

Exodus 14:10-14; 21-29

Today's story is about **trust**. Last week's scenes from the Joseph story showed God at work quietly, delivering God's people in subversive ways. God enabled Joseph to interpret dreams, rise quickly through Pharaoh's palace ranks of prime minister, and use human systems in all their brokenness to bring about safety, prosperity, reunification, and reconciliation for Jacob's family.

After Joseph saved Egypt and his family from a famine, it took about four hundred years and several pharaohs for this seemingly relationship between the Israelites and Egyptians to sour. Joseph had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Joseph's youngest brother was Benjamin along with ten half-brothers. Half-brother Levi was the fore-father of Moses. There was more than a four-hundred-year gap between Levi and Moses. Joseph's family eventually settled in the land of Goshen in the northern part of Egypt.

400 years later and things have dramatically changed. Joseph's family – the children of Israel, have been enslaved by the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. The Israelites had prospered in Egypt and their numbers exploded. According to Exodus, there were 600,000 Israelite men by the time of Moses, certainly enough to form a nation.

The Pharaoh is afraid that the people will grow too numerous and start

a rebellion, so he kills all the baby boys. Moses is spared when his mother sets him in a basket and he floats on the Nile river to the feet of the Pharaoh's daughter. She raises Moses as her own son in the Pharaoh's house. Moses kills a slavedriver for abusing the Hebrew slaves and then runs for his life. He spends forty years as a fugitive, working as a shepherd in Midian.

Moses encounters God in a burning bush, who sends him back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and deliver the Israeli people. God sends ten plagues on the Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The angel of death sweeps through the land and kills every first born son in a house that is not covered in the blood of the lamb. Pharaoh's son dies and he releases the slaves. Pharaoh changes his mind and sends his army to retrieve the people as they ready to exit Egypt. Here, the Passover story begins.

This is where today's story picks up. The spirit of God is leading the people in the form of a pillar of cloud. Once again we see God delivering God's people, but there is nothing quiet about it this time. Horses' hooves pound the dirt, the Israelites cry out in fear, the Egyptians scream in panic, the wind howls, and the waters churn. Add to that the the pillar of fire and cloud, and we have a huge chaotic mess.

As the Israelites were being chased down by the most technologically equipped fighting force anywhere around, they were inclined toward fight or flight. Their mandate from here is neither fight nor flee, but to witness:

to observe God's power and might. God will do all the fighting for them. After all, all the agency in this story belongs to God. This is God's victory alone. Through this victory, the people of Israel as well as the Egyptians see that God's glories far surpass any of Pharaoh's claims either to military prowess or to the status of deity. The contest between God and pharaoh has been building throughout Exodus to this showdown at the sea, and God has won.

The Exodus story shows us a once-in-a-lifetime or once-in-a-millennium, or even once-in-a-Testament miracle. In many ways it is **the** miracle; this might just be the most important chapter in the entire Old Testament. The story of God's deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea (or Sea of Reeds) is the bedrock of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the two parties, God and Israel, continually remind each other of this particular saving act. In the opening lines of the Ten Commandments, God declares: "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." The people of Israel have been freed in order to worship and serve God by keeping God's commandments.

The prophets, Amos and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah, use the exodus as an analogy for later periods of suffering in Israel as evidence for the kind

of deliverance of which God is capable. The exodus is a favourite topic for the psalms, and its remembrance forms a centrepiece of ancient Israel's liturgical life. Some, psalms list the exodus as the first in a litany of God's "mighty acts," while others retell the story of the exodus in poetic ways.

People today, have a hard time with accepting the Exodus story as true, as factual. For those with a more secular world view, it couldn't possibly have happened. For those with a Christian world view, at least in its classical sense, it **HAD** to have happened. The biblical writers clearly believed that it did. So, is the Exodus account historical or merely mythology? Recent archaeological research hasn't turned up any evidence. The supposed chronology seems more religious than historical. The wider biblical story is that God worked to save a particular nation, Israel, not so that God could favour them over other nations, but to set the stage for an Israelite to come, one who would save every nation on earth.

We should not let the secular bias, evident here, stand unchallenged. We too easily and too often capitulate to the naturalistic world view from which this kind of thinking stems without even realizing it.

The Hebrews, who built their lives on the certain conviction that their God, YHWH, had, because of unbreakable love for them as a people, led them out of the horrors of Egyptian slavery, through the forbidding

Sinai wilderness, into and out of the terrible Sea of Reeds, and at last into the land of promise. They proclaimed in story and song that on the west bank of that sea they were the hopeless captives of the cruel pharaoh, while on the east bank of the sea they were the people of YHWH. This is precisely the resurrection story of Israel.

Certain facts surrounding this story should be noted. Despite three millennia of searching, probing, digging, exegeting, and speculating, not a single historical clue has been discovered that could pinpoint where any of these things actually happened. This is not any sort of historical event. If one visits the Sinai today, trekking through what is actually a fairly small and sparsely populated desert place, any biblical clues are completely vague and might be located in any number of spots on a middle-eastern map. And there is the location of the sea itself. Despite the long tradition of naming it the Red Sea, the Hebrew says “Sea of Reeds,” a marshy place somewhere east of the slave pits of Egypt. Since reed marshes mark many square miles of northern Sinai territory, the search for **the** Sea of Reeds is hopeless. But that is precisely the point. No Hebrew, no later Israelite, wants any of us to don our archaeologist’s garb, and head off to the Sinai searching for the Sea, or the mountain, or the trails of the ancients.

This is a **story of resurrection**, for Israelites – and for later Jews, **the** story of resurrection, and the focus is squarely on YHWH. When the grumbling and terrified Israelites find themselves trapped between the

forces of Pharaoh and the angry waves of the sea, they scream at Moses that their freedom has turned to imminent death. “Plenty of graves in Egypt, Moses,” they shout; “why bring us into this place where death is even more certain and even more horrendous?” Moses’ response makes the central point of this resurrection tale. “Do not be afraid! Stand still and see the salvation that YHWH will work for you today. The Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you must only stand still.”

And with that grand oration echoing in Israelite ears, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea and two very separate distinct events occur. We are most familiar with the “walls of water on their right and on their left, made indelible in our minds by the Cecil DeMille epic of six decades ago, done using Jello, resulting in the only Oscar the film won. But that is only one of the stories told in this complex account. There is another: “Moses stretched out his hand toward the sea, and the Lord drove the sea apart by a strong east wind all that night, and he made the sea into dry land, and the water was divided.” Here we witness some sort of long tidal event, rather than the instantaneous piling up of divided water walls. An event as magical and grand as this can hardly be confined to one telling! There are two accounts of creation, and four very different accounts of the resurrection of Jesus.

Again we are not asked to choose the “right” story; is the tidal account more “believable,” hence more possibly “historical,” than the walls of

water story? This is, again, not the point. *Both* stories have YHWH at the centre; *both* stories announce that YHWH is the God of life, ever active against the forces of death. This ancient resurrection story mirrors and echoes all other stories of dying and rising gods from the ancient near east. It is not more or less historical than they; its power is not found in its historical plausibility. It has power because it is our story; it is the story that we choose, the story that has lured us into its potent orbit, the story that affirms our conviction that God is always seeking and creating life in a world too often overcome with death.

It is always valuable to read again the Israelite resurrection story, that story that has sustained Judaism now for three Millennia through horrific persecutions and hatred and rejection throughout the centuries and in nearly all lands of the world. The history of the thing is beside the point. It is the story itself that counts. And so, for us Christians, we are not helped by demands to suspend the laws of physics in order to accept the unacceptable, to believe the unbelievable. The story of the Sea of Reeds and the story of the resurrection of Jesus are more than enough to change the way we think about God and the way we think about the living of our days.

Both Jews and Christians know this story above all the stories of the Hebrew Bible. For Jews it is the central claim of their faith: on the west bank of the Sea of Reeds (wherever that may be) the Israelites were the slaves of the pharaoh, while on the east bank of the sea, they are the

people of YHWH. This unforgettable tale is nothing less than the Jewish resurrection story. Out of hopeless slavery and death appeared life and a future with God.

For Christians this story has a different impact. It has become one of the accounts of the power of God over the forces of nature, beginning with the creation itself and culminating with Jesus' calming of the wind and the waves of the Sea of Galilee as a sign of his unique power as son of God. It could well be said that for both traditions, the great account of the Sea illustrates the control that God exerts over the natural forces and places that God has created.

God promises to stand with us, urging us, luring us to move in the divine way of unity and wholeness and the oneness of creation. That is the lesson of the event at the Sea of Reeds. It is not that we need to discover the exact location of this Sea in order to prove that the Bible is in fact historically true, as if that were somehow crucial information for us. It is not. Even if we could find the actual Sea, what difference would its precise location make for us as we reflect about God and God's desire for the world? Nor do we need to ferret out what exactly happened at the Sea.

Any careful reader of the exodus story can easily see that there are two stories of the event now intertwined. One of the tales speaks of a tide moving back all night and in the morning returning to its usual flow, while

the other, speaks of “walls of water” through which the Israelites pass and which collapse on the pursuing Egyptian armies, pharaoh, horsemen, chariots, and chariot drivers. Now that we know that, what in fact do we know? We know, as our Jewish brothers and sisters proclaim, that God has saved the Israelites from certain defeat at the Sea of Reeds. And we know that, despite not knowing either where or how it “happened,” categories that are finally not helpful at all.

The story of the exodus testifies to Christians today about the power God has to defeat oppressors and deliver the oppressed, and about the special love God has for Israel. When we read about God’s redemption of humanity in the New Testament, we should remember that God has been delivering God’s people all along: from the water of the flood, from famine, from slavery in Egypt, from exile in Babylon. As readers of this sacred story, we are called to join the Israelites in their witness to God’s victory: Stand, see, keep still, and believe.

In the twenty-first century, many Christians struggle to maintain their faith. If Luther worried about finding a righteous and forgiving God, we worry about finding God at all. What made the Israelites believe in the Book of Exodus? Was it really the three trick signs that Moses was able to pull off? Was it the supernatural power of the Exodus experience itself? Perhaps.

But chances are it was the fact that God had heard their groaning and

remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and took notice of them. God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew. God knew what they needed. God knew what they were going through, and then God came up with good news for their bad situation. God knew. As we struggle to live out the life of faith, we have a God who knows us, knows our problems, knows our failings, knows our needs. We have a God who provides good news for whatever bad situations we are going through; unemployment, family discord, depression, serious illness, doubt, fear, loneliness – and whatever else that makes life difficult.

We are all in the process of being saved by God. God is working on us at this very moment to turn us toward the healing of all. The victory of God at the ancient Sea of Reeds is a foretaste of that victory that God has had in mind from the very start of things, from the time of creation of us and the world we live in.

How often do we find ourselves in seemingly hopeless situations and we think it would be better to die? We can all take hope and courage from this story. God is with us. God is for us. May we trust in God's faithfulness. May we remember that God has worked through the waters of our baptism to save us from Sin and Death. Let us be of good courage.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Holy God, we thank you for the gift of life. Recalling Francis who celebrated your love for all creation, today we embrace our connectedness to all: to wind, sea, and sky; to earthworm, giraffe, and chicken; to fish and puppy, to cats of the jungle and in our homes. Deepen our care for all that lives; in the name of Jesus, our teacher, saviour and friend. **Amen.**