suffering, the constant division around us. With the rise of the sun after a dark night, we see hope for us and for the world God has made.

So much to see.

In one of the most familiar stories in all of scripture, this text from Exodus today is rich with imagery—things for us to see from afar.

When we arrive at Exodus 14:19-31, we are at the culmination of a long stretch of narratives demonstrating God's power to save the people of Israel. Their freedom as well as God's very identity are on the line.

Much ink has been spilled over the precise nature of the phenomenon that allowed the Israelites to walk on dry land through a body of water. However fascinating and entertaining this story is, it's the very character of

God and the nature of God's relationship with the people that is primarily on display, and seemingly in a new way.

This isn't a story about the Israelites, although much could be said about their faithfulness or lack thereof in the lead-up to this seminal moment. While the *people's* experience of being liberated is more often the focus of so much commentary on this story, this text ultimately seems more concerned with God's reputation—who God is.

God's undisputed power is on display here.

When Moses and Aaron arrived in Egypt, it was surprisingly easy to convince the people what God was up to in freeing them "from the hand of Egypt," but it took a good deal more effort—or at least more narrative—to convince the imperial powers. Still, there is a sense that liberation is messy work, requiring sustained effort, and that there would be casualties. God works through agents—be they human, natural, or supernatural—but is also presented as actively involved in hurling the retreating Egyptian chariots back into the water, leaving no survivors.

The story begins with a promise and ends with the recognition that God is doing the fighting (14:14, 14:25).

In the end, not only is God's power on display, but God was relentless in acting on their behalf. From the moment God appeared out of a burning bush to Moses, to this remarkable moment where he caused the sea to become dry ground and then rushed the waters back together to thwart their enemies, God never gave up in rescuing and saving them. In the end, Israel "saw the great work that the Lord did." And from that moment on, they believed in God.

God's relentlessness enables so many to be rescued from their imprisonment, their captivity, their pain, or other forms of suffering. With a spirit of liberation, God enhances the lives of those he loves.

And yet, this relentless pursuit leaves us seeing what God has done so that we are left believing and following the one who astounds us with his relentless love.

Today, we see what God has done by the ways God acts through those who serve God.

We've just passed another anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Many of us struggled to see God as the attacks were taking place twenty-two years ago, sensing that evil instead had the upper hand. And yet, in the ensuing days, our vision of the Almighty became clearer. We saw God through the heroic actions of the first responders who, in many cases, gave of their own lives in service to their fellow humans.

Phillip Yancy, author of *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, was asked after the terrorist attacks, "Where is God at a time like this?" He answered with a question of his own, "Where is the church when it hurts? If the church is doing its job -- binding wounds, comforting the grieving, offering food to the hungry -- I don't think people will wonder so much where God is when it hurts. They'll know where God is: in the presence of his people on Earth."

Then he reflected on what our nation was taught by 9-11 (*Christianity Today*, October 1, 2001): "We learned that even in a city known for its crusty cynicism, heroes can emerge. ... We learned that at a time of crisis, we turn to our spiritual roots: the President quoting Psalm 23, the bagpiper piping 'Amazing Grace,' the sanitation workers stopping by their makeshift chapel, the Salvation Army chaplains dispensing grace, the chaplains comforting the grieving loved ones. Thanks to them, we know where God is when it hurts."

In our moments of great suffering and calamity, we see God and we're emboldened in our belief in God. Faith is formed on the anvil of human adversity. Often, if there's no adversity, there's no faith. And we have faith because God has seen us through.

Can you imagine the expressions on the Israelites' faces that day when the sea parted, they moved through on dry ground, and then the waters rushed back together and dispatched their pursuing captors? When they knew God had done this -- that God was responsible for their liberation -- they no doubt expressed great joy.

Because of the great work God had done on their behalf, they believed.

It's a new week -- with more opportunities to see what God is up to. Look for them -- look for the people God is using to bring relief and healing and inspiration. Look for the examples of people demonstrating great

humility and cooperation for a common goal. See the solutions humans are finding to fight disease, homelessness, and isolation. Don't miss the episodes of kindness and sacrifice taking place right in front of you.

And even better, be an example yourself.