

Strong Winds and Divided Waters

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Exodus 14:19-31 and Romans 14:1-12

Churches call it many things – Homecoming Sunday, Rally Day, Kickoff Sunday, Back to Church Sunday. It marks the start of a church’s program year, coinciding with the start of school, with picnics and warm hugs and handshakes with those we haven’t see all summer and a general sense of happiness and hope.

How do you come home when home is online? How do you rally when rallying is viewed as a potentially hazardous event? How do you warmly greet people when you are remotely distanced from them?

These were unanticipated questions a few months ago. Yet they are our questions now, and our responses. Today, then, is all of those things – rally and kickoff and homecoming – even if the look and feel is quite different.

We are enhancing our online worship just a bit. We also have a fabulous tent that we will use throughout the fall for smaller, in-person gatherings.

In many ways it will be a historic fall, with global pandemic, presidential election, ongoing economic challenge and the steady drumbeat for racial justice and equity, and epic wildfires now added to the mix. Church will look different, by necessity. Whatever is next will never be the “old normal,” let alone a “new” normal. But there will be a next church, because, in my humble opinion, church is needed now as much as it ever has been, both for those of us within this community of faith and the world beyond our walls, virtual and real walls.

We continue to do what we’ve always sought to do – engage the word, discern our call, care for one another, serve those in need, seek justice. The core values remain – love your neighbor, let justice roll down like waters, be still and know that I am God. The packaging might differ, and the cultural context – already fluid – is even more so.

And yet, here we are – from this space to all of the spaces where you are engaging this, and to all of the spaces where God is calling us.

We entered an ongoing story – each of us and this particular congregation/community of faith – our calling is to live in and into that story, to play our parts, our roles, to write this next chapter. It will have new elements, new plot twists; it will also resonate with echoes from the earliest moments of the story. We can lose our way when we wander too far from those foundations, and, conversely, we do very well to anchor ourselves in them.

Our reading from Exodus is at the heart of the story, and always worth re-visiting to punctuate and re-calibrate whatever we might remember from Sunday School or a Cecil B. DeMille movie.

Moses encounters God as a burning bush, and God places the mantle of leadership, of confronting Pharaoh, of liberating the Israelites, on Moses' extremely human shoulders. Moses returns to Egypt and endures the bitter hardship of slavery. The plagues follow. The Passover follows. The Exodus follows. Pharaoh lets the people go, but not easily, never easily. Power seeks to hold on. God leads them – a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire shining forth in the night.

We know the story...then this. A confrontation. The fleeing Israelites and the pursuing Egyptians. This is a difficult sequence – any war is. The point persists; God's protective presence with the Israelites. God calls forth a strong wind; the waters are divided and the earth dries. The Israelites are able to pass. The Egyptians pursue, first caught up in the muddy earth and then, eventually, God allows the waters to return. The Israelites are saved; the Egyptian army is drowned. The story concludes, echoing over the generations: "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."

These are the elements of life, and the elements of faith. Earth. Fire. Wind. Water.

The earth of creation, the dirt that Jesus wrote in with a stick, that he used to make mud to heal a blind man's sight. The earth that welcomes the scattered seeds, the same earth that generations later produces the very food that we eat.

The fiery furnace of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the fiery pillar leading the Israelites, the fire of the burning bush, the fire of Pentecost, the fires that rage in California and Oregon and Washington.

The water of creation, of the falling rains of the flood, the water on which Jesus walked, or turned into wine, the water of baptism – his and ours, the waters of Flint, Michigan, undrinkable.

And the wind, the wind of creation, the wind that separates waters, the wind that blows at Pentecost, the cooling breezes and the destructive tornadoes, the wind, the air, that George Floyd fought to breathe, the wind, the air, that carries the signals of the internet that allow us to be connected *and* that carries the coronavirus.

The elements of life and the elements of faith are so inextricably linked. We enter that great story at a remarkable moment in history – better than some, less so than others – but important in whatever context because these are our moments, this is our chapter of the story, our call to be good stewards of these fundamental elements as we seek to live in faith as God’s people in this particular moment.

Anathea Portier-Young writes: “Throughout this passage the Lord acts and speaks and saves. God again takes up the work of creation, now on behalf of God’s people...Exodus, the road out from slavery to freedom, is a new creation. God’s power to create from nothing, from formlessness and void, is the same power by which God saves and transforms. It reveals a path for God’s people and builds walls to protect them from the chaos and death of the sea.”

Portier-Young continues: “Yet the crossing remains treacherous. Though there is light in this new creation, there is also darkness. This passage portrays slavery’s end in vivid, violent detail. Chariots, technologies of conquest and visible signs of royal power and status, become a trap for Pharaoh and his armies...When the Israelites have crossed to safety, they see the bodies of their former masters cast up dead upon the shore...the waters of new creation dismantle (Pharaoh’s) chariots and drown the machinery of war and abduction.”

The Exodus narrative, like faith itself, is always a dance, between God and God’s loving and just activity and our response.

Dennis Olson writes that “God is intimately involved in the details and forces involved in the struggle of God's people, intervening at times directly on their behalf against forces of bondage and oppression...At the same time, God may sometimes work in more indirect and mediated ways. God may at times rely more on human action, working in, with and through the human agency and decisions of God's own people to achieve God's purposes in the world.”

That dance, the possibility of transformation, by God, through us, is what makes the exodus more than a great Sunday School story.

Walter Brueggemann writes that “The concrete claims of Judaism and the large liberation trajectory of interpretation are not mutually exclusive, the God named and known first by Jews is the God who, in many other ventures, is also the God who enacts exoduses where none have seemed possible.” (*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, page 58)

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood the ethical implications of Exodus. In an early sermon he preached that “This story symbolizes something basic about the universe. It symbolizes something much deeper than the drowning of a few men, for no one can rejoice at the death or the defeat of a human person. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil. It was the death of inhuman oppression and ungodly exploitation.”

Two years after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, King preached: “In our own struggle for freedom and justice in this country we have gradually seen the death of evil. Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation, and his great struggle has been to free himself from the crippling restrictions and paralyzing effects of this vicious system. For years it looked like he would never get out of this Egypt. The closed Red Sea always stood before him with discouraging dimensions. There were always those Pharaohs with hardened hearts, who, despite the cries of many a Moses, refused to let these people go. But one day, through a world-shaking decree by the nine justices of the Supreme Court of America and an awakened moral conscience of many White persons of good will, backed up by the Providence of God, the Red Sea was opened, and the forces of justice marched through to the other side.”

Oppression continues. Liberation continues. The church continues, even in this unexpected and uncertain moment. It is our calling now to place ourselves in the

story, to be cleansed and healed and nourished by the power of the water, to be carried forward by the power of the wind, to trust God's presence and at the same time claim the mantle of leadership given to Moses and all of us. We do not wait for the coronavirus to pass. We do not wait until racial justice is somehow achieved and racism and white supremacy are memories. We don't walk around this moment, but like our Israelite forbears, walk through, pass through, pass between whatever is raging and whatever is pursuing.

As the poet Mary Oliver wrote: "There are a hundred paths through the world that are easier than loving. But, who wants easier?" Our path is love. Our path is justice. Our path is through the water, trusting the wind of the Spirit, trusting the God of justice and hope to lead us. Amen.