

## **STARING AT THE WATER**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 17, 2017

Scripture: Exodus 14:19-31, Romans 14:7-12

We have been through a season of high waters and low ground, strong winds and heavy flooding. Houston and Naples, Port Arthur and Tampa - our unwelcome guests Harvey and Irma, mimicking in-laws who breeze into town, make a mess of the house, and leave with everything in turmoil. High waters and low ground, and there is no getting around what a terrible twosome these storms have been.

How serendipitous that in the wake of these stories of flooding and evacuation, waters parting and coming back in a surge that the church's calendar reminds us of the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, the stories found in the book of Exodus that remind us of our forebears' journey in faith and one of the keystone stories of our identity as God's people, the flight from captivity.

This year the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt is remembered in the Christian lectionary at the same time that our Jewish brothers and sisters are celebrating Rosh Hashanah this coming week, the Jewish New Year, followed by Yom Kippur the Day of Atonement. So these are holy days for many of us and a time to remember the defining stories of our identity and location in the story God is telling about us, a story that has a tendency to repeat itself generation after generation.

As we travel in the story to the banks of the Red Sea, we are at one of those points in the Bible where something so big and so defining is happening that it is a story fundamental to our faith. Like the Creation itself or the healing stories, the narratives of Jesus birth, and certainly the story of the resurrection, we stand before these stories awe struck and glassy-eyed not quite sure of what we are seeing.

Like standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or in the shadow of Mt. Everest we feel the shudder of being overwhelmed by what's there. Or like in the birthing room when the yelp of the first breath hits the little one's lungs.

We should have known it was coming to culmination. This story of the exodus and the mighty acts that accompanied in it. They were slaves in Egypt, the economic underpinning of a great empire. And then Moses, the dreamer, the one whose face was still burned from facing that fiery bush that was not consumed, came along with his confrontations of Pharaoh. Moses, and his plagues, turning the Nile into blood, the swarms of locusts and fierce destruction, and then the Passover where every first born Egyptian child was swept away in a sickness unto death, inexplicably selective except for blood on the lintel, God's mysterious intervention.

It was enough to wear Pharaoh down. Poor old Pharaoh, who grieved his own first born and wanted nothing more than to be rid of these annoying and impossible slaves, and their ambassador Moses. So Pharaoh let God's people go and off they went with everything they could carry, babes in arms, pots and pans, refugees headed for the Red Sea.

No sooner had they left the concentration camps in Egypt than Pharaoh decided he could not live without the economic backbone of his public works projects, and so he sent his fleetest of chariots and strongest of soldiers to round up the slaves now with a head start struggling toward the sea.

There they were at the edge of Egypt, passing the signs on the roadside saying "Now leaving Egypt. Thanks for coming, See you again soon." And Moses and the exiles, a ragtag army, lumbered their way as night fell, camping at the water's edge ready to make their move in the morning, while all the time the wheels of the Egyptian chariots were grinding on the rough sand not far behind.

According to the story an angel kept watch, two angels in fact, behind and before, a buffer between the Israelites and Pharaoh's soldiers, a sacred cloud and an angel or two keeping watch and staving off attack.

Now anyone who has read this story to an eight-year-old knows that it is rife with inconsistencies, puzzling questions emerge that never get answered. Like... how is it that the slaves on foot were able to get so far ahead of the Egyptians who had horse drawn chariots?

And what about all those Egyptian soldiers drowned in the sea? Didn't God love them too?

And... can't God's work be accomplished without bloodshed or loss of life?

And how is it that God parted those waters. Was it a mighty wind that did it... a tornado... a hurricane? And did the winds have a name like Harvey or Irma? Or was this some freakish exception to the laws of nature, a once in a ten-thousand-year occurrence?

Some of you will be willing to simply call it a mystery, a mighty act of God, something you must take on faith, something that the Bible reports and we either believe or we don't, like "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

But go with me for a moment into the story, that night that the angel stood before and behind, and the darkness and the pillar of cloud stood between us and our slave masters come to get us.

Morning as the Bible understands it is between 2:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., four hours, and by the end of the morning, in those terms, the crossing was over, and soon the chase began as the Egyptians raced headlong and horse-long into the sea which became a storm surging nightmare.

Rewind the clock to 1:59 a.m. that moment before the crossing began, before the morning in Biblical terms. Moses having told them what they would do and where their freedom lay... on the other side of that deep and churning sea in front of them, that had not yet parted. As on the Passover night Israel would have to trust that God was in their midst, that whatever happened God would stand with them, go with them, be with them through whatever lay ahead, unknown as that might be. There were angels to make the way for them, and Moses told them that the angel and the cloud would guard them and guide them. All they had to do was to take the first step and God would clear the way.

When my mother died, our family traveled from the church to the cemetery in a car behind the hearse. It was the custom of the St. Joseph Police Department to provide a motorcycle escort with any funeral cortege going through the city. Two police officers on big Harleys would leapfrog from one stoplight to the next, lights flashing, until the hearse and family car were past. They did this all the way out to the city's limits where the cemetery was located.

My mother was no dignitary or office holder, just an ordinary woman, my mom... but a child of God, who had died and was on her last journey. So, the police in our town gave her a motorcycle escort, as if she were a VIP. It was a courtesy afforded everyone in the community, arranged by the funeral director, no doubt, probably safer for cars that would creep through red lights to keep up with the others going to the cemetery, and I have to say an act of dignity and safe keeping that was appreciated by all of us in the family at a vulnerable time in life.

That angel and that cloud of presence that made the way for the exiles fleeing were no doubt much-appreciated signs of dignity and safe keeping for those Israelites in the darkness of the morning at that vulnerable time in their life when some divine assurance would have been much appreciated.

My friend Camille Cook Murray, pastor at the Georgetown Presbyterian Church, notes that, "While multiple agents may have been working together [in the Red Sea crossing], this [account] is fundamentally not about Moses' leadership but about the Lord's work."<sup>1</sup> The *Egyptians* even came to recognize that fact when they called a retreat and tried to reverse course as the waters billowed around them. When the wheels of their chariots were clogged in the mud they cried out, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for *the Lord* is fighting for them against Egypt." (A foxhole expression of faith, but at least a valid confession - though too late to make a difference).

Pharaoh's soldiers represented slavery and oppression, bondage and injustice. And God in this story, and by general disposition stands on the side of the oppressed at the Red Sea.

All of this is important to note, but the thing that really astounds me is what happens as the clock strikes 2:00 a.m., that moment that the Bible reckons morning breaks - that moment that the writer of Exodus cites as the time Israel started crossing the Red Sea.

Wind the clock back one more time to 1:59 a.m. that morning that Moses urged the people to step out on the water and trust in their God to deliver them to the other side, safe and sound.

God is taking their side, ready to deliver them but for them to get from where they are to where God wants them to be, they have to move their feet and hold onto the kids, and steady grandma, and wipe away the tears and walk out onto that wet and sandy course that is the sea bed, with the fish jumping from the water to the sandy path, all the way across, step by step, until they reached the other side.

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy and his old dad Henry in their quest for the Holy Grail have come to a mountain gap, a sheer cliff where there is no bridge to connect from where they are to where they must go. Henry explains to Indy that he must step out onto what appears to be thin air, and that by so doing a way will appear. Don't worry, just do it. Well, Indy is a bit reluctant, to say the least, and just to be sure, he even throws a little sand out before him to see if he can see the invisible bridge he must cross to get to the other side – walking on air. But it is finally only when he overcomes his hesitation and steps out onto the invisible bridge that he finds that one step in faith leads to another.

The worst enemy of God in the story of the Red Sea Crossing are not the Egyptians but the fear that grips the Israelites.

At 1:59 a.m. there is no sign of deliverance... save, perhaps, a gentle stirring of the wind...  
no cavalry sounding trumpets in the background making their way to the rescue,  
no parting of the waters just yet.  
It is only with the first step into the water,  
only with the trust that places our lives in God's hands,  
only the step we take with everything at stake that allows God to do what God is ready to do for the Israelites.

In order to capture the meaning of this story for ourselves, we must ask what it would have meant to be standing on that shoreline that day, staring at the water ready to swallow us and Pharaoh's troops rushing toward us from behind. There we are staring at the water. No way to go back, no certainty about what lies ahead, except that God has promised to be with us in the cloud and the presence. The question is whether we would run back to slavery or would we have the courage to set foot on the damp sand and trust that God sees farther than we do?<sup>2</sup>

I wish I could tell you that the larger story ends happily ever after, but we know the truth and that is that no sooner were the Israelites on the other side than they began to grouse about the manna and the quails and they whined about a revisionist version of being a slave in the good old days when the whip's lash on their backs was hardly a lick and their past was recast in their minds as a pleasant story of construction work at the service of compassionate straw bosses.

It was hard to leave their old life, to leave their old identities behind, all the things that they had gathered and kept mixed with the memories they would take with them... not to mention the things they left behind... the stillborns they had buried in Egyptian soil, the buildings they had built on the back of their labor, the place they saw in their mind's eye as they gazed over their shoulders from whence they had escaped.

Perhaps they were reluctant to trust the God who promised to save them. They were unwilling to trade the certain identity of slave and victim for the uncertain identity of being one of God's chosen ones. Maybe they forgot to wash the proverbial mud from their sandals as they stepped out from the sea on the far side.

I imagine in their longing for what was now past, they frustrated God no end because their reluctance to move forward was what was keeping them from the promises God had made to them about the future.

We all of us come to times and seasons in our lives when we realize that we are standing in God's way because we are reluctant to really trust that God could love us so much as to meet us in the midst of the hard things we must do, like urging us to take the first step on a journey to the other side where God will go with us.

The new job that beckons though we do not yet see it. The child who calls forth from us things we had never thought ourselves capable of doing. The opportunity that comes that seems out of our wheelhouse, but we can't get it out of our head. The student who interrupts studies and takes the year in Africa that will change her life, though it will be a year of hardship and challenge. The retirement that seems from the near shore like a kind of dying, but that in reality is a new kind of life. The simple tasks we have to master to move on from the stroke, to come back from the heart attack, to lean into the grief we must endure in order to get to the hope that lies before us if only we will take the first step.

It is always so tempting to stay on the near side of the yet un-parted water, where we are safe and comfortable, and deaf to the hoofbeats of Pharaoh's chariots. Were it not for the promise that God will meet us when we take the first step, it is so tempting to stay on the near side. But God lies before us even as God stands with us, and wise is the one who listens to what his heart is telling him when that is what his head wants to deny.

Maya Angelou's poem, *Touched by an Angel*, could have been written by one who made that sacred crossing through the Red Sea.

She writes,

We unaccustomed to courage  
exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness  
until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight to liberate us to life

Love arrives  
and in its train come ecstasies  
old memories of pleasure  
ancient history of pain.  
Yet if we are bold,  
love strikes away the chains of fear  
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity  
in the flush of love's light  
we dare be brave  
And suddenly we see  
that love costs all we are  
and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love  
which sets us free.

What are you doing with those dry feet on this shore staring at the water at the breaking of dawn?  
Don't you see that with your first step, and with God's sure promise, the waters will part?

By our faith and in God's love, (Oh my Lord!) the waters will part.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2017.

---

<sup>1</sup> Camille Cook Murray, *Moveable Feast*, Sept 17, 2017. Unpublished paper. p 3

<sup>2</sup> I have paraphrased Camille Murray's paper again here.