

What We See – Exodus 14:19-31

Rev. Matt Nieman

September 13, 2026

Here are a few things I saw this week (I think it's always good to take account of and reflect on what has happened before our eyes):

The 9-11 Remembrance on Friday morning at Delaney Plaza in Knoxville was a moving tribute to those first responders to died and those who returned from their service and, in some cases, suffered physically and emotionally because of it. Our own Steve Tinder was specifically honored for his role in going to New York in the aftermath of the tragedy and participating in the recovery effort.

And to the family members of those who were lost and those who stood by their first-responder spouses or children, like Janet Tinder, they were honored and remembered for their own sacrifice and dedication.

Coincidentally also on Friday, Laura and I saw the singer James Taylor in concert Columbia, South Carolina. He has an old-soul comfort about him (partly because he's not young but also because he sings with such feeling and warmth and appreciation for his audience). And during the show, there was a spirit of unity among the crowd that was reminiscent of what we all experienced in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy 25 years ago: people putting their differences aside, in a unified spirit of love and laughter.

This past Wednesday, I was also in Nashville to sit with Kirk Morris following his heart surgery. Vanderbilt Medical Center, like so many others, was teeming with people—medical

professionals and other staff, family members and friends in solidarity with their loved ones and the many patients there to receive care and treatment.

Every time I'm in a setting like this, I'm reminded of the extraordinary skills and talents and compassion on display by people for other people. It is energizing and hopeful to be in that space and seeing others doing amazing things *for* people.

So much to see this week, so much goodness taking place.

In one of the most familiar stories in all of scripture, this text from Exodus today is rich with imagery, too—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.

Phillip Yancy, author of *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, was asked after the terrorist attacks of 9-11, “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. We should look for them—for the people God is using to bring relief and healing and inspiration, for the examples of

people demonstrating great humility and cooperation for a common goal. We should see the solutions humans are finding to fight disease, homelessness, and isolation. We should take care not to miss the episodes of kindness and sacrifice taking place right in front of us. In them and in us, God is doing amazing things.