

Mo Blessings Mo Problems Sermon Series
Seas the Day! - Exodus 14:10-31
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We're continuing our sermon series today on the life of Moses as we arrive at what is probably the best-known part of his story, the parting of the Red Sea. When we last left the story, God was giving the Israelites their instructions on how to avoid the 10th plague, which was God killing of all the first-born in Egypt. Last week I said it's OK not to believe in the historical accuracy of that story, because that's not the kind of God I want to believe in. We can love God and not love the way God is portrayed in the Bible.

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 pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night. Meanwhile, Pharaoh takes some time to reflect on his decision to free the Israelites and realizes that he just released the bulk of his country's workforce, so he has a change of heart. The Bible actually says that Pharaoh exclaims, "What have I done?" He gathers his army and chases after the Israelites before they get away. We pick up the story from there (READ SCRIPTURE).

When I was about eight, I visited my grandmother in Southern California. One of our tourist-y stops was visiting Universal Studios. I got up-close with Bruce, the mechanical shark used in Jaws, and I lifted a car used in "The Six Million Dollar Man." If you remember that show, I heard your knees creak when you stood up for the first hymn. But the thing I was most excited about was driving through the special effect that was used to film the crossing of the Red Sea in "The Ten Commandments." I imagined going through this elaborate construction with water towering over me on either side. And I admit I was a bit scared. Should I wear a life jacket? What if Bruce was in the water?

So, imagine my disappointment when we get to that part of the tour and our trolley arrives at what looked like a glorified puddle. The water was pushed aside using two glass walls and our trolley drove through it. The water was about knee-high, which made me glad I decided against the life jacket. That hallway is more thrilling to walk through than the ride I went on. I was so excited to finally figure out this mystery, and yet when I got the answer it was not nearly as satisfying as I had hoped.

That same thing can happen when we start asking questions about the "special effects" of the Bible. We have to be careful about getting bogged down in the questions a story like this raises. Scholars have wasted forests full of paper trying to explain what actually happened here, but I choose to take this story at face value. The historicity of this story is of secondary importance to what it tells me about God. Where it happened and how it happened and even if it happened ultimately don't impact the meaning of this story for me.

That meaning continues a theme we've already seen in Moses' story. Remember, when we started a few weeks ago the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt with no hope in sight. They were 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, until he turns aside to see the burning bush. 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, as it is translated in The Message, “Didn’t we tell you, ‘Leave us alone here in Egypt—we’re better off as slaves in Egypt than as corpses in the wilderness?’”

As the Israelites see it, they only have two options: slaves or corpses. Being held captive or dying. That’s the place where the Israelites are left this morning. 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 options! Don’t know you that God is on your side? Isn’t that enough?”

So, using Moses, God makes a way out of no way, parting the sea and allowing the Israelites to walk through the waters to dry land. But this is more than just a last-minute rescue. This story is a literary neon arrow pointing the us back to the beginning of the Bible. First, when we talked about Moses’ birth story, we made the connection between the boat in which his mother put him and the ark that Noah built. Both were stories of new starts for the Israelites.

The author is doing the same thing here in even more powerful ways. If you remember the creation story, you remember the first thing that happens is that God’s spirit hovers over the waters and brings order to the chaos of the creation. 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 – are used against the Egyptians in the ten plagues. Then, at the Red Sea, God takes the waters that 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 creatures. 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 are released from slavery and walk through the watery 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 trials; it is earned through perseverance and stubborn, persistent hope in the face of a dead end. Sometimes we have to go through Egypt to fully appreciate God’s faithfulness to us.

All roads to freedom lead through Egypt. 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 with someone this week who realized the challenges and fear of aging were keeping her from being who God was still calling her to be. What’s holding you back? We all have an Egypt.

But we also have a God who has parted the sea for us. We talked last week about how the Passover meal that Israelites shared has a strong connection to our celebration of communion. Today, when we as Christians talk about passing through the waters, we are referring to the

baptismal waters. 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 been delivered.

So, we do we still live like we're captive? Why do we choose to stay in Egypt rather than live out the freedom we've been granted? Why do we let fear be the loudest voice in our head? Why do we live like God's provision isn't enough, God's grace isn't enough, God's love isn't enough? Maybe 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. We're better off as slaves in Egypt than stepping into the unknown. Better the devil you know than the God you're not sure about, right? Better to stay put than to seize the day and walk into the waters that might lead to freedom.

But here's the thing: We are not waiting for God to trouble the waters. We are not awaiting God's deliverance. God's deliverance has already come through Christ. 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 body 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." What would happen if you stopped fighting to make a way yourself and you just were still, giving room for God to work? You've been at dead ends before, haven't you? And God has shown up. How do I know? Well, 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. Captives or corpses. 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 death. We are already standing on the other side of the sea! We have passed through the waters! We can choose to live like we are still captives, but why would we? Don't you know God is on your side?