

A Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2020

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The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. Exodus 14:19-31

Lately I have been remembering past travels, wondering when it will again be safe to travel. I've been reminiscing about a trip overseas - a work trip with my husband. He worked, and I toured Paris! But there were a few planned company excursions for all of us and one of them was to Omaha Beach in the Normandy region of France. This is truly a holy place, marked forever by the events of D Day on June 6, 1944. Now it's a tourist attraction, but even so, the holiness of this place is tangible and those who visit move reverently and speak softly as they remember the countless lives given there, that we might have a life of freedom.

When we arrived that morning it was low tide and the expanse of beach amazed me. When I was shown where the water level would be at high tide, I was surprised. These extremely low and high tides, and the moon phase on June sixth were precisely what the Allied Forces hoped would aid their maneuver that fateful day. Due to the weather, the channel became a sea of chaos for them, yet miraculously they moved forward to reach land, that justice might prevail and freedom be secured.

When we read the account of the Israelites walking through the middle of the Red Sea on dry land, some of us marvel at the miracle, others attempt to explain it scientifically, and some may simply reject the whole story as unbelievable. Some scholars attribute the miracle to the tides, as on D Day, others have speculated that there were coral reefs making the sea shallow where they crossed.

Even the text seems to contradict itself - at one point saying God drove the sea back by a strong east wind that separated the waters, and at another point having Moses stretch out his hand to control the sea. The contradiction exists because the Red Sea event in Exodus 14-15 comes to us in three different versions that have been woven together and placed alongside one another in the book of Exodus. There are also numerous references to the Red Sea story in the Psalms. However it happened, it was a clearly a memorable event and people wrote numerous accounts of it.

The crossing of the Red Sea is one of the best-known stories in the Bible. On the west bank of the Red Sea the Israelites were the slaves of pharaoh, and on the east bank of the sea they become the people of YHWH. They move from slavery and death to freedom and a new identity as the children of God.

It must be said, however, that this story is not without its troubling aspects, just as there are some troubling aspects in the plague narratives that come before this story. This is why Bible study is so important. We can go so much deeper into the text in a study than we can in a sermon.

There is always tension between God's love and mercy on the one hand, and God's righteousness and justice on the other. And in the end, there is a point where evil must be defined as evil and must be dealt with.

Again and again Pharaoh was given the opportunity to end the conflict, yet he continued to oppress the Israelites, blind to the LORD's admonitions and warnings through ten plagues.

When we find ourselves caught between a thundering army and a crashing sea of chaos, what will we choose? Where will we place our trust? Life is full of opportunities to make a choice.

We can probably think of times when Pharaoh's army was bearing down on us, or when the sea seemed too chaotic to consider wading through it.

Our lives are made chaotic by so many things - a financial crisis, a wayward child, a parent suffering with dementia. A fractured relationship, intolerable conditions at work, or inability to find work. Many of us are living in constant anxiety right now for one reason or another.

What is your Red Sea? Who is your Pharaoh?

When our enemies seem very real and very close, when the problems in our lives are overwhelming, can we recognize that God is with us? Can we trust that God will make a way for us when the waves threaten to drown us?

Just a few verses prior to where our story begins today, the Israelites are afraid, they do not trust Moses, they feel abandoned by God and they cry out, "What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." They actually longed to return to their old life, a life of slavery under Pharaoh, rather than face the unknowns of the future to enter the new life God had prepared for them.

Fearful and angry with God, they blamed Moses, and they lamented the circumstances. But Moses replied: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today . . . the Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

You have only to keep still. Be still. And know that I am God. It was in that stillness that Moses and the people could hear what God wanted them to do next, could recognize God's presence and trust that God would lead them to safety and new life.

When we are overwhelmed by fear and anxiety and impossible odds, what if we could see the situation as an opportunity to enter holy ground? What if we could be still and allow God to enter our chaos and transform it?

What if this pandemic, this racial unrest, this political turmoil are opportunities for us to enter holy ground? An invitation to be still with God, a time to stop relying on the pharaohs of *this* world and trust in God's power to save?

God will act in ways we sometimes will not understand and cannot explain, and God will use the people and events in our lives to transform us, to lead us into new life. Then we will tell our own story to all who need to hear the hope and the promise of God's salvation. Amen.