

Back to Sunday School Sermon Series
#4 – Troubling Waters
Exodus 14:10-31
January 7, 2024

Did you have a favorite Bible story as a kid? Maybe you loved the tale of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, or Noah escorting two of every creature onto the ark, the cute little bunnies and snakes and mosquitos. Perhaps you were mesmerized by the story of Jesus walking out of the tomb on Easter morning, or the seven-headed red dragon waiting to eat the newborn child of the woman in Revelation. Can you just see that as a Precious Moments statue? Whatever your favorite was, these stories shaped our understanding of God and helped forge our fledging faith as we grew in our connection to God.

But have you looked more closely at those stories as an adult? Adam and Eve were a rebellious pair who got kicked out of Eden. Noah and his family lived in the ark while the rest of humanity got swept away in a God-ordained flood. And Jesus was able to walk out of the tomb on Sunday because he was nailed to the cross on Friday. If we look a little closer at these stories, we might find they deserve a PG-13 rating because of their mature themes. What do we do with these stories that seem so innocent to a child but convey complex, adults-only themes? What do they have to say to us today?

For our first sermon series in 2024, we're going back to Sunday School to look at some of these stories. We'll watching David battle Goliath, Jesu walk on water, Daniel enter the lions' den, and Zaccheus climb a tree to see Jesus. What will we learn from these stories as adults that we missed when we saw them through the eyes of a child?

We're starting with one of the most well-known and cinematic stories, Moses parting the Red Sea. It's a story of freedom, deliverance, and the drowning of thousands of Egyptian soldiers, a detail we conveniently forget because it's OK to kill "those people" in the name of religion. As a child hearing this story, we probably believed God could overcome any obstacle in front of us. But as adults, do we believe that now?

Let's set the stage: God tells Moses to go to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh release the Israelites, who've been held captive as slaves for 400 years. As you can imagine, Pharaoh isn't keen on turning loose his best source of cheap labor. So, God unleashes ten plagues on the Egyptians, the last of which was the killing of every first-born child, including Pharaoh's own son. Your Sunday School teacher probably left that coloring page out of your lesson.

The Israelites are finally given the OK by the grieving Pharaoh to leave, so God begins to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian territory, using a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night. Meanwhile, God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh changes his mind about releasing the Israelites. So, he gathers his army and chases after the Israelites before they get away, trapping them at the Red Sea. They are at a dead-end.

You ever been stuck in one of those? I remember I was using my GPS one time to find a remote church camp in rural Illinois. I was far off the interstate in completely unknown territory, fully reliant upon my little hunk of metal and wires and signals sent from satellites in outer space to get me to my destination. I took all the right turns and dutifully obeyed the voice commands, even when they sent me down an unmarked dirt road. The road ended at a cornfield, at which point my GPS proclaimed, "Your destination is ahead." I shouted at it, "No it's not!" and my GPS responded, "Hahaha! Sucker!" I wasn't at my destination, I was at a dead end.

Dead ends are a common theme in the story of Moses. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt with no hope in sight. They were at a dead end. And yet, God finds a way to lead them out of slavery. After fleeing Egypt as a young man, Moses is at a dead end, caring for his father-in-law's sheep in a foreign country. And in our story today, Moses and the Israelites are at a literal dead end, trapped between Pharaoh's army and the waters of the Red Sea.

So, in the ancient version of a one-star review, the Israelites say to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" Wow, I didn't know snarkiness was a spiritual gift! They conclude by saying, "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

As the Israelites see it, they only have two options: slavery or death. Those are their only options in this dead end. But Moses knows there's another way, so he tells the Israelites, "The Lord will fight for you, you only have to be still." The English translation can't convey the anger that was in Moses' voice, but a more literal translation of the original Hebrew passage is, "Shut up! How dare you grumbling in the face of God! How dare you limit God to your humanly-conceived options! Don't know you that God is on your side? Isn't that enough?"

We know this, right? We know that with God, there always another way. Haven't we already seen that our God is a God who breaks through dead ends? Abraham and Sarah were at a dead end when they couldn't have children. Jacob was at a dead end when his brother Esau wanted to kill him. Joseph was at a dead end when his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Jesus was at a dead end, shut up in a tomb. And then God breaks through the barrier in front of us, and suddenly there's a path when there used to only be a cornfield.

So, God makes a way out of no way, parting the sea and allowing the Israelites to walk through the waters to dry land. There's some amazing symbolism here we would have missed as kids. First, if you remember the creation story, the first thing that happens is that God's spirit hovers over the waters and brings order to the chaos. God says, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let dry land appear." And then God creates the plants and animals and insects and gives Adam dominion over them.

What we have in our story is the reversal of that creation. Those plants and animals and insects that humans are supposed to control – things like frogs and gnats and flies – rebel against the Egyptians in the ten plagues. Then, at the Red Sea, God takes the waters God gathered together at Creation and separates them, allowing the Israelites to pass through. In Genesis, the appearance of dry land brings forth life in the form of vegetation and animals. Here, the appearance of dry land gives life to the Israelites. This moment in the history of Israel is a time of new creation, a fresh start for God's people as they travel through this re-birth canal into the freedom God has for them. They are leaving Egypt behind.

It's not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Egypt plays a role in the story of God's people. Abraham spent time in Egypt. Joseph was a slave in Egypt. Jesus' parents fled to Egypt when Herod tried to kill him. All roads to freedom lead through Egypt, through a place of exile, through a place of captivity. Freedom does not come freely. It is earned through perseverance and stubborn, persistent hope in the face of a dead end.

What's your Egypt? What have you gone through, or are going through, in order to reach the freedom God has for you? Are you a slave to technology or to your calendar? Are you held captive by anger or resentment or greed? Are you in bondage to the voices that tell you you're not worthy of being loved or forgiven? I spoke this week with a young person in our congregation going through a difficult breakup, and they were so distraught it was keeping them

from being who God created them to be. What's holding you back from fulfilling your God-given potential, what obstacle is in your way? We all have an Egypt.

But we also have a God who has parted the sea for us. When we as Christians talk about passing through the waters, we are referring to the waters of baptism. Jesus has gone ahead of us and parted those waters so that we may enter just as he did, dying with him as we go down and being resurrected like him when we come up. Through Christ, we have also been delivered, delivered from our slavery to sin and selfishness. We are free!

So we do we still live like we're captive? Why do we choose to stay slaves in our own Egypt rather than explore the freedom we've been granted? Why do we choose to live as if our only options are captivity to sin or the death of our faith? Why do we live like God's provision isn't enough, God's grace isn't enough, God's love isn't enough? "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." Maybe because it's easier to stay in slavery than to forge a new path. Maybe it's more comfortable to remain captive than to do the hard work of change. Better the devil you know than the God you're not sure about, right? Better to stay put than to walk through the troubling waters that might lead to freedom.

But here's the thing: We are not waiting for God to part the waters. We are not waiting for God's deliverance. We have Jesus Christ, the ultimate way-maker. We may feel like we're trapped in our sin, in our brokenness, but make no mistake about it: We're already on the other side of the sea. Because we have passed through the waters of baptism, we can look back and see whatever has held us back lying dead on the seashore, not because of what we've done, but because of what God has done for us.

You may feel like you're at a dead end. You may feel like there's no way forward for you in your job or your relationship. You may be facing a situation related to your health or aging parents or mental health that feels like there's no way out. You may feel held captive by your circumstances. But we worship a God who delivers us from captivity to freedom. Moses tells the Israelites, "The Lord will fight for you, you only have to keep still." Do you believe that? Do you trust that? You've been at dead ends before and God has shown up. You're here, aren't you? Do you believe God will show up again?

The Israelites thought they only had two choices: remain in slavery or die. They never imagined that there was a third option. But we've seen it, read about it, experienced it. We've heard Jesus tell us that he has come to show us a better way, better than being slaves to sin, better than being resigned to a life without purpose or meaning. We are standing on the other side of the sea! We have passed through the waters! Don't you know God is on your side? Isn't that enough for us to start walking toward freedom? We are free to be who God created us to be, to put our faith above our fears, trusting God's promises are good. Why would we choose to live any other way?