

## **Preparing for Miracles**

Rev. John Allen

So what did the Israelites bring when they fled out of Egypt?

We know they brought bread, but it did not have time to rise, and after a while it was not enough to sustain them, they had to rely on manna from heaven.

They brought water (but not a lot) - they ran out pretty quickly, and had to start relying on miraculous water flowing out of rocks in the desert...

And they brought valuable things, a little bit of Gold and silver, jewelry and heirlooms - and we will see what kind of trouble that gets them in when they melt it down to make a golden calf as an idol to worship.

In many ways they brought the kinds of things we might expect people to pick up when they were fleeing for their lives. Small precious things, and life's daily necessities.

Like refugees before them — and to this day— they grabbed what they could, what they thought would give them the best chance to survive.

So hastily they pack what they can and flee ahead of Pharaoh's mighty army, believing that God is their liberator, they press to the edge of the sea, and the water parts, they walk to freedom on dry land, and the sea crashes back onto their pursuers.

As soon as that is done, Moses gives a long speech. We didn't read that this morning, it is beautiful, and it goes on...

And then we get to the women, Miriam, and the other women of Israel suddenly bust out the tambourines to sing and dance for joy.

It's a fleeting little detail in the story, but don't miss it.

The women brought tambourines.

Can you imagine? In the deepest night of their fear, eyes chasing around their homes for what few things they will need to make a new life on the other side of the sea, and not just Miriam, but many of the women among the Israelites spotted their percussion instruments in the corner, and thought. Yes. That.

"You can't be serious." I can imagine some of their husbands saying. Put that back. We won't need that. We don't need that jangling around in our bags when we are trying to get away with our lives!

I suspect others just laughed at them. The sort of people who too smart to see the wisdom in crazy notions. What a waste of precious space in the bag...

Can you imagine it? After generations of slavery. After terrifying plagues of frogs, and locusts, and darkness, and death.

After rivers turned to blood, and the Egyptians forced them to make bricks with no straw. And the sky grew dark with locusts. And frogs covered every inch of the ground.

After generations of crushing slavery. The Israelites finally made a break for it, following Moses, following God, toward a faint glimmer of freedom.

“Come quick. No time to lose. Just bake the bread as it is, no time to let it rise.”

But Miriam, she slipped a tambourine into her bag...

Now there is someone who knows a thing or two about God.

There is someone who remembered God’s faithfulness. Who believed in God’s promise. Who saw and perceived that God was indeed doing something miraculous for them.

Because as strange as it might seem, there is actually great wisdom in the impulse to grab a tambourine in the midst of danger.

It is the sort of wisdom that perceives even in the midst of profound fear and dramatic threat, we need to preserve our capacity to imagine there will be joy in our future.

Our God is a surprising God. And Miriam had faith that no matter how bad things seemed, they might have a need to celebrate again before too long...

These women were doing something that seems impossible. They were preparing for a miracle. Expecting to be surprised. Getting ready to celebrate, even though it was the worst night of their lives.

As commentator Avivah Zornberg writes, “They are a set for wonder, these women, carrying the instruments of song with them through the corridors of fear. *They have always known that the future is incipient in the present.*”

These women did not grab hold of the objects of fear and scarcity in their haste, but instead imagined with incredible courage the likelihood that there may be a need to dance before too long.

And sure enough, they do.

Of course, after that day, it would be a long journey in the wilderness. Those tambourines don't come back out. Grumbling becomes the familiar refrain.

But, I imagine, years into their wandering, somewhere in that crowd of refugees, deep down in some wise woman's bag, there was a dusty old tambourine that rattled a little bit when she walked. It didn't get taken out often, but that quiet persistent noise reminded her that the struggle of the present did not encompass the whole of human experience. It reminded her of fear giving way to celebration, and carried that tambourine faithfully, as a token of hope. That even if she didn't need to dance today, she would need to again someday.

—

I love that Jan Richardson poem that Megan read for us earlier. I've been reading it as part of my own daily devotional time this past week.

I love it because it is honest. It says plainly that things are hard, and that things are falling apart, and it tries to imagine what God's presence looks like in the midst of that.

Listen to the poem's ending once more:

This blessing  
will not fix you  
will not mend you  
will not give you  
false comfort;

it will not talk to you  
about one door opening  
when another one closes.

It will simply  
sit itself beside you  
among the shards

and gently turn your face  
toward the direction  
from which the light  
will come.

Faith in the midst of catastrophe is not about convincing ourselves that things aren't really that bad. It is not about resigning ourselves to a fate. It is not about cavalierly discarding the pain of the present in favor of some comforting platitude or sentiment.

But it is to sit on the shards and let God turn our face toward the direction from which the light come.

It is about taking a long view that stretches far beyond the present moment, and spreads wider than our concern for ourselves and those we know, and believing that for us as a people there is a dawn that will break, there is dancing in our future.

There is a day when we will gather in this Sanctuary again.

There is a day when we will greet our neighbors with a hug.

When we will go out to dinner with friends.

A future when we will be able to grieve our losses in each others arms. Where we will be able to sit beside the ones we love when they are in the hospital.

And my prayer is that that future will not just be a return to the way we were all living our lives a few weeks ago. But I have already begun to sense that this time when we are forced to be apart is rekindling in us our desire to be connected to one another.

It is likely to make us more apt to strike up a conversation with a neighbor, to linger with a friend. It might even make us sick of our computers and phones.

I don't see the light at the end of this yet. But I am allowing God to turn my face toward the direction from which it will come.

And we are not dancing together today.

But, I'm keeping this tambourine handy.