

Promise at the Sea
Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29
Matthew 2:13-15

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pastor Doug Browne
September 30, 2018

Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, ‘What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?’ So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.

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. 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? 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.’ 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. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.’

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. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. 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. 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.’

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.’ 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. 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. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Matthew 2:13-15

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’

Let me tell you a story.

A man was walking alone with his young son in the dark. They walked single-file to stay on the narrow path. When the man sensed a robber ahead, he moved his son behind him to shield him from danger. When the man sensed a wolf behind them, he moved his son in front of him, for the same reason. When the man sensed both a thief and a wolf at the same time, the man lifted his son onto his shoulders. The son was confused by being jostled back and forth by his father, but he trusted his father to keep him safe on the dark path.¹

The Hebrew people's escape from Egypt may seem straightforward, but, for the people experiencing it, it was a rollercoaster, and not the fun kind of rollercoaster, either.

They were slaves in Egypt.

Then came this rabble-rouser from the desert, Moses, talking about words from a burning bush. Moses may have been born a Jew, but he had grown up in the Pharaoh's palace. He claimed to be speaking for God, but who was he? Was he really a Hebrew? The Hebrew people might be forgiven some doubt here.

Moses demanded in God's name that the Pharaoh let the Hebrew people leave Egypt and go into the desert. The Pharaoh refused. And I have to imagine that at least some of the Hebrew people breathed a sigh of relief. Life in Egypt might not have been good, but it beat starving or dying of thirst in the desert, right?

Then come the Plagues, one after another.

¹ Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 14:19, quoted in Cory Driver's commentary on *Working Preacher*.

Moses strikes the water of the Nile River, the source of all the drinkable water in Egypt, and the water is turned to blood. The fish all die, and the river, running right through the middle of the entire Egyptian civilization, stinks of blood and death and decay.²

Then come plagues of frogs, fleas, and flies.³ These successive plagues do not go into the land of Goshen, where the Hebrews lived, but they had to have been truly terrible. Pharaoh promises to let the Hebrews go if Moses will get rid of the flies. Moses does, or, rather God does, but Pharaoh changes his mind.

Next comes a plague on all the Egyptians' livestock, killing most of their horses and donkeys and camels and cattle and sheep and goats. None of the Hebrews' livestock are affected, only the Egyptians'.⁴ Pharaoh still says no.

Next God strikes at the Egyptian's own bodies. Festering boils break out on Egyptian people and their remaining animals alike. Pharaoh is still stubborn.⁵

I'm sure that the ordinary Egyptian people blamed the Hebrews. You know, "If it weren't for uppity Hebrews like that Moses, everything would be fine." "If you Hebrews would just stay in your proper place, there wouldn't be any problems."

And the Hebrew people are watching all of this, and saying, "Excuse us. It really isn't fair that we're the political football here."

Next God warns the Hebrew people to bring all their livestock and anything they value inside. God sends a thunderstorm of hail and lightning, the worst that has ever come to the land of Egypt. Entire crops are destroyed in the fields. And the hailstorm just keeps coming.

² Exodus 7:17-18.

³ Exodus 7:25-8:32.

⁴ Exodus 9:1-7.

⁵ Exodus 9:8-12.

Pharaoh calls for Moses and tells him that he will let the Hebrews go. Moses prays to God, and God stops the storm. And Pharaoh changes his mind. Again.⁶

Moses goes back to Pharaoh, and tells him that a plague of locusts will come next on the hit parade. Pharaoh's officials beg him to let these people go – no slave people, however wonderful, could possibly be worth Egypt being destroyed. But Pharaoh says no. So, God sends the locusts as promised. The locusts eat every bit of grain, every bit of plant life that remains in Egypt, and fill the people's houses. It looks like the floors are moving everywhere you go, except in Goshen, where the Hebrews live.

Pharaoh calls for Moses and tells him that he will let the Hebrews go. Moses prays to God, and God sends a wind that carries all the locusts into the sea. And Pharaoh changes his mind. Again.⁷

So God plunges the land of Egypt into darkness for three days. No one can see anything for three days. The first thing that God did in creating the world is temporarily undone. Pharaoh tells Moses that the Hebrew people can go out into the wilderness, but they aren't allowed to take their flocks and herds of livestock. They would need those to survive out there and to make sacrifices to God. That is not good enough.

The last of the Ten Plagues is the worst. All the Hebrew people celebrate a lamb dinner and brush the blood of the lamb over the doorpost. The Egyptians do not. And that night at midnight, every firstborn son in Egypt dies, except for those of the Hebrews. The Pharaoh's son dies. The firstborn son of the lowliest slave dies. And every firstborn son in between, except for the Hebrews. The firstborn males of all the animals die, except for the animals of the Hebrews.

⁶ Exodus 9:13-32. The Scriptures are quite specific about which crops were destroyed and which weren't, because they hadn't come up yet.

⁷ Exodus 10:1-20.

Pharaoh tells Moses and the Hebrews to get out of Egypt, and to take with them everyone and everything that is theirs. He wants no part of this rollercoaster getting any worse.

After this, God tells the Hebrews to go to their Egyptian neighbors and “ask” for their gold and silver jewelry, on the way out of town. They do go to their neighbors, and they get the jewelry, in a time when jewelry was how you stored and carried your wealth. They’re now rich. They leave town.

All the Hebrew people leave Egypt and start walking toward the Sinai Peninsula, *en route* to the Promised Land. They are led on the way by a pillar of cloud during the day, and a pillar of light at night.⁸

After the Hebrews have left, the Pharaoh says, “What have I done?” He takes his army and goes chasing the Hebrews, to bring them back into slavery. The Hebrews are trapped between the sea and Pharaoh’s army.

The rollercoaster has come crashing back down again. The Hebrews go to Moses and they do not mince words. “Did you bring us out here into the wilderness to die, because of some shortage of graves in Egypt?” They want to roll back the clock, go back to Egypt. Go back to slavery.

Moses tells them to be still and see what God’s going to do.

The pillar of cloud and light doesn’t make a noise. It just quietly moves between the Hebrew camp and the Egyptian camp. Like the father in the story moves himself between his son and danger.

⁸ Exodus 13:21-22.

And God tells Moses the opposite of what Moses has just told the people. “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to move forward!”⁹

God has Moses stretch out his hand, and the waters of the sea part. The people walk through the middle of the sea, dry-shod.

Then Moses stretches out his hand again, and the waters of the sea come crashing back down on the Egyptian army, destroying it utterly.

This story is quite a rollercoaster. It’s kind of like the rollercoasters that some of live through in our lives, isn’t it? We, too, are often ready to ask God not for a way through, but for a way back.

A way back to before the diagnosis.

A way back to before we said or did the catastrophic thing that broke a relationship.

A way back to before the life-changing event.

A way back to before.

But that’s not how life works, is it?

It moves forward, not back.

As we walk our paths in this life, we can’t always see the way ahead, and the way God leads us can be very confusing. God calls us all to freedom from sin and death, including freedom from structural sin like slavery in Egypt.

⁹ Exodus 14:15, my paraphrase.

But sometimes the path to get there is confusing. The faithful thing to do is to stop standing still, or crying out to God to go back to what was, and to move forward into what God is doing right now.

A man was walking alone with his young son in the dark. They walked single-file to stay on the narrow path. When the man sensed a robber ahead, he moved his son behind him to shield him from danger. When the man sensed a wolf behind them, he moved his son in front of him, for the same reason. When the man sensed both a thief and a wolf at the same time, the man lifted his son onto his shoulders. The son was confused by being jostled back and forth by his father, but he trusted his father to keep him safe on the dark path.

Let us all do likewise.

AMEN.