

October 7, 2018
The Song of the Sea
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Exodus 14:5-29

⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" ⁶ So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; ⁷ he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. ⁸ The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. ⁹ The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

¹⁰ As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. ¹¹ They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." ¹³ But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers."

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went

into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ 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."

[The Pursuers Drowned]

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

Every week I feel like there are five to seven Bible texts you really need to hear to get the context for one. Just like me at the gym. My trainer feels like I need to do five to seven sets of my circuit, if I'm going to really benefit from being there. Like you, I prefer two. I'll settle for three. But I'm not going to tolerate five or six or seven.

This week I'd have added verses from Luke 8, Colossians 1, and all of Exodus 15. Exodus 15 is *The Song of the Sea* (see how I'm doing it anyway), the liturgy Israel composed to memorialize the Red Sea miracle. The people's fussing and complaining is conveniently left out of the song – appropriately so, as it is a song about God's faithfulness, not theirs.

History becomes liturgy, the way events become stories. The liturgy is sung and sung and sung until it can be sung by heart. The singing becomes the act of faith, so that when trouble closes in again – because it surely will again – the words and tune of faith are limber, ready to be flexed again at a moment's notice.

Let's pray together:

God of heaven and earth, God of land and sea, God of Tranquility and Terror, we never leave your reach. We are never outside your sight. Would that we might walk and breathe and work and rest inside this truth we know for sure on days this light and full of peace. Amen.

One of my neighbors has two young kids and sometimes we'll visit on my driveway in the evening. She'll procrastinate going home because she hates bath and bedtime. "It's awful," she says. "They act shocked and offended every single night, as if bedtime is something I invented that day." Her kids are like the Hebrews on nearly every page of the Old Testament, positively shocked that God expects them to do anything they don't want to do, something difficult or dangerous or simply unpleasant.

It's been 400 years since Joseph. His descendant, Moses, was raised in pharaoh's palace, until he ran away – for good reason. Moses is an old man when he meets his God in the wilderness. God talks from inside a burning bush. As they talk here, God and Moses will talk to one another for the next forty years, using bushes, rods, and shepherd's hooks, snakes and rocks and quail and plagues.

It's the plagues that turn the story from Egypt towards promised land, from slavery towards freedom. Plagues of frogs and grasshoppers and oozy skin sores, water turned to blood, hail and darkness, and dead baby boys. It's gross. But that's the Bible. All of the plagues are sung about as battles between the gods – Pharaoh's and Moses' gods. Pharaoh finally concedes. When the Hebrew baby boys survive – Passover, remember – Pharaoh tells him they can go. They're barely gone a month; Pharaoh reneges on the deal. He musters his entire army to go and fetch them back.

Geographically the text gets a little tricky from here. Theologically, it does not. The Hebrews are *between a rock and a hard place*. "*Hell if I do and hell if I don't*," my mother called it. Like the choice between being eaten by a lion and being eaten by a bear. *I'd rather the lion eat the bear and leave me out of it, thank you very much*. The sea to the front, Pharaoh's army to the rear. They can drown or be cut down by the sword.

They do what people do. They panic. They cry. They blame their leadership. They fall out of formation. There's noise. Chaos. "*Were there no graves in Egypt?*" they complain to Moses, which is to say, "*Why didn't you kill us before we walked all this way?*" Moses does what leaders do – fathers, mothers, teachers, platoon sergeants. He yells at them to "SHUT UP!"

But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again." And in saying so, Moses does what? He makes promises he has no way of keeping at the time he's making them. He speaks for God before God has spoken to him, about this particular problem anyway. What's Moses' aim, do you think? I think he wants them to calm down. Nothing good is born of panic. We're not our best selves during panic. Nonsense makes sense when we're panicked.

Back when my paramedic sister rode an ambulance, she'd tell me such nonsense. Like the gunshot victim who fought her as she tried to start an IV – because he was terrified of needles. "You have a bullet in your gut, sir," she had to remind him. Is Moses panicked? Maybe. We aren't given to know how he feels. We know only what he does. What he does is, he leads as best he can. Because how we feel need not determine what we do. I appreciate that about him.

God, apparently, not so much. Moses offers this encouragement to the people, to which God responds, with kind of an exasperated tone (to my mind), "*Why are you stopping? Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go!*"

A clown followed four-year-old Mariah into a room at a birthday party once. When she turned around and saw him, she literally ran up her daddy's body like a squirrel up a tree. There's no mystery why kids are scared of clowns. Clowns are terrifying. Being trapped between a sword and the sea is terrifying, as Syrian women and children on the beaches of Turkey today know better than us.

And it seems awfully privileged of God to ask, "*why are you stopping?*" assuming God has the advantage, the privilege, of being able to see well beyond the border of that moment. A similar biblical moment comes to mind from Luke chapter 8. Jesus and his disciples are in a boat crossing the sea of Galilee. Jesus falls asleep and a storm comes up. The disciples are sure they'll die. Just like the Hebrews, they blame their leader for not caring if they die. Jesus wakes up, looks around and responds much the same as in Exodus, "*For God's sake, what are you so afraid of?*" As if to say, *it's just a little storm*. It's just a little water; it's just death by drowning. You act like dying is the worst that might happen to you. *What are you so afraid of?*

Only that's not what he says in Luke. He says, *why are you so afraid?* in Mark. In Luke he says, *where is your faith?* And it's so, so easy to rush to verse 16, to the miracle, to consider too lightly that God is instructing Moses to instruct these people, tens or hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children to flex the faith (which they've just put on, remember), to step into the water and keep walking no matter what, knowing full well that as their feet sink in the sand, the sword is gaining on them.

Again, how does this fit the broad biblical narrative? Old Testament miracle stories are the bread and butter of American evangelical Christian nationalism. From them I learned that God always rescues us and that our enemies will inevitably recognize ours as the one true God. Extrapolated from there was the understanding that we are the one true nation, the one true people called and blessed to lead the world. And being the one true and faithful people, we can depend on God in any given situation in which we are trapped between any given sword and sea, any particular crisis, to be miraculously evacuated to the safety reserved for God's chosen people.

Long before that was the American narrative, it was Israel's narrative until exile. It was Israel's narrative in the days of David. But this story took its final shape in exile. And exile shadows every story that leads to it. Even the people telling the story know that *God with us* does not mean *God delivers us from every earthly toil and trouble*, that *God with us* does not mean *we shall not taste death*.

You've read the story. How many of them died in the wilderness? Every single one of them. As will all of us. In this chapter, they believe themselves free of Egypt only to find out they weren't free of Pharaoh. They got free of Pharaoh and his army to discover, just two chapters later, they are not free of starvation. Right after the Song of the Sea, they're begging to go back to slavery. Slavery to the very people who just chased them with swords. Only they don't call it *slavery*, do they? They call it *sitting around the fleshpots of Egypt feasting on cucumbers and melons and fish*.

Friends, over and over and over again, we will take the slavery we know over the trouble we don't. Forgetting the gospel we knew for sure yesterday, last week, last year. The event and person of Jesus has taken away every cause for fear. Death holds no threat over us. The exile may shadow the Old Testament. The cross shadows the whole story, from Genesis forward. We live ever in that shadow.

Jesus appeared caught between capitulation to Empire and certain death. Momentarily, but only momentarily, he prays for a third option. It doesn't come. He doesn't panic. He rises. And we will too. So we need not panic either.

Jesus rose and we will too. He rose from that prayer and moved, calmly, fearlessly, purposefully, intentionally, in the direction of death, so that we can too – seeing, believing and knowing that death at the hands of this world is hardly the worst thing, hardly something worth panicking over. After all, we live these lives and our life together in the shadow of the cross, from whence we know that death is barely the beginning.

Would you pray with me?