



“Crossing the Red Sea: Breaking Free from Egypt”
Scripture – Exodus 14:19-31, 15:1b-11, 20-21
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 6, 2016

Welcome to week four of our sermon series on the Moses drama. Week one featured the tale of the burning bush and how Moses heard the whispers of God summoning him to return to Egypt to liberate his fellow Hebrews. The passage prompted us to contemplate the ways God calls each of us. Next, we focused on the way Moses *responded* to God’s call – with great reluctance – and we are prone to doing the same. We often doubt we have what it takes. Yet, when we embrace God’s call, we become our best selves. Last week, we noted that living our faith is not for the faint-hearted. But tapping into God’s Spirit within us, we can discover the courage to stand up to whatever Pharaohs we encounter.

This morning, we leap forward in the saga. We are skipping over the chapters in which Moses threatened Pharaoh with 10 plagues and the Egyptians suffered the consequence of each one. The last plague broke Pharaoh’s determined will to hold the Hebrews captive; he finally let those people go free. They had brought so much pain and suffering to Egypt that Pharaoh was glad to be rid of them. However, shortly after Pharaoh removed their shackles and the Hebrew people began their dash to freedom, Pharaoh regretted losing his slave labor force. Now, who’s going to do the work? He rounded up his army and headed out in pursuit of the Hebrews to recapture them.

The story says that God led the people on their journey by appearing as a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. For those interested in the different images of God in Scripture, note that these are not human-like projections, but images borrowed from nature. By cloud and fire, God led the escapees to what legend tells us is the Red Sea, but what the Hebrew actually names a “sea of reeds” – something more akin to a marsh with stalks of plants sticking up from the water.

Keep in mind that the saga of Moses comes from the 13th century BCE, and was passed down by storytellers for centuries before being assembled in written form. Naming the body of water the Red Sea may have become part of the story as it was embellished over time. Since the story is more historical fiction with widening circles of meaning than it is flat historical facts, it is right to picture a large body of water. It has overtones of the watery chaos of creation and how God made dry land appear in its midst.

Regardless of how we picture this sea, the Hebrew people are encamped next to it and the Egyptians are bearing down on them. They appear to be cornered. It is at this point that we pick up today’s passage.

As the Egyptians are drawing near, a strong east wind blows all night until dry land appears. The Hebrews march across the land to the other side. The Egyptian army pursues them, but the wheels of the chariots become clogged

in the muck. As the Hebrews reach the other side, the wind subsides, the water rushes back, and the entire Egyptian army drowns. Moses leads the people in a song of triumph and Miriam leads the women in dancing.

It is one of the most familiar passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is also troubling. Most people will celebrate when a brutal oppressor like Hitler is dead, but the story cannot help but make you wonder if God could have kept all of the Egyptians stuck in the mire and unable to reach the Hebrews, without drowning every last one of them. Twenty chapters later in Exodus, God will be revealed as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”¹ but that is not the way God sounds in this story.

The epic of the Exodus is the consummate story of the Hebrew Scriptures. It contains practically everything regarding the life of faith. The saga informs us that God is distressed when people suffer, God seeks to liberate the oppressed, God summons people to bold missions, human beings are free to accept or reject God’s call, we doubt our ability to meet God’s challenges, life is both precarious and unpredictable, we complain and threaten to give up our faith when life is difficult, God can fill us with courage, God opens up new possibilities when none seem available, God provides our daily bread, and God delivers us from death to life. For centuries, people of faith have identified with this story because it details our experience of the life of faith.

Today’s portion of the Exodus, the story of the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea, was a liminal moment in their history. A liminal moment is a point where you leave one place and enter another. It is a place of transition. To cross the sea is to cross a threshold, a boundary. It represents the liberation from slavery to freedom. It is hardly any wonder that the narrative of the Exodus is at the core of the Jewish faith.

In fact, Moses is recognized as such a towering figure that he has been a defining symbol in our own nation’s struggle for freedom. A few years ago, *Time* Magazine published an article entitled: *How Moses Shaped America*. It began by noting that, from the American Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement, Moses has been one of America’s cultural symbols. As a result of religious persecution in Europe, the earliest pilgrims found in Moses the inspiration to make the journey to a new land of freedom. This image was so archetypal that when Benjamin Franklin proposed a seal for the United States, he pictured Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea. Images of Moses inspired leaders of the Underground Railroad rescuing people out of slavery, and Frederick Douglass was called Moses. Likewise the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was compared to Moses as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement.²

The story of the Red Sea is the story of slavery to freedom, of death to life. Biblical scholar, John Holbert says, it “is nothing less than the Jewish resurrection story. Out of hopeless slavery and death appeared life and a future with God.”³

The story of the crossing of the sea is a story of breaking free from whatever is destroying us and living in new ways. It could represent a person’s bondage to drugs or alcohol and breaking free from the addiction. It could represent breaking free from a toxic relationship or a miserable job. It could represent moving from guilt to forgiveness, from fear to courage, from strife to peace.

I have some sad news to share. The current uplifting and edifying political election is coming to an end! I know you are going to miss all of those beautiful and truthful ads running over and over ad nauseam. The Egyptians suffered plagues of frogs and boils and locusts. We have been forced to suffer the plague of a nasty election.

I cannot begin to express how grateful I am that the election will finally come to a halt. It has not merely exposed stark divisions in our country; it has thrown gallons of gasoline on the flames of fear which has led to bitterness and strife.

Differences of opinion make our nation great, but disdain for fellow citizens because they see issues differently is not merely counter-productive; it is destructive. Even though many cannot imagine how others can view life so differently, disdain toward well-meaning people who hold a contrary opinion can shred the fabric of our society.

If we choose to model ourselves after those who denigrate people with whom they disagree – whether they are political leaders, commentators, religious figures, celebrities, or business leaders – we will continue to foment rancor and discord. The health of our nation will continue to erode.

Like the Hebrews being liberated from Egypt, we must seek to be liberated from fears that create prejudice and prompt vitriolic rhetoric which, in turn, destroys personal relationships and the ties that bind us together as a community and a nation.

It is right to hold malice toward evil. God despises injustice and summons us to right what is wrong. However, rancor toward people because they hold different opinions, or because they are of another political party, race or religion, will ravage your heart, pervert your mind, and devour your soul.

Like the Hebrews at the sea, we are standing at the waters edge. We can remain enslaved by our fear of others or we can take the risk of crossing over to the other side. With God's guidance, we can break free to forge a new and better future.

NOTES:

1. Exodus 34:6
2. Bruce Feiler, "*How Moses Shaped America*," Time, October, 12, 2009, p. 48-50.
3. John C. Holbert, "Victory at Sea: Reflections on Exodus 14:19-31," *patheos.com*, September 8, 2014.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God, who welcomes us to the table, who invites us to join the saints at the feast, who surrounds us with so a great cloud of witnesses, you are our strength and salvation! From generation to generation, your faithfulness is sure. With those who found a path made through the waters, with those who first heard your promise, and with those who stand firm on it still, we join the song of praise!

Loving God, by your grace, we have these gifts to share. So, with thanksgiving, we come to this table, taking our place beside saints of ages past, to share one bread and one cup the fruit of your creation, that unites us with the faithful of every time and place.

On this *All Saints'* Sunday, we remember with joy the saints of our lives, who have done justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with you, and we name them before you now.

[Names of the saints were read by pastors]

We give thanks for these, your beloved children, who have joined the church triumphant, and dwell with you in your everlasting kingdom. With thanksgiving, we remember these sisters and brothers in Christ and praise you for the gift of their lives. For all in them that was good and kind and faithful, for the ways they bore witness to your love. With gratitude and anticipation, we come to this table, which is bound neither by time nor place, to join these sisters and brothers at the feast which you have prepared for us.

Gracious God, pour out your Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and cup. Draw us together into one body, and join us to Christ and the communion of saints. Unite us in faith, encourage us with hope, inspire us to love, that we may serve as your faithful disciples until we feast at your table in glory. We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, and join our voices as one as we offer the prayer he taught us: **Our Father**, ...