

THROUGH THE SEA

Exodus 14:19-31

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on September 17, 2017, the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.'

Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.' So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth.

As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 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.

I.

Last Sunday's sermon began with a tribute to the Mississippi River and how, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the river is for Huck the source of his great "moral passion,"¹ and therefore, in the words of T. S. Eliot, "a strong brown god." Eliot also described the river as "almost forgotten//By dwellers in cities...but waiting, watching and//waiting."²

But in addition to the appealing adjectives "watching and waiting," Eliot also uses more *foreboding* descriptors of the river: "implacable//Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder of//What men choose to forget." These haunting words characterize any river, any body of water, any aspect of nature whose gentle beauty can become destructive.

¹ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 1950), 107.

² T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," in *Four Quartets*, copyright, 1942, by Harcourt, Brace and Company; quoted in Trilling, 106.

We have seen such destructiveness the past three weeks, seen at least from the distance of observers. Are there two more “salt of the earth” names in our vocabulary than *Harvey* and *Irma*? – and yet the salt of these two hurricanes never lost its saltiness, but overwhelmed with fury.

Over the past week we on the staff have tried to contact every person in our congregation we know to have parents or children or siblings or homes in Florida or Houston. The list has grown to more than twenty, and we have received answers from everyone we have sought to contact. While some were forced to evacuate, to our knowledge, all are safe and only a handful have significant property damage.

During this same time, I have been trying – since late August – to reach a congregation in Houston that I served as Pastor from 1984-1990. I no longer have emails nor phone numbers of the few members I know still to be there. Messages I sent or left went undelivered or unacknowledged. This past Friday, however, I uncovered a Twitter account³ the current Associate Pastor maintains, and I was able to follow the congregation’s plight over the past few weeks:

August 28: “We continue to pray for everyone as we continue to see rain falling...the church is holding off well and has not been flooded...some of our members are at church and are opening it to folks whose homes are being flooded...If you need to get out, I know Rolando Moreno is on a boat out helping people....if you need [him, his] cell is

On August 29, 7:11 a.m.: “The church is without power and in need of a generator....please contact us if you have one...”

An hour later, generator apparently secured: “A current list of needs for the church shelter: deodorant//diapers//cat food//litter/air mattress pump”

Twenty minutes later: “Shoes! Shoes! Shoes! Any old shoes please donate....”

August 31: “We are winding down operations at the shelter...all of our guests will have found homes....We have now closed our shelter....NO WORSHIP ... this Sunday, September 3...Mayor Turner has issued a MANDATORY EVACUATION for the area around the church. Please leave the area...”

A week later September 7: “Just in our church family alone, the number of families who have been flooded has risen to 16... We’ll do our best to have a normal service on Sunday, but we know it won’t be normal for most...”

Then this past Friday: “THE WATER HAS FINALLY GONE DOWN...We finally begin our school year....we are starting Sunday Afternoon Youth Group...With all that’s going on...our youth need time to be with each other, and with God.”

Huck’s River, Eliot’s “strong brown god” – “implacable and raging,” once again “watching and waiting.”⁴

³ <https://twitter.com/StThomasPC>.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages,” in *Four Quartets*, copyright, 1942, by Harcourt, Brace and Company; quoted in Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1950) 106.

II.

In this week's Old Testament lesson, waters rage, as the people of Israel cross the Red Sea to freedom and members of the Egyptian army lose their lives. It is a famous story.

Four to five hundred years after God had called Abraham and Sarah, with a promise of land, descendants and blessing,⁵ the people of Israel have spent 400 years in slavery.⁶ The conditions of slavery have worsened under the Egyptian Pharaoh. The Israelites cry to God. God hears their cries, and raises up Moses to lead them from slavery to freedom.⁷

After an accelerating series of plagues fails to persuade the Egyptian Pharaoh to "let [God's] people go,"⁸ God instructs Moses to lead the Israelites to the edge of the Red Sea and prepare to cross it. The people of Israel fear the Egyptians. They fear the sea. They fear that God will lead them to their deaths. But follow Moses they do.⁹

Our passage contains the *actual crossing* of the Red Sea. In successive order:

- The angel of the Lord that leads the people by day withdraws to the rear, joining the pillar of cloud that leads them by night. Angel and cloud thus stand between the Israelites and the Egyptians who are pursuing them, leaving the waters of the sea immediately in front of the Israelites.
- Moses stretches out his hand over the sea.
- The Israelites enter the Sea, at night, on dry land, that has emerged.
- The Egyptians pursue them.
- Hours of darkness pass – midnight, 1:00 a.m., 2:00 a.m. – undescribed by the narrator but no doubt stormy, windy, warlike.
- At daybreak, God sows confusion among the Egyptians. Wheels come off their chariots and their chariots get stuck in mud.
- The Egyptians turn and flee.
- God tells Moses to stretch out his hand over the seas. Moses obeys, again.
- The waters fall back into place, submerging the fleeing Egyptian army.
- As the Israelites emerge from the water, they see the bodies of their pursuers, slain on the shore.
- The Israelites then fear the Lord and believe in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

⁵ Genesis 12:1-4.

⁶ Approximately four hundred years passes between the conclusion of Genesis, in which the Israelites become slaves during the time of Joseph, until Moses is born in the opening chapters of Exodus.

⁷ Exodus Chapters 1-3.

⁸ Exodus 7:8-15:21.

⁹ Exodus 14:1-18.

III.

As Jewish scholars have read this story for centuries, some of them have depicted the crossing of the Red Sea as what we would call a “cakewalk.” One even speculated that the corridor through the sea was lined with “fruits and all manner of delights.”¹⁰

But most do not describe it in this way. In fact, there is a fierce debate across the centuries as to the timing of the Israelites’ *entering* the water versus the *appearance* of dry land.

This debate is fueled by *word order* and *sentence placement*:

- One verse¹¹ reads: The Israelites went “*into the sea* on dry ground” – leading to an interpretation that they were already *in* the sea *before* the dry land appeared.
- A later verse¹² reads: The Israelites walked “*on dry ground* through the sea” – not necessarily *contradicting* the first interpretation but more directly implying that the first step they took had some solid ground beneath their feet.
- A verse in the next chapter¹³ reads: “*When the horses of Pharaoh* went into the sea...the Lord brought back the waters,” implying that the waters were *not* parted until the *Egyptians* entered the sea, which is after the Israelites entered.

And ancient writer¹⁴ said:

The sea was not split for [the Israelites] until they came right *into* it *up to their noses* – only then, it became dry land.”

A contemporary writer¹⁵ stresses that when the Israelites enter the water:

- They do not *know* that they will be rescued
- They do not *know* that they will reach freedom
- They take a genuine “*leap of faith*.”

To interpret this timing theologically:

The miracle happened only *after* the people had committed themselves entirely to God. On the *threshold* of death, they experience, most *viscerally*, the *restoration* to life, as the waters surge apart to either side of them.¹⁶

“Each step is a miracle of salvation.”¹⁷

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¹⁰ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), note 32, page 516.

¹¹ Exodus 14:22.

¹² Exodus 14:29.

¹³ Exodus 15: 19.

¹⁴ Shemoth Rabba 21:9, quoted in Zornberg 215.

¹⁵ Zornberg 215.

¹⁶ Zornberg 215.

¹⁷ Zornberg 215.

As you might imagine, I am intrigued by the possibility that the that Israelites entered the waters of the sea *before* the dry land appears, though I must admit that the prospect of walking into stormy waters – even on a patch of dry land – would require of me only slightly less a leap of faith. The point is this: *Dry land or no dry land*, the people of Israel take a *leap of faith* and step into the waters. Each step, therefore, *is* a miracle.

My friends, most of us know that any major decision we make – any major step we take – by its very nature calls forth “a certain leap of faith” on our part. Be we nation, community, business, organization, church, or individual: *making a decision nearly always involves a leap of faith*.

It is often during the proverbial “dark and stormy night” in which we make such decisions, take such leap:

- The night in which the soul is tested
- The night in which the heart is scorched or drenched or both
- The night in which we cannot clearly distinguish between our friends and our enemies as we thrash around in darkness and wind.
- The land isn’t beneath our feet.
- The waters haven’t coalesced into a wall by which we can feel our way.
- We do not know if our next breath will fill our lungs with air or water.

But each second we remain afloat, each minute we are able to hang on, gives opportunity for hope.

- The new drug comes onto the market.
- New surgical technique becomes available.
- A diagnosis emerges, provides explanation, treatment options, which, however overwhelming, serve at least as a wall forming at our side.

Every step we take brings a moment of life:

- An initial adjustment which makes our marriage better, and that leads to another, and another.
- We take one small step toward compromise in politics, in international affairs, at work, and that leads to another, and another, and eventually “one giant leap” for humanity.

To enter stormy waters by definition involves a leap of faith, but so does staying on dry land. Every step toward resolution, healing, salvation *is* a miracle.

IV.

Another aspect of this episode both *attracts* and *troubles* me, or attracts me *because* it troubles me. This aspect is the death of *every* Egyptian who serves in the army against the Israelites, a death in which God plays so *direct* a hand.

Though admittedly what I am going to say has limits, please follow along with me: While Pharaoh is depicted as one of the cruelest and most incompetent rulers in the Bible, we as readers see *little* if any *difference* between the Egyptian *people* and the Israelite *people*. Egyptians and Israelites alike are *dependent on* and *impacted by* the quality and character of their respective leaders, Pharaoh and Moses. In other words, as readers we are given *no real reason* to *despise* the Egyptian *citizenry*; it is their *leader* who rightly draws our ire.

At the end of our passage, when the Israelites emerge from the Red Sea, the first thing the narrator says is that the Israelites “*saw* the Egyptians dead on the seashore.” Drenched and exhausted from their own all night brush with death, the Israelites “*saw* the great work that *the Lord* did against the Egyptians.”

While we have varying degrees of discomfort – or even offense – with the idea that God would wipe out an entire army of his opponents, it might be a bit surprising to us that the Israelites who come through the waters do not emerge singing and celebrating. To be sure they will sing and celebrate in the next chapter, but their initial reaction is one of *silence* – perhaps even *reverence*. The narrator puts it this way: “...the people *feared* the Lord and *believed* in the Lord and in his servant Moses.”

In their silence, perhaps they have come to realize that their God has

- The *power* to rescue *them* after four hundred years of slavery
- The *power* to keep *them* alive in and through waging waters
- The *power* to *bring their pursuers* to death
- And by implication *power* over *their own* lives and deaths.

In addition, in the years and even generations to come, as Moses leads the people of Israel through the wilderness and to the edge of the Promised Land, he will twice refer to “the diseases of Egypt”¹⁸ in *admonitory* tone toward the Israelites. This is a reference to the Ten Plagues¹⁹ God visited upon Pharaoh in hopes Pharaoh would “let [God’s] people go.” Moses is warning that such diseases could strike the Israelites as well. It presages Shakespeare: “use every man after his desert, and who shall ’scape whipping?”²⁰ When the Israelites *see* the Egyptians slain on the seashore – see within touching distance – perhaps they are moved whisper to themselves: “There but by the grace of God go I.”

As you likely know, I am not much on talking about the *judgment* or *threat* of God, but it is in this passage. Yet the way it emerges is as something of an *equalizer*. The silent sight of death on the part of those who survive the crossing of the sea helps transcend the split between “Israelite” and “Egyptian,” between “us” and “them.”

During the Boer War, Thomas Hardy wrote:

Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd *treat* if met where any bar is,
Or *help* to half-a-crown.²¹

Humility in face of the power of God – over life and death – makes thin the line between “us” and “them,” between Egyptian and Israelite. *Makes thin*. “There but for the grace of God go I.” When such remembrance, such humility, we will do well. Amen.

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¹⁸ Deuteronomy 7:15 and 28:60.

¹⁹ Exodus 7:8-15:21.

²⁰ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 533; quoted in Zornberg 217.

²¹ Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44329/the-man-he-killed>.