



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## ***An Assignment***

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

**September 11, 2011**

Sometimes, even for God, things are not clear. How tired God must have been of trying to convince the Egyptians to let the Hebrew people leave in peace. He had sent Moses with the word and the power to back it up. He had then sent ever increasingly nasty plagues on the people of Egypt, the water turned to blood, then frogs, gnats and flies, locusts and others awful things. Pharaoh would promise to let them go if a plague would be stopped and then say "I lied!" God had had it. So the final plague was announced – the death of each first born, human and animal, peasant and king. Moses brought the warning, but Pharaoh's heart was unmoved until his son lay dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron and told them to leave. The Israelites quickly gathered up their belongings and began their walk to freedom. But Pharaoh changed his mind again – his labor force was getting away so he sent his chariots after them.

The dramatic scene was played out at the shore of the Red Sea – the people were frightened, the enemy in pursuit. Moses stretched out his hand and power flowed through him. The sea parted and opened a way out for the Israelites. The Egyptian chariots followed. But when the Israelites were through God said to Moses, release the waters and the Egyptians were drowned.

That's what it tells us in the Bible. In the Judaism, there is a tradition of Biblical interpretation called Midrash, a form of storytelling that explores the ethic and values in a particular text. Midrash will often fill in the gaps, give back story or provide a thought provoking twist. My favorite is a Christian midrash that expands the story of Mary and Martha. After dinner Martha was complaining to Jesus that her sister Mary left her to do all the work while she sat in on Jesus' teaching. Jesus, said to Martha, "Yes, I know that you did a lot of work today but Mary chose to do something even more important." And he told her this as he was drying the dishes.

The Midrash for this part of Exodus goes like this...God's promise to liberate the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt was unfolding in the wilderness. Through Moses, God was meeting every challenge that they faced, including parting the waters of the sea so that they could pass through to safety. Unfortunately, the fast chariots of Pharaoh's army were closing in on them. God and the angels watched the drama unfolding. Once the Israelites were safely on the other side, Moses looked up toward heaven and then stretched out his hand once again and the water closed over the Egyptians. In heaven, the angels celebrated but God rebuked them saying, "How can you be glad when my children are drowning?"

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

[www.trinitybranford.org](http://www.trinitybranford.org)

203-488-2681

*e-mail* [rector47@trinitybranford.org](mailto:rector47@trinitybranford.org)



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Vengeance, even for God, comes at a price. If we truly believe that all of creation comes from God, has been deemed to be “very good”, then the destruction of any part of creation is grieving to God. That makes it all very complicated. It means that God can never be claimed fully for any side of an argument or a war. Even the bad guys belong to God. No one’s life can be dismissed as inconsequential. Jesus has a way of putting things in perspective as we see in today’s gospel reading. There is nothing more difficult asked of a Christian than to make the commitment to forgive and then to live within that commitment. Peter was looking for an out – a limit on how much he was expected to forgive and still be in the right. But Jesus dashed his hopes and said that for the kingdom to come we must forgive, even when we don’t want to or when it doesn’t appear to be working.

The stakes are too high to let anger and wrongs fester. We are called to hear and heed our enemy’s pain even while decrying their violence. The only way to interrupt the “I hit you because you hit me” cycle is to forsake violence as a strategy and vengeance as a goal.

This September 11<sup>th</sup> is a moment to reflect on all that has been lost. The numbers themselves are complicated – 2,976 on Sept. 11, 2001. Somewhere between the 900 to 1000 of the first responders have died since then. And then we have to start to count the cost of wars in two places. Over 7500 American military lives lost and more than 35,000 wounded, many of whom will never be the same. The estimates of the toll on the Afghani and Iraqi population range anywhere from 100,000 to 1 million. And then there is damage to trust, honor, hope, confidence and freedom. How much have we humans made God weep? How much forgiveness will all of this require? Probably more than 77 times.

We cannot change what has already happened. But we can decide what we will do from here on. I propose that we make now the new starting place – that we exercise our imaginations and courage, speak up and act out for the world that God would have us be. I have a homework assignment for you. I want you to imagine that despite your qualifications or lack thereof, you have just been hired for a new job. Your assignment is to create a plan to make the world a better place. And not just a better place for people just like you, but for everyone – for all of God’s children, the good and the bad, the naughty and the nice. It is a big job but I have it on good authority that Jesus will be acting as your consultant. Don’t think small. May God bless you in your work.

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