

September 13, 2020  
Exodus 14:19-31  
“Red Sea Places”

Most of us remember quite clearly where we were and what we were doing on the morning of September 11, 2001. We remember when we first learned that a plane had hit one of the Twin Towers. We remember watching the news as the second plane hit the other tower. And then a plane hit the Pentagon. And then the crash in Pennsylvania. We remember the shock, disbelief and the confusion. We thought, “There was no way this is really happening.”

Many of us perhaps were thinking how, why, and who? Then word got out Osama Bin Laden was responsible for the attacks. Do you remember the first time you heard someone suggest that we pray for Bin Laden? I was in seminary in 2011. I remember being at Miller Chapel (the chapel on Princeton Seminary’s campus) one day when someone offered that petition. Of course they were right in that we should, as Jesus taught, pray for those we call our enemies, but still there was shock, disbelief, and confusion about an idea as bold as that one.

Life was changed that day. As a country we rallied together, hugged strangers, helped our neighbors, filled sanctuaries, stood in lines to give blood, and united in a way that I had never seen before...But most of these changes were temporary. How quickly did we begin to point fingers at one another and argue with those we had just embraced? I fear we are still arguing and pointing fingers.

But some changes were permanent and life was changed forever that day in more ways than one. I am recording this sermon on Friday, September 11<sup>th</sup>, the 19 year anniversary of the last day you could accompany someone to the gate at the airport. Do you remember being able to do that? To not just pull up to the curb and drop someone off at the airport, but to park, help them with their luggage, wait while they checked in and then go with them to their gate. You could sit with them while they waited. Maybe get a snack and give them a hug before they boarded their flight. That has changed. And in a more significant way, life has changed for our military families who have to hug a loved one, deployed to engage in multiple wars fighting an enemy named Terror whose face is often hard to recognize.

Certainly we were not the first people, and sadly we are not the last people, to deal with terror in our lives. It happens in various forms all around us. One of my good friends recently had the experience of terror in watching his young wife and the mother of his two daughters die of cancer. There is still terror for someone living in an abusive relationship. There is terror for someone dealing day in and day out with overwhelming anxiety and fear. There is often terror in waiting on the doctor to call with the results from the lab. There are some who live daily with the terror of oppression and having to make their way on the margins of society. There are some young people who have to live with the terror of not living up to the pressures and the expectations that others place on them. There are those still held captive to the terror of stress and anger of having to live

in a situation that is just not fair or just. In many ways these things hold us captive. There are people experiencing these things living closer than we might think.

Perhaps we could name this current time of COVID-19 as a time that strikes fear in our hearts. Coupled with tremendous racial and civil unrest, along with fires in California that seem to give us an apocalyptic appearance, these are not easy times.

While we certainly have things that scare and terrify us, I was trying to think this week of other times in our country when living with and fighting terror had also been an ongoing reality. No doubt we have experienced some hard times, but I was hard pressed to think of a more terrifying time for a group of people than the experience of the American Slaves. Of course we are familiar with their story. And we are thankful that they were familiar with the story of another oppressed group of people who longed to taste the sweet flavor of freedom—the Israelites who were held captive in Egypt. This was a story that gave the slaves a word of grace and some hope that one day God might come and free them too. And I trust it is a story that gives us hope as well.

We've been following the story of the Israelites for the past few weeks. Their story is one of the most remarkable and powerful stories of our faith. But it is one that is perhaps a little hard to believe in places. In the past couple of weeks we've touched on some pretty a-typical experiences that are a part of their story—God talking to Moses via a burning bush. Can you imagine Moses going back to tell his wife for the first time about the burning bush? Can't you just see her eyes rolling while thinking "*OK, Moses, whatever and don't forget to take out the trash.*" Or how about those gathered around as Moses described what needed to happen on the Passover? I could see and understand how some people could be confused by the notion that putting blood on your front door would somehow save you from a flying angel of death. I mean, that seems unusual to me.

And now this—the parting of the Red Sea.

But I think we lose focus if we focus on trying to figure out exactly “how” all of this took place. There are some scholars who have been debating for years about how in the world the Red Sea may, or may not have, actually parted...and for how long, and was it even the Red Sea or was it somewhere else? All of that is important to consider and I admit it is interesting, but it is not the “*how*” that is the important thing. The most important thing is that God delivered. God made a way when there was no way.

I read somewhere that the 17<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Blaise Pascal pointed out that this passage shows us that our God is not a far-away God who is abstract and way off in the heavens—rather this passage shows us that we have a God who acted in that time and place, and acts in this time and place. He reasoned that if God can set people free in that day, then God can set people free in our day (too).<sup>1</sup> And I think he is right.

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<sup>1</sup> Source unknown.

In his sermon, “The Red Sea Places,”<sup>2</sup> Tom Tewell, the former pastor at the 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Presbyterian Church in NYC points out that this story really is a phenomenal story. The people of Israel had an obstacle in front of them so they couldn’t go forward. And they had an obstacle coming up quickly behind them so they couldn’t go backward. Where could they go? They were trapped. And yet God made a way when there was no way.

Tewell asks an important question—where is that place for you where you can’t go forward and you can’t go back? Where is that place where you are kind of stuck? Where is there a place that leaves you feeling paralyzed and not sure what to do? Dr. Tewell calls these places “Red Sea Places.” Where is there a Red Sea place in your life?

Sometimes these moments are dramatic like the situation the Israelites faced with the Egyptians hot on their tails and a sea before them. But most of the time these Red Sea moments are ordinary moments and situations in our lives.

I am thinking of someone I know who boldly moved to a new city to have a new experience and to get away from the old routine and tired existence they had before she moved. But now that she is away, she is having a difficult time making ends meet. It wasn’t as easy as she thought it would be. Since she is new to the area she doesn’t know a whole lot of people that can help out with things. What should she do? Return home and back to the town and the situation that she needed to leave in the first place? Or stick it out even if it means lonely Friday nights and not knowing how she’ll make it? Does she risk rejection and continue to try to make new friends in her new city? Or does she come back home to the same old same old of the place she was getting away from? She can’t go forward. She can’t go back. She’s in a Red Sea place.

I am thinking of someone I know who wants to go back to school to get a master’s degree. He said it would help his professional development and he’s put it off for quite a while already. If he is going to do it, he should do it soon. But his wife is pregnant with a baby due this winter. She’s going to have to stay home to care for the newborn meaning she can’t work, at least not for a while. While going back to school might help his professional development, he also knows that he would be the only bread winner for his growing family...and he knows that grad school does not pay as much as his full time job, in fact he might have to take out more loans. What is he to do? Does he go to school furthering his education and “skill-set” that will hopefully eventually further his career? Or does he keep his job, especially in these unstable times, knowing it will provide right now for his family, but at the same time risk what might be his only chance for grad school? He can’t go forward. He can’t go back. He is in a Red Sea place.

I am thinking of someone I know who is trying to decide whether or not to put their parent in a nursing home facility. They know they can’t care for their parents needs and they have already sacrificed so much for them. But they also know that the parent does not want to go to a nursing home. What to do? On one hand there is the safety and the health of the parent to think about—and they would get good care at the nursing home.

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<sup>2</sup> The Rev. Dr. Thomas K. Tewell preached the sermon “The Red Sea Places” on 9/7/3 at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City.

On the other hand, there is the sense that they would be taking away something the parent holds dear, freedom. They are stuck. They can't go forward. They can't go back. They are in a Red Sea place.

What about all of us? I think we would all agree that we'd love to go back to how things were before the pandemic, but we know we can't. And trying to figure out and find a way forward is nothing short of a daunting task. We can't go back to how it was, but we can't rush full steam ahead either. How do we function as a society in a way that is safe, smart, responsible, and healthy? We are in a Red Sea place. So many of us are struggling over what we can, and cannot, do, where we can and cannot go, from kids in schools, to restaurants and businesses, even to churches. It feels like a Red Sea place.

With so much happening in our country right now, how many of us are wondering how we will ever go forward? And we know it might not be possible to go back, to a pre-pandemic world, and even a pre-9/11 world and life as we knew it. You could say that we are in a Red Sea place.

But we remember the story of the Exodus. We remember that God does provide a way. We remember how our God is not a far off and distant God, but a God who breaks into the story of our lives—sometimes in small and subtle ways and sometimes in dramatic and surprising ways, even in Red Sea places. We can see that somehow God ultimately allows us to go forward...somehow, someway, in the case of the Israelites it was literally going through the water...not over or around...but through the water. What a surprise that must have been for them!

As they stood on the water's edge they must have thought they were stuck. They couldn't go forward. They couldn't go back. And then God breaks in and delivers. This begs the question for those of us in a Red Sea place—are you willing to be surprised by God? And do you believe that God can work in your life?

If so, then we remember that even though God parted the Red Sea, the Israelites still had to take that first uncertain step into the mud and the muck as they began to cross through where the water had just been. It probably meant getting some mud between the toes and on the clothes they were wearing. Things could easily get messy. Taking that shaky first step might mean walking into an unknown territory.

I wonder if there is anyone here this morning that needs to take that risky and shaky first step. Maybe it is a shaky step toward healing a frayed relationship...or maybe it is a shaky first step in having a difficult, but much needed conversation with someone...or maybe it is a shaky first step in updating and sending in your resume for that job you've been wondering about. Maybe you feel called to take a risky first step out to help those in our world who are living with the reality of poverty, racism, or any other hardships. OR maybe on a day like today that first step might be a shaky first step toward forgiving your enemy?

Of course we don't take that step forward alone. God leads us. Even though the Israelites took that first step out, it was God who made it possible. It is God who is at work and saves them, delivers them and provides a way for the Israelites—those who had known all too well terror, fear, exhaustion, oppression, heavy burdens and Red Sea places.

And may it be so for us. We don't have to be perfect or even come up with every answer on our own. Often times we describe someone who is perfect as being able to walk on water. Well, there is only one who can do that, Jesus Christ. Mihee preached on that passage only a few weeks ago. He is the only one who is perfect and needs no help. But for folks like you and me, perhaps the perfect thing to do is to trust that God still delivers and to be willing to walk through the water.

Nineteen years ago and in the time that followed there has been a lot of faith and doubt at Ground Zero and around the country. People were asking, "Where was God?" We are still asking that question. But we would be naïve to think we get to go through life without any bumps and bruises. We forget that God does not promise a life free from pain as if nothing bad would ever happen to us.

Instead God promises to be with us in those times and places. God does not keep us from the darkest valley, but God does promise to walk through it with us until we reach the other side. Thanks be to God that our God does not only walk on the water, but our God will walk through the water with us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.