

“Caught Between Pharaoh and the Deep Red Sea”

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Overbrook Presbyterian Church

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Scripture Readings:

Exodus 13:17-22

¹⁷When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. ¹⁹And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” ²⁰They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²²Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Exodus 14:5-14

⁵When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?” ⁶So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; ⁷he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. ⁸The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. ⁹The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

¹⁰As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. ¹¹They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” ¹³But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

Sermon: “Caught Between the Pharaoh and the Deep Red Sea”

The Passover of the Angel of the Lord is sort of the climax of the Exodus story. Everything has built up to that moment when terrific death and grief are visited upon the Egyptians and the Israelites are finally set free. But like any good scary movie where the villain appears to be dead, but then shows up one more time to make a last-ditch attempt to defeat the heroes, Pharaoh isn’t quite done. He sends his army after the Israelites in one last shot at glory and redemption. It’s a classic trope used in all kinds of movies and TV shows like *Fatal Attraction*, *Stranger Things*, and *Men in Black*. We think the villain is defeated. And everyone relaxes, and then out of nowhere, BAM! They lunge at our hero and we all gasp in startled amazement. We thought it was all over, but the bad guys weren’t quite finished, yet.

That’s Pharaoh here. It’s clear from everything that has happened that he is no match for what God is capable of doing. But he’s either too dumb or too idealistic to understand that he is beaten. Just when you think the Israelites are home free, Pharaoh makes one final, desperate effort to stop them. But as the Egyptian Army comes storming across the desert towards our newly freed tribes of Israel, we are also given one more chance for God to show what God is all about; one more chance to see what God is doing in the world.

In the passage we just read, Pharaoh has finally conceded defeat, and has let the Israelites leave. And so, we see them in a long caravan, winding their way across the wilderness to an unknown future. We know that God has made a promise of a good and rich land they will eventually call home, but the realization of that vision still lies at the end of a difficult, years-long journey the Israelites have just begun. There are still hurdles to be crossed and challenges to be faced. But what matters most here is that the Israelites do not face this uncertain future alone. In a brief, two verse passage that occurs so quickly you could miss it, we are told that God goes before the Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by

night. They are not just turned out into the wilderness, the way Adam and Eve were turned out of the garden; they are not just called to leave home in search of a land that “I will show you,” like Abraham. They are *led* out of Egypt.; their path marked by God’s physical presence, both by day and by night.

And it is this journey that brings them to the edge of the Red Sea. Now even under the most normal of circumstances, a large body of water in your path poses a challenge but not an insurmountable one. With a little ingenuity and time, they can find a way across or around it. Except time is something they do not have. There’s that sticky bit about Pharaoh’s army coming after them. And soon, the sound of waves lapping at their feet, is joined by a new sound; that of pounding hooves and the shouts of pursuers rising in the distance.

Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, as they say, more literally than anyone would have liked, these people of God began to despair. “Did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness because the cemeteries weren’t big enough in Egypt?” That’s a rough translation of what the people say to Moses. In Eugene Peterson’s modern language paraphrase of the Bible, he describes the people turning to Moses and saying, “Didn’t we tell you this would happen? Didn’t we tell you, ‘...we’re better off as slaves in Egypt than as corpses in the wilderness.’”

And if you think about it, really put yourselves in their shoes, they had good reason to be afraid. It had been a scary, tough few weeks for them. We tend to focus on the good news of their newfound freedom, but you have to remember that this all occurs within the context of hardship. When Moses had first gone to Pharaoh asking him to let the people go, Pharaoh responded by increasing their workload. No longer would he provide them with the straw they needed to make bricks. They would have to find it for themselves. But at the same time, they would be expected to keep making the same number of bricks. So, their workload was doubled, but production was expected to remain steady. Being a slave is hard enough. But for them, it seemed like Moses had made it harder.

Then when the plagues begin, even if the Israelites were not directly affected by them, they still would have been startled by the river of blood and the hoards of frogs, gnats and locusts that covered the land. There were storms and hale and darkness and the first born in every Egyptian household being struck dead in the night; we think 2020 has been a year, but those people have really seen some things happen! And now the journey has brought them to the shore of the Red Sea. The unknowable, hostile deep lies before them, the ruthless army of Pharaoh behind them. Their despair is understandable.

But here is another way to look at it. In the preceding days and weeks, they had seen and are now seeing, more obvious, physical manifestations of the very real and very powerful presence of God in their midst than anyone, in the totality of human history. The plagues. The Passover. Their emancipation. Their ongoing journey led by the presence of God before them in a pillar of cloud during the day that turned to a pillar of fire at night; all of that should have convinced them that in this terrifying, challenging moment, God would be with them and God would protect them.

And we know that as the story continues, they will see more of God’s mighty acts of salvation as God, in the pillar of cloud and fire, moves between the Israelites and Pharaoh’s army so that they are never really threatened. But in that moment, caught between Pharaoh and the deep Red Sea, they still found themselves overwhelmed by the circumstances of that moment in history. They struggled to call upon their faith. They still wrung their hands in desperation.

You might very well know what that’s like. To be faced with life’s difficulties: the struggles of meeting responsibilities and expectations, the illness of loved ones, the tragedy of loss, the trials we fear sharing with others and try to shoulder alone.

And yet God still calls us to all sorts of crazy places. To do all sorts of crazy things. To love neighbors we don’t know. To love enemies we don’t like. To serve strangers with no guarantee we will get anything out of it. To advocate justice and equity not just for some but for all.

Just as Shiphrah and Puah, and Miriam and her mother, and Pharaoh’s daughter were called to resist the evil demands of a powerful king - just as Moses was called to go and speak of liberation and justice to that same powerful King - just as God called the people to come out of the lives they knew, in which they had grown comfortable, even as slaves, to embrace something new and to be a blessing to all nation - God is calling us to that same journey toward the Kingdom of God today.

And we’re called to do all of that standing caught between the COVID-19 pandemic, and hurricanes in the gulf, and firestorms in the west, a political reality that seems more like fiction every day, and the tumult of the struggle for justice

and equity all over this land. And in the midst of all that, we can begin to get a sense of what the Israelites felt: Overwhelmed. Afraid. Inadequate.

Why did you call us onto this journey, Oh God? Wasn't it better, safer, more comfortable back when we were slaves to sin? Why have you called us out into the wilderness on this discipleship journey towards your Kingdom, only to suffer here? And in the midst of the tempest, as the sound of the waves lapping at our feet fades beneath the sound of the approaching army behind us, we hear the voice of Moses saying to his people: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today."

We don't have the benefit of seeing the presence of God standing before us in a pillar of cloud and fire. We don't have the recent history of God's mighty acts performed before our very eyes. But we do have the presence of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

And we have in him the knowledge of God's grace and mercy and steadfast love that overcomes all of the things which frighten us and threaten to overwhelm us, even death.

And we have the pillars of the church, the body of Christ, the house of God. And those pillars are not made of stone and brick and mortar; they are made of flesh and blood and bone; they are our brothers and sisters in Christ who walk beside us and support us; who lift us up when we struggle to find the next step, who share our burdens when they become too heavy to bear, who pray for us when our own words fail us; who show us by their lives and by their faith, the way to the Kingdom of God.

And we know that no matter how overwhelmed we may feel by it all, God will deliver us from the sin and struggle of this world. It will require us to follow. It will require us to work. And we may not see the journey's end in our lifetime, but God is doing a new thing, and we are called to be a part of it.

It is fortuitous, or perhaps it is God's will, that we find these stories of the Exodus in the lectionary at this moment in our history. For in this story, we see the grave challenges God calls on God's people to accept, and the divine power of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love with which God guides us behind and before, as we rise to meet them.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear not evil."

"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today."

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.