

Wade in the Water 1: the Red Sea
Genesis 1:1-10
Portions of Exodus 13 & 14

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“And the people of Israel went
into the midst of the sea on dry ground.”
Exodus 14:22

The people of Israel were dry land people.

No city or town of ancient Israel was built on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. They left the sea coast to the Philistines in Old Testament times, and the Romans in New.

Even a moderate sized fresh water lake in Galilee they called a “sea.”

No wonder when they were looking for a metaphor to describe the utter chaos before creation, they used the watery deep – “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2)

They knew water was essential for life – but preferred it in smaller forms, like streams and wells.

The sea was terrifying for this land bound people.

So when the Hebrews escaped from slavery in Egypt, only to find their path blocked by the Red Sea in front of them, with the chariots of Pharaoh coming after them – it was their worst nightmare come real.

The old saying, "caught between a rock and a hard place," might have its origin here.

Have you ever been caught?

Have you been trapped in a vise?

We laugh when the hero in an old movie is trapped in a room with the walls moving, squeezing together, and there is no escape.

But have you been scared to death because no matter what you do, you know you're going to get it in the end from one side or the other?

When have you made some important change in your life, in your job, in your marriage?

You've stepped out in faith and been shot down?

You changed to a great new job – and were laid off a month later.

You tried for years to get your spouse talking about their feelings; and when they finally began to talk, it was to tell you they want a divorce!

You've made exciting plans for retirement after slogging along for years at a less than exciting job, and illness strikes.

You've spent so long mediating between your child and your spouse who have trouble communicating with one another and now neither one of them will speak to you.

Someone you love dies, and you feel like you have no future left.

You are on a journey, a fight for freedom, a fight to be the kind of person you were meant to be and your world falls apart.

Why does Egypt look so good to us at times like these?

Egypt, the Biblical story of the people of Israel and Egypt, is a good metaphor for every time we find ourselves looking back, yearning for what was, remembering - it feels good.

I mean, after all, why go through all the turmoil and the stress and the uprooting of change in our lives only to end up worse than we were in the first place?

You know, it's true for us as it was for Israel in the Wilderness, that if God didn't keep pulling us along relentlessly day and night, pillar and cloud, cloud and pillar, we would scurry back to Egypt the very first time that push came to shove.

Any time you make a major change in your life, don't you want to know before you make it that you will be better off? Safe, secure, successful?

Then suddenly the old oppressor is right there, up ahead, fully armed ready to get you. The old problems, the old opposition, the old anxieties.

It always seems to work the same -- when you decide to take off for freedom, Egypt doesn't just sit there. Egypt reaches right out and follows you and pretty soon you are caught between the old oppression coming up behind and the unyielding barrier ahead, that won't let you go on any further.

This happens whether you are by the Red Sea or in Iraq, or the Gaza Strip, or the parent of teenagers, or facing the economic uncertainties of 2008, or in shock every time you fill the tank with gas!

Fear and anxiety sneaks up even in the best of times. When you think life is good, you can still be trapped.

What happens then?

The people of Israel moaned and groaned and fell apart at the seams.

"Are there no graves in Egypt, that you brought us out to die in this wilderness?"

They were caught and they knew it.

"It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness. What is this that you have done to us?"

But there is something missing here. Just as there was something missing when Pharaoh had second thoughts and said to his servants, "What is this that we have done?"

What's missing is God's part in all this.

Something important is missing in the assumption that Moses brought them out and Pharaoh let them go.

Now there is some truth in both of those statements, but neither one goes far enough.

You see. Israel and Pharaoh share certain characteristics in common.

One of them is that both have short memories.

And the other one is that both Israel and Pharaoh continue to believe, against all the evidence, that they have total control over their own lives.

When caught between the pounding surf of the sea and the thundering chariots of Pharaoh, Israel will change, or Israel will die.

Oh they thought they had already been changed and freed by following Moses out of Egypt but their hearts were still the fearful hearts of slaves.

You see change is not some automatic process which once set going just continues to the end.

So that if you just do certain things in the right way, everything will be alright finally.

When you are facing the waters and you can't go around and you can't go over and you can't go back and only the intervention in your life of a force outside of yourself and greater than yourself, that loves you, will help you pass through the waters.

God's answer to you when you are between a rock and a hard place and scurrying around frantically looking for some way out, and crying is two-fold.

It is found in verses fourteen and fifteen of Exodus fourteen.

The first part of God's answer is: "**Be still.**"

Which is the best thing you can ever hear when you are panicked. Be still the Lord is with you: calm down, pray, think, take a deep breath, be still.

And then - "Tell the people to **go forward.**"

Face the barrier, wade in the water and move on.

Wade in the water, children.

And they did. Terrified, still they did it – they went forward.

So they passed through the waters and they came out of the waters a new people.

For it was a sort of baptism.

They became a people.

They were changed into a people when they came to accept that they had nothing left but trust.

Reliance on a God who chooses to work through very common and ordinary things in your life like an east wind blowing all night but then, every now and then adds a few special touches for your own particular needs, who opens up just the littlest, tiniest hole in that solid wall that's in front of you and says, "Come on, slip through."

And God does it not because you are so great, not because you are such a firm and staunch believer, but just because you are you.

Which brings me to my two closing points. The first one is that Israel was not saved by faith, was not. In fact, Israel had very little faith at all when Israel was saved by the Red Sea.

Israel's memory was short.

Israel did not know how to trust.

Israel wanted to turn around and run back to Egypt.

Israel's faith was built up over forty long years of wandering in the wilderness, built up by many experiences like this one at the sea.

Each experience carried them one step forward into faithfulness before they managed to fall three steps back.

They had to start over again and again and again.

Does that sound familiar?

I sometimes think that is the story of our lives!

And each time they came a little closer to faithfulness – but it was a long time coming.

My second and final point is that when God opens up for us that small, tiny, unexpected escape hatch through the barrier, we sometimes pass through to find we have not arrived anywhere we want to be!

Where we want to be is often not the place God has chosen to take us.

I rather suspect that the people of Israel would rather Lord had parted the Egyptians – so they could have scurried back to safety in Egypt -- than part the Red Sea as God did, for them to move on into the wilderness.

I do!

No matter where we want to be, God wants us moving on, even into the wilderness.

Maybe especially into the wilderness.

For it is in wilderness, any wilderness of our lives, in wilderness we are tested and formed and shaped by the hand of God into the people we are to be.

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