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First Presbyterian Church  
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Exodus 14:19-31

### **“When the Going Gets Tough the Tough . . .”**

Last summer when I was planning the preaching calendar for the year, I came up with the big idea of all the pastors preaching on their favorite Bible story. Now you would think this would be easy, right? Wrong! All of us have struggled with choosing a favorite story!

I think the reason I’ve struggled to choose a story is that preaching is contextual. (There’s that word again!) Meaning, we don’t preach in a vacuum. We preach for a certain congregation, at a certain time, in a certain location, all while trying to discern how the word of God speaks to us today. This makes it hard to choose a story out of thin air and make it work; am I just preaching what I want to preach, or what I think you or we need to hear? Since I came up with this brilliant idea, hopefully I’m doing both!

One of my favorite books of the Bible is Exodus. It’s all there. Exodus contains all the major themes of the Bible. It sets forth the idea that God calls people from slavery to freedom, that God provides, that God chooses men and women, that God will never abandon us and therefore, there is nothing to fear. And all those ideas come to fruition in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is why so many scholars say that the Exodus story for Jews is what the Easter story is for us. So, we should probably pay attention to this story and know it. The story I’ve chosen from Exodus is the crossing of the Red Sea. A little odd for a favorite story . . . but I think there’s a word in it for us today. And so I invite you to listen for the word of God as it comes to us today.

<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. <sup>23</sup> The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. <sup>24</sup> At the morning watch the LORD, in the pillar of fire and cloud, looked down on the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into a panic. <sup>25</sup> He clogged<sup>[a]</sup> 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."

### The Pursuers Drowned

<sup>26</sup> 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." <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

<sup>30</sup> Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup> 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.

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*In sacred times of word, wonder, and awe, and in ordinary days of work and play: you are with us, God. Whether we are stuck in doubt's mud or standing on faith's shoreline: You are with us. In those who teach us and those who trouble us; in those who surprise us, and those who forgive us: You are with us. Amen.*

Now when we meet up with the Israelites in our reading for today, they're getting ready to cross the Red Sea. You might recall that Moses was summoned by God to return to Egypt to tell Pharaoh that he had to free the people from slavery and let them leave the country.

But Pharaoh, as you can imagine, wasn't so eager to let his entire work force go free.

So God sent 10 plagues to devastate Egypt, in the hopes of convincing Pharaoh to let the people go. And that's exactly what happened. By the 10<sup>th</sup> and final plague, which was the death of every firstborn child, Pharaoh was begging the people to leave the country. "Get up! Get away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go!" Pharaoh cried out to Moses and Aaron, back in chapter 12.

And so they went. They packed up everything they owned and headed toward the Red Sea and the Promised Land. After all those years of slavery they were finally going to be free! The long-anticipated exodus had finally arrived!

But at the last minute Pharaoh had a change of heart and decided to go chasing after them. So he sent for his chariot and took his army with him – 600 chariots in all. It was an amazing show of force; if you had chariots, you were undefeatable. Chariots were the nuclear weapons and fighter planes of the army. They made all the difference.

So when the people looked back and saw the Egyptian army approaching, they lost their nerve. They cried out to Moses, "What have you done? Didn't we tell you to just leave us alone? Couldn't we just as have easily died in Egypt?" All of a sudden their courage and commitment to live as free people is gone, vanishes. "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?"

Yes, this very important story is our story, too. Because when the going gets tough the tough . . . want to go back to Egypt! Granted, life as a slave wasn't that great, but it sure beat drowning in the Red Sea or getting caught by one of the 600 chariots that was coming after you! Safety and security are much more preferable than crossing a sea without a lifeboat, even if the Promised Land is in front of you. Right?

Well, not according to God. For you see, at the very heart of our tradition, from the beginning of the Bible to the very end, is the belief that God calls people into a new future. And not only does God call us into a new future, it's God who agitates us and disturbs us and makes us uncomfortable with the status quo.

Now, I realize that's not how we like to think about God. We tend to prefer a God who bends to our wishes and desires, rather than a God who demands that we bend to His (or Hers, depending on your perspective), but that's just not how God works. From the very beginning to the very end, God calls us to be on a journey, and we're to follow God with courage and commitment into an uncertain future. In fact, one of our very own Confessions, the Confession of 1967, states: "Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage."  
*(Presbyterian Church USA, Confession of 1967)*

And the Israelites needed to summon all the courage they had to step into their uncertain future, because if they were going to get to the Promised Land, they had to keep on going. They needed to head straight for the sea, a sea which had not yet parted; their salvation was dependent on them crossing that sea.

Like the Israelites, when we encounter deep waters, we want to turn back too, or give up. We like to hang on to the past, living in familiar surroundings, and maintaining our comfort zone. Going forward overwhelms us, so we keep everything the same resisting change but also resisting opportunity.

Six years ago around this time I was here in Fort Wayne, interviewing with the PNC and preaching at United Faith Presbyterian Church in what we call a "neutral pulpit". It's such an odd term because it's anything but neutral. After serving one congregation for quite a while, it felt odd to step out of my surroundings and preach someplace unfamiliar to people I didn't know. I felt a whole range of emotions that weekend: awe the first time I stepped foot in this sanctuary, a twinge of guilt that I was here and not there; excitement at all the possibilities; but also some anxiety because I wasn't the only person involved in this move – there are 6 in the Epling family and everyone would be affected. And I felt some sadness; I was leaving friends and most especially family. My sister lives in St. Louis, and we're very close, and our kids grew up together.

But I also knew – I don't know how – one just knows – that I wasn't called to stay put. I knew that; I felt that. I also believe God calls us to move forward. Now this doesn't always mean we're called to physically move, but we also can't move forward without leaving something behind.

Walter Brueggemann, a fine Old Testament scholar, once said that the Bible, and particularly this story, is rooted in memory but always presses us to the new possibilities that are in front of us.

God pressed the people to go – to head straight into the sea – to grasp hold of the new life and new possibility that awaited them. And God presses us, too, to grasp hold of the new life and new possibilities that await us even if that means walking into a sea that has not yet parted. Which I realize doesn't make any sense. Who goes walking out into the sea with no intention of turning back?

Ironically, the Red Sea in Hebrew means the Sea of the End. Depending on your perspective that could either be a good thing or a bad thing. It can mean the end of your life as you know it . . . or it could mean the beginning of something good. For the Hebrew people it meant the end of life as they knew it, but it also marked the beginning of life as free people.

A new career, a new home, a new school, a new relationship, a new venture – it all comes with risk and uncertainty. And there isn't one of us in that situation who doesn't say or think, "Why am I doing this? The past wasn't so bad. At least I knew what to expect." Embarking on something new can cause us to panic. It certainly caused the Israelites to panic.

Yet in this moment of panic, Moses is amazingly patient with the people. "Do not be afraid," he says. "You only have to keep still." He's so kind, so caring, so attentive.

And then there's God. "Why are you crying out to me? Get moving!"

And boy did they get moving. They hustled. They gathered their belongings and went forward. Moses reached out his hand and parted the waters so the people could cross the sea. With all their belongings and livestock and family members they crossed the sea. They summoned every ounce of courage and faith they had, and they made it to the other side.

The Egyptians, however, weren't so lucky. Did you notice how much time and attention the writer gives to the Egyptians' destruction?

The Lord sent the Egyptians into a panic; clogged their chariot wheels so they couldn't move; and even after the Egyptians declared defeat – God still fought them – driving the water back upon them and upon their chariots and their chariot drivers – and tossed them, all of them, into the sea. The waters covered them all, not one of them survived. And when the Israelites walked on the dry ground, they saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

It is a haunting and frightening picture – and all week I wrestled with it – what does it mean, why didn't God let them go when they declared defeat? Why did it need to be so gruesome, and so heavy-handed? Why did the writer need to point out that the people saw all those dead Egyptians on the seashore? Why is that so important?

All week I wrestled with it. And finally came to the very simple conclusion that actions have consequences. And while that doesn't give me much pleasure to say, it's true. The Egyptians' actions had consequences. It's not what we want to read, and it doesn't give us much pleasure to think that God would be so cruel, but we know that logically it's true. That actions have consequences. But can we believe it in our hearts, can we believe it enough to step into our own Red Sea, whatever that sea may be, or will we allow Pharaoh to enslave us?

Now that Pharaoh could be anything. Pharaoh could be the addiction that we face daily; he could be the dead-end marriage or job we don't leave; he could be the guilt we haven't yet confessed; or the wrong we haven't yet forgiven. Pharaoh can take as many forms as there are people here today. But the point is that Pharaoh enslaves us and wants to keep us in Egypt but God, God wants us to venture forth to the Promised Land and seize the opportunities that await us there.

Maybe the writer knew that the power of Pharaoh was so strong that the people would need the haunting image of the dead Egyptians to get past him. Maybe God knew that the power of Pharaoh is so great that it must be overcome with all force and that no deals can be struck with him no matter how much he or his minions cry out for help. Maybe God wants us to know in no uncertain terms that clinging to our pharaohs will have consequences.

If you learn nothing else from this story, learn that God doesn't call us to remain in Egypt. God calls us to get moving and live into the future with courage and hope. God does not want us to get stuck in a rut like those Egyptians did. God calls us, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free, whoever we are, wherever we are, to live into the future with hope and courage. God calls us, as individuals, as people, as a church, and as a community to commitment and to courage, and to let go of those pharaohs that hold us back.

You know, there's an old Jewish Midrash about this story that says the water didn't actually part until the people started wading into it. They had to take the first step simply trusting that it would part when they did. Water in front of them, the army behind them, and God's invitation to move into their future . . . all of it surrounded them. And when they tied up their robes and took off their sandals and waded hip deep into the water of their fears . . . then, and only then did the water recede and the path emerge.

Friends, I invite you to stand up (if you're able) and imagine yourself at the edge of your own sea – think about the hard decision you have to make, or the Pharaoh that enslaves you – you can go back to Egypt and the conveniences Pharaoh offers you, or you can lift your feet and take the next step, even though you have no idea what's ahead or you're scared beyond belief. The letter to the Hebrews says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things unseen. We trust in God to guide us, and God expects us to believe with our feet . . . to take the next step into the fear and move into the promise of everything our lives can be.

I would encourage you, to roll up your pant legs and take that first step into the water of whatever it is you fear the most, knowing – trusting – believing -- that God is before you; God is behind you; and God has made a way.

Amen.

