

Not a Walk in the Park
Exodus 14:19-31
September 13, 2020

I cannot tell you how happy and thankful I am to be here in this sanctuary with all of you today. For six months I have sat at my dining room table and communicated with you through a camera phone. It was a strange and challenging experience. So, yes, I love the fact that we are here together in worship once again. I have missed preaching to live people who respond back to me. Your response back to me is so much a part of this dynamic experience. Preaching into a phone or computer is sort of like throwing out a sock full of gasoline and watch it die silently on the floor. But enough of that! Here we are ready to reach out to the promised land.

So where should I begin our journey today? I wondered about this! It's kind of like Easter, as Emma reminded us at our Session meeting, a new beginning, a resurrection. But that's not where God led me. Instead the Spirit led me back to Moses as he leads the people out of slavery and bondage to the promised land. In so many ways we may feel like we have been in Egypt, slaves and bound by a plague that has kept us silent, alone, scared, and helpless. We want to get out of here and get to the promised land, don't we? Back to normal! I suggest we follow Moses and see where he takes us today!

Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt by way of the wilderness toward what today is called the Gulf of Aqaba. The bible tells us that God presence was with them by way of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. What happened next in the story has been a rich vein of gold mined by several moviemakers in Hollywood. Charlton Heston's Moses in the 1959 movie ***The Ten Commandments*** gave us perhaps the most colourful attempt to capture the miracle of the Red Sea crossing. (Slide 1) Moses points his staff over the sea and it opens to the swelling music score. Walls of water stand vertically enabling the people to walk through the path to the other side. The Egyptians pursue them into the sea but it turns back on them and they are all drowned. We used to sing this song at VBC: (Slide 2)

*Well, all of God's people came to the Red Sea
With Pharaoh's army coming after me*

*I raised my rod, stuck it in the sand
And all of God's people walked across dry land.*

*(chorus) Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Oh baby, Let my people go! Huh
Yeah yeah yeah... (2x)*

Whether the actual site of this crossing was the Red Sea or as some say, the Sea of Reeds, we cannot possibly know. What is known is that this would have taken a huge step of faith to walk down that path across a sea bed. In so many ways this is a metaphor for just how challenging God's call to us in Christ is for each of us today. Many outside the faith communities look upon believers as soft and gullible to believe in a book filled with such fairy tales. They see us as people who have found a crutch for life's difficulties. But in fact, as this sea metaphor reminds us, nothing could be further from the truth. The walk of faith demands discipline and strength, walking in hope.

But this is no simple story. In fact, what we have here in Exodus 14 are two stories stitched together by two different sets of writers and editors. In the one story, usually attributed to the priestly writers, God is the supreme Lord who acts through his servant Moses. In this account Moses stretches his hands over the sea and God causes a wind to blow all night. It causes a path in the sea so Israel can walk across dry land. When the Egyptians follow them into the path Moses puts out his hand again and the waters return and drown the entire Egyptian army. In this account God is the powerful actor through Moses.

In the other story, usually referred to as the Yahwist tradition, the angel of the Lord stands guard over Israel with a pillar of cloud and fire. The cloud and darkness kept Egypt at bay. In the morning the angel causes confusion in the Egyptian ranks and their chariot wheels get stuck. In the resulting chaos many of the Egyptians die in the sea and their bodies lie floating near the shore. But the worst possible result is prevented; God prevents a war developing between Egypt and Israel. There is no parting of the sea in the Yahwist story. Nor is Moses mentioned.

Our natural response is "which one is true"? Well obviously, we need both stories to remind us that God saves both Israel and Egypt. God

is both warrior and peacemaker. Scripture leaves the tension in the accounts by stitching them together.

At another level this is a story of God defeating the chaos. The sea is often portrayed in the bible as the source of chaos, political upheaval and death. Here in Exodus the sea is swept aside by God to create a path toward salvation for Israel. God conquers the sea. God defeats the anti-god forces, here in Exodus indentified by Pharaoh and his forces who are bent on Israel's destruction.

Moreover, there is also a picture here of a second creation. God's wind, or if you like God's Spirit, blows over the emptiness in Genesis one's creation story and creates a universe. Here God's wind blows over the sea to create a new beginning for Abraham's descendents. The message in this story for Israel and for us is that God remains powerful and in charge. God's Spirit continues to brood over our world, its chaos and disorder, and seeks to bring about order and peace. Yes, even today as find ourselves in the grip of the powerful force of a virus which has brought death, fear and economic hardship to millions. The forces of chaos and death, who work against God's plan for peace and justice in the world, are not the ultimate victors.

No, this is no walk in the park for these folks facing the sea of water and a path over the sea bed. To step into the muddy floor of the former sea and walk across to the land on the other side would have taken great courage and faith. For you and me today who face the daunting challenge of following Christ, in the face of the challenges of chaos and death, we take encouragement from Israel's story of redemption. Today we live in a society that has sought to remove God to the margins. Egypt seems invincible. But take heart, the sea doesn't triumph! This Exodus story reminds us that God's path, however difficult, remains one that holds the key to making sense of our lives. Christ promises freedom and hope. And if we ever needed to hear this truth it is surely today amid all the fear and hesitation that grips our society. God promises meaning in our sometimes strange and disordered world. Come, follow me, he calls to us, and I will be with you, even to the end of the age.

Amen