

## Ours the Journey *Serving the Egyptians*

Raise your hand if you know how to swim. Do you remember when you were just learning and went into the deep water for the first time? Kind of scary, right? There's a reason we have idioms like "I think I'm in over my head," and "they really threw you right into the deep end, didn't they." Facing the deep end of the water is frightening when you are first learning to swim.

In ancient times deep water, specifically the sea, was associated with chaos, disorder and the unknown. The Bible begins with these words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters." In the verses which follow in Genesis chapter one, God speaks and creates order out of the dark immensity of all that scary water which existed from the beginning.

For the ancient Hebrews to say that the Spirit of God was moving "over the surface of the waters" even at the dawn of Creation, was to proclaim God's power over the most threatening experiences of the unknown. And yet, repeatedly throughout scripture God's people forget that God's Spirit always moves across the face of the deep.

Last week we began the series "Ours the Journey" by considering the encounter Moses had in the wilderness at Horeb with a burning bush. You'll remember that God sent Moses back to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to let God's people go. In this morning's scripture we pick up the story eleven chapters later -- after Moses confronts Pharaoh, after the plagues are visited upon Egypt, after the first Passover, and after the Israelites gather their few belongings and follow Moses away from Egypt and out into the wilderness. When we pick up the story today the people of God are in the wilderness, the Egyptians who were their slave masters are hot on their heels and they find themselves at the edge of the sea with nowhere to turn. I

don't know if these recently liberated slaves know how to swim or not, but it's clear they're terrified of all that water.

The text says that the people of Israel look back and see that the Egyptians are pursuing them. Immediately they begin complaining against God and questioning Moses, saying, "What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" You see, given a choice between facing the depths of disorder which lie in front of them or the certainty of slavery which lies behind them, the Israelites choose slavery over freedom.

Fear does strange things to our ability to think clearly, doesn't it? It keeps us satisfied in the familiarity of what we've already adjusted to from our past -- to the point that we completely distrust the future. It can paralyze our logic, thinking and actions. Research indicates that fearful people are extremely hesitant to explore new concepts or embrace other possibilities -- even when the well-known past to which we gravitate is enslavement. We cannot embrace liberation if we continue to live in fear.

Is that what's happening in our text today?

Imagine the scene for a minute. Horses' hooves pound the dirt, chariots spew sand and gravel as the distance closes between the pursuers and the pursued. Egyptians cry out in aggression, Israelites cry out in fear, the wind howls, and in due time, waters churn and roll back. Add to that the pyrotechnics of the pillar of fire and cloud, obscuring vision, heightening confusion, and you can see that Exodus 14 describes one big, chaotic, *scary* mess.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of all this, Moses' gives remarkable instructions to the terrified: "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"

(Exodus 14:13-14). The most technologically equipped fighting force in the world is now upon them and the Israelites are told to just stand there and wait.

An order to fight we can understand. Permission to “run away, run away!” (as outnumbered armies in Monty Python movies shout in unison), this makes perfect sense. But keep still? Watch and wait? Stand firm? What good will that do?

Rather than giving in to the obvious response of flight or fight, the people of God are urged to simply be witnesses: “**to observe God’s power and might**. This detail underscores the fact that all the agency in this story belongs to God,”<sup>2</sup> not Moses or the people. This is the LORD’s victory alone. Through this victory, the people of Israel will finally see clearly the **weakness** of the Egyptians, to whom they have given too much credit. They will see that the LORD’s glory far surpasses any of Pharaoh’s claims either to military prowess or to the status of deity. “This contest between God whose breath moved upon the waters at Creation and Pharaoh, who claims to be a deity but actually relies on technology, economic exploitation and institutionalized violence to rule, this **contest of powers** has been building throughout Exodus 1-13 right up to this showdown at the sea. And we are about to see God’s breath move upon the waters again – instilling God’s control in the midst of this chaotic scene.

There is an old African-American Spiritual that comes to mind:

Wade in the water

Wade in the water children

Wade in the water.

God’s gonna trouble the water.....

God troubles the water in a BIG way at the edge of the Red Sea. And the path to freedom leads through that water.

The good news is that God makes a way—even when we are afraid. Just as God cleared a dry path for the Israelites to get through and then closed the waters over their oppressors, God continues to make a way through whatever frightening waters tempt us to turn back toward an Egypt-like slavery when we hesitate on our own journey toward liberation.

A child experiencing the freedom of increasing maturity often lurches forward toward that freedom only to turn back in fear to the skirts of a protective mother. A teenager stepping out into adult responsibility and privilege feels the pull of childish comforts where the “big people” assume all the consequences for trials and disasters that arise. A young adult longs for the freedom of his own apartment but hesitates when remembering how his parents cook all the meals and do his laundry. A student is lured by the excitement of launching a career but is still enamored with the exuberant community of school comrades and turns back to consider staying in school a bit longer. A job opportunity to follow her heart competes with a woman’s comfortable place at the position where she has been dependably employed for a decade. The examples in life are endless – moving to a new city, entering a new relationship, watching our children grow up and move out, severing ties with old relationships that were not good for us, again and again in life we are faced with the choice between turning back to what we know but does not make us free or stepping forward into the dark immensity of the sea.

It is true for us in our individual lives. It was true for the Israelites as a people who made the daring move from slavery to freedom. And it is true for our faith communities in this age as well.

Rev. Sharron Riessinger Blezard makes this passage from Exodus contemporary as she compares the God’s faithful people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church with God’s faithful people standing at the edge of the Red Sea. She says:

Our own Red Sea today is the vast cultural divide that stands between the glory days of the 20th century church and the new reality of a post-Christian age. Yes, there is

a wilderness beyond the waters, and as with the Israelites, there is no turning back. What once worked is no longer viable, and the past wasn't really all that great anyhow.

We are still on a journey, a journey of faith and discipleship. We are a countercultural people—similar to the Israelites in situation—and we DO stand at the edge of a sea of change in our culture and religious landscape. We can't go back to Egypt. To do so would mean certain death of our denominations and our way of being church. To move forward and put a toe into the water, trusting God to give us dry land on which to journey, is to head into a wilderness of uncertainty and discernment. Neither path is easy, and fear of drowning and losing our way as “institutional church” accompanies the change of moving forward.

And yes, there will be casualties. The chariots and warhorses of our way of being church are drowning. It's no great secret that the way we've been church in North America is passing. Our central place in culture does not remain, and the grand army of Christian soldiers moving onward is covered by the waters of change.

But there is hope, always hope. Our God is a God of liberation and salvation. The Creator of the Universe is always making things new and bringing forth new life from the remnant that follows cloud and fire into a new and uncharted land.<sup>3</sup>

Our job is to stand firm as Moses commanded. To trust in God's power to save. And with confidence and trust to keep our eyes on the Lord and our feet moving forward on the dry ground of faith.

If that sounds impossible, if the idea of leaving behind the comforts of what we have known as home is too scary for you, then take a minute to listen to the words of one young adult who did leave home and found herself thrown into the deep end of faith development. You may have read this already this week. It is a portion of a letter Kayla Mueller sent to her parents many months ago. Kayla Mueller was the 26-year old humanitarian worker captured in Syria by ISIS, and killed last month after a long captivity. When her fellow prisoners were released and she was detained she gave them a handwritten letter to deliver to her parents in which she detailed some of her experience of captivity and expressed her deep love and gratitude for her family. This is what she said toward the end of the letter:

*I remember mom always telling me that, all in all, in the end the only one you really have is God. I have come to a place in experience where, in every sense of the word, I have surrendered myself to our creator b/c literally there was no else.... + **by God, and by your prayers, I have felt tenderly cradled in freefall.***

*I have been shown darkness and light and I have learned that **even in prison, one can be free.** I am grateful. I have come to see that there is good in every situation, sometimes we just have to look for it. I pray each day that if nothing else, you have felt a certain closeness + surrender to God as well [and that you] have formed a bond of love and support amongst one another...<sup>4</sup>*

The growth which is possible for us on our journey of life is about so much more than better job offers, bigger apartments, and a more impressive groups of friends. It is ultimately about learning what Kayla did at age 26. Even in prison, one can be free. And as the Hebrews learned at the edge of the sea, even a hundred miles away from Egypt – one can still think and behave like slaves, eager to go back into serving the Egyptians. The key is what the Jewish Midrash on this text calls *bitachon* or *betach*. These two Hebrew words refer to trust and confidence in God. With *betach* we are brave enough to go through the waters into a new way of being in the world. With *bitachon* we experience deep within ourselves that inner peace that allows us to **feel God cradling us in free fall.**

*Bitachon* got the people of Israel through the Red Sea, got them to ignore the pull of returning to serve the Egyptians. As Kayla Mueller said:

*“even in prison,[OR WE MIGHT ADD, EVEN IN THE DEPTHS OF THE SEA] one can be free”*

1 Cameron B.R. Howard, commentary on Exodus 14, [www.WorkingPreacher.org](http://www.WorkingPreacher.org)

2 *ibid.*

3 Rev. Sharron Riessinger Blezard, “Fear of Drowning in the Seas of Change”,  
<http://www.stewardshipoflife.org>

4 *Huffington Post* article, February 10, 2015 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/10/kayla-mueller-faith\\_n\\_6656312.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/10/kayla-mueller-faith_n_6656312.html)

