

“Through the Waters”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 30, 2018

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 2:13-15

Rev. John Wahl

Exodus 14:5-7, 10-31

The story of the crossing of the Red Sea – and indeed the entire account of the Exodus – is as central and important to the Old Testament as the resurrection of Jesus is for the New. For, here, we find an example of the primary character of God: the Creator who is also Redeemer, who hears the cry of his suffering people and delivers them from bondage. At the middle of this story is Moses: God’s human agent of salvation who, in this week’s passage, will raise his staff to part the waters of the Red Sea; and who will also, in next week’s reading, ascend the mountain to receive the Law – the Ten Commandments – from God.

And so, today’s text focuses once again on one of the great heroes of the Old Testament. Two weeks ago, it was Abraham: who, by accepting God’s call and promise to travel forward in faith, became the Father (along with his wife Sarah as the mother) of three great world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Last week, it was Joseph: the dreamer and wearer of the coat of many colors given him by his father, Jacob, who was then sold into slavery by his brothers; only to emerge in Egypt as the one who would save that nation – and indeed his entire family as well – from famine and certain starvation.

This week, it is Moses: the prince of Egypt turned run-away shepherd who heard God’s voice speak to him through a burning bush, telling him to go to Pharaoh and demand that he let the enslaved Jewish people go. Following a series of horrible displays of God’s power, the Egyptian ruler has finally relented and given in to Moses’ demands. As we encounter Moses and the Jewish people in today’s text, they can see that Pharaoh’s heart has again hardened and the Egyptian army, including its 600 chariots, is pursuing them and catching up quickly.

Standing at the banks of the Red Sea, with their former oppressors closing in, Moses is getting an earful from the people he is leading. “What have you done by bringing us out of Egypt?” they ask. “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out into the desert to die?” (Exodus 14:11) After 400 years of slavery, the people of Israel were free; they were following a leader who demonstrated that God was on their side through ten plagues. But with a sea ahead of them and an angry army

behind them, they began to second-guess the choice to leave the only place, and only life, they had ever known.¹

Pharaoh's change of mind – first agreeing to let the Hebrew people go, and then sending his army after them in pursuit – is not the only reversal in play here. While Moses had instructed the people to stand still, God interrupts and instead instructs Moses to “tell the people to move forward.” (Exodus 14:15) God's plan for them was not to wait and watch their enemies draw nearer, but instead to move forward into an uncertain future. Up to this point, the people had been led by a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night, which never left its place in front of the community. Now, though, the cloud shifts to the rear of the camp between the Israelites and the Egyptians, providing for both light ahead and darkness behind. In this way, the Spirit of God stood in the breach, acting as a buffer between those seeking freedom and those looking to return them to bondage.²

A cloud can either be a promise for rain and sustenance, or a warning sign of a raging storm. It can obscure our view of a beautiful night sky, or it can be a welcome shield from the blistering sun. In the Exodus story, the cloud represents the presence of God that traveled with the Hebrew people. The cloud had always been at the head of the camp; now it is behind. Previously, its role was to guide; now it is to obscure and protect.

Throughout this passage, the Lord speaks and acts to save. In a sense, God is again taking up the work of creation, now on behalf of God's chosen people. But like the cloud, this creative work also has a dark side. A new beginning also marks an ending.

At creation, God's Spirit, like a mighty wind, hovered over the unformed deep. God created light in place of darkness, divided the waters, gathering them so that dry land might appear, naming them earth and seas. Now, again, as God's people are being led from slavery to freedom, God makes light in darkness and divides the waters, revealing dry land, so that there is now a barrier between earth and sea.

The Exodus, the journey from slavery to freedom, is like a new creation. It reveals a path forward for God's people and builds a wall to protect them from the chaos and death of the sea. And yet, this crossing is still dangerous. Though there is light in this new creation, there is also darkness. When God separates the waters, the Egyptians pursue their former slaves, but as they enter between the walls of water, the wheels of their chariots fail and they are unable to escape. While the Israelites cross to safety, their former masters are caught in the deadly waters and soon their bodies can be seen washing ashore.

¹ John Dobbs, “Israel's Question”

² Cory Driver from *WorkingPreacher.com*

This is one of those Old Testament stories – and not the last one that we will encounter this fall – that gives us pause; that casts doubt over what we think we know about the nature and character of God. Although we believe the defining characteristic of God is love, here is a story not only of salvation, but of horrific death. It is tempting to skip over these difficult parts and focus on the more positive, or less controversial, aspects. But, maybe that is a mistake: we live in a world of difficult stories; a world that questions where God is in the midst of suffering; a world that wonders how God could allow pain and conflict to happen. This passage, and those like it, require wrestling with what we know and believe about God – and maybe that is a good thing.

The uncomfortable truth of this story is that while some are saved from the waters of the sea, others die in them. And yet, truth for the ancient writers of this story was different than our modern definition of truth. To believe their intention was to relay an event exactly as it happened would be a misinterpretation of this text. Instead, we have to ask ourselves what the purpose of a story like this may have been for the writers and their intended audience.

As best we know, Exodus was written down in its final form while the people of Israel were exiled in Babylon in the 6th century, BCE. It was crafted from many generations of earlier, oral traditions as a story with a purpose for an exiled people. No longer were they a sovereign nation, but a conquered people whose identity was carried away to a distant land. The cohesion of their common experience was in jeopardy of fading away, and remembering stories like this became important for rediscovering hope amid despair. Perhaps, Egypt could be seen as a metaphor for Babylon; the writers thus telling this story as a means of reminding the people that they have faced exile before and God saved them.³

The God seen in this passage is powerful: in control over the very waves of the sea. This is a God stronger than the gods and leaders of their oppressors. The people of God in this story are not scattered and powerless, but a chosen nation who safely pass through the waters with the bodies of their enemies scattered about.

However, this historical perspective does not mean we simply dismiss the story as mere fabrication; we have no more compelling reason to disbelieve than to believe it. And so, if we actually believe what we say we believe about scripture, then there is truth contained in this difficult passage. What does it say to us about the nature and character of God?

As much as this is a story about freedom (release from captivity) it is a story of justice. Egypt is a brutal regime that has been built upon the backs of slaves. Pharaoh cares more about maintaining his power and his people's control than about honoring the humanity of the Hebrew people. His heart is hardened over and over again in this story –

³ Aimee Niles from *A Plain Account*

by an act of God as we're told by its authors – as he seeks to hold on to and then regain power; until finally his unending thirst for control leads to his people's destruction.

It's an uncomfortable idea that we would use the massacre of the Egyptian army as an example of God's heart; and yet God – in this and many other passages – reveals a preference for the poor, the oppressed, and the powerless. Divine justice – revealed through the parting of the Red Sea so that the Hebrew people could safely pass through on dry land – brings about the release and the restoration of God's chosen nation to the freedom for which they, and all people, were created.

And so it is that the Israelites proceed through the parted sea at night, with water piled up as walls to their right and left. The only source of light is the pillar of fire behind them, the same cloud that darkened the way and shielded them from the pursuing Egyptian chariots. Ahead of them lay only uncertainty; meaning that, time and again, the people would ask about and long for a return to the old way in Egypt, even if that was a time and place of oppression. As bad as it had been, at least they knew what to expect.

As we walk along the uncertain path of life, God's leading – when to stand still and when to press forward; what brings chaos and what will offer safe passage – can be deeply confusing. God calls us all to freedom: from all types and forces of oppression, sin and death; but, at times, the pathway can be confusing, and we are tempted to stand still and cry out instead of moving forward in faith to what God is creating and doing.

Through the prophet Isaiah, who ministered in and around the time of the Babylonian exile, God spoke these words of reassurance to the people of Israel: “do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” (Isaiah 43:1-2) This is the way that God still delivers us today. The God of creation, the God of deliverance, the God of resurrection brings freedom by being a constant presence in our lives. God calls us to believe and proclaim this good news, and – most importantly – to embody this good news by being present to others.⁴

When we walk the pathway to freedom – whether individually or collectively – it can be so tempting to turn back; especially when the history of bondage and oppression is so long. And yet, God promises to be present with us, always. Just as God was there when the Hebrew people passed through the waters on dry land, offering them protection and light, so also God is with us even on the darkest, most chaotic of days. To each of us, God our creator and redeemer says, “I have called you by name, you are mine.” AMEN.

⁴ Gregory Rawn, “The Parting of the Red Sea”