

Our Old Testament lesson today is the story the crossing of the Red Sea. There's an old joke:

Parent: "What did you learn in Sunday School today?"

Child: "We learned about Moses at the Red Sea."

Parent: "Oh really? What happened?"

Child: "Well, the Egyptians had the Israelites trapped against the shore. So, Moses called in the engineers and they built a pontoon bridge across the water. During the night Moses moved all his troops across the bridge to the other side. In the morning, the Egyptians saw what had happened and rolled across the bridge in their tanks. But just before they got to the other side, Moses called in an air strike and sunk the bridge with all the Egyptians on it."

Parent: "I can't believe you Sunday School teacher told you THAT!"

Child: "Well, not exactly. But if I told it the way the teacher told it, you wouldn't believe it."

The crossing of the Red Sea.

It's probably the most famous image from the book of Exodus. It's a huge scene in Cecil B. DeMille's epic, *The Ten Commandments*.

It's even part of the back-lot tour at Universal Studios—the tram heads toward a lake, and all of a sudden, a path opens up. And the tram drives through the water. Okay, it's not as spectacular as the movie—the water's only about 4 feet deep. Still it's pretty cool.

The crossing of the Red Sea is the subject of a popular song at our church camp—the younger kids love to sing it so much that the counselors and clergy start to get tired of it. It's "Pharaoh, Pharaoh" which is sung to the tune of "Louie, Louie":

*Pharaoh, Pharaoh, oooh baby,
Let my people go! Huh! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah*

The song deals with the subject of our OT lesson today, Moses and the Hebrew people escaping Pharaoh's army by crossing the sea.

*Well-a me and God's people comin' to the Red Sea
And Pharaoh's army comin' after me,
I raised my rod and stuck it in the sand.
All of God's people walked across dry land...*

*Well-a Pharaoh's army is a comin' too,
So what do you think that I did do?
I raised my rod and I cleared my throat,*

And all of Pharaoh's army did the dead man's float...

Fun song.

But because of the songs and the movies and the Universal Studios tram ride, we can often lose sight of the point of this account.

First off, the words "Red Sea" are a bad English translation from 400 years ago. Most modern Bibles will still print "Red Sea." But they usually put a footnote that says the literal translation of the Hebrew is not "Red Sea," but "Reed Sea," or "Sea of Reeds."

So we shouldn't think of this as a crossing of the deep water of the Red Sea. It's supposed to be a crossing a little further north, near Suez, in the old swampy, marshy, reedy, salt-lake area where the Suez Canal now exists.

We also lose sight of the literal words of Exodus that we heard this morning. Exodus says, "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."¹

This is not some flashy Cecil B. DeMille miracle with God instantaneously opening a path through deep water. This is more, subtle miracle story, with God's wind blowing all night to open a path through shallower marshy water.

And as a number of commenators have pointed out, it doesn't take too much imagination to see how a group nomadic shepherds can march across a marsh while the wind is pushing the waters back. But then the heavy charioteers try to cross and they get bogged down. And then when the wind shifts and the waters return, they drown.

But that's NOT the main point of the narrative.

What is the good news from the Hebrew point of view? It is this: that God intervenes and saves them.

They're trapped between an angry army and the sea. And yet Moses tells them not to fear. That speech came just a few verses before our lesson started. Moses says to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."²

There doesn't seem to be any hope. There doesn't seem to be any way forward. And yet God provides a way forward.

The natural human response is fight or flight. But the opposing army is too strong to fight. And there is no way through the sea, so flight is impossible.

¹ Exod 14:21

² Exod 14:13-14

But God intervenes. God's angel comes and stands between them and the Egyptians. And God's wind comes and opens a way of salvation. Through the water of the Sea of Reeds, the people go to safety on the other side.

"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today... you have only to keep still."

The crossing of the sea is not only important for the Jewish people. It is also a hugely important image for Christians. In fact, today's story of the crossing of the sea coupled with last week's reading about the Passover were hugely influential in the way the early Christians thought about Easter.

Even though we're almost half a year away from Easter Sunday, last week we sang an Easter hymn with the lyrics,

"Where the Paschal blood is poured, death's dark angel sheathes his sword; Israel's hosts triumphant go through the wave that drowns the foe."³

Another ancient hymn that we sing at Easter says,
"Come ye faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness! God hath brought his Israel into joy from sadness: loosed from Pharaoh's bitter yoke Jacob's sons and daughters, led them with unmoistened foot through the Red Sea waters."⁴

Every Easter when we light the Paschal candle we chant the ancient words, "This is the (time), when you brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land."⁵

And whenever we have a baptism, the sacrament by which we share in Jesus' death and resurrection, at the blessing of the water the priest prays the words, "We thank you almighty God, for the gift of water... Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise."⁶

In the resurrection, Jesus passes over from death to life. And like the children of Israel passing through the waters of the sea, we also find salvation by passing through the waters of baptism. It is a wonderful and glorious image.

And it's not something we do. It's about what God does for us.

"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today... you have only to keep still."

³ Hymnal #174 v2

⁴ Hymnal #199 v1

⁵ BCP p287

⁶ BCP p306

And yet, there is a sad undertone to this story. Yes, it is triumphant for Christians. Yes, it is triumphant for the Jewish people. And yet their descendants 100-some-odd generations later have noted that their joy comes at the price of Egyptian tears. They are given life at the price of Egyptian deaths.

Thus every year at the Passover, during the sacred Seder meal, there is a section where many Jews remove a number of drops of wine from one of the cups of celebration. By reducing the wine in their cup by these removed drops, they remember that their joy is lessened just a bit by the suffering of others. Yes, those others were their oppressors. Yes, their oppressors were seeking to kill them. And yet their oppressors were fellow children of God. So modern Jews find it appropriate to remind themselves that their joy is lessened by the Egyptians' suffering.

One Rabbi writes the following:

"The Torah depicts celebration, unbridled joy at triumph Moses and the Children of Israel and then Miriam. The people are jubilant, at least for a time. And yet, by the time this reaches us in the Passover Seder centuries later, we diminish our cup by drops of wine recognizing that even the Egyptians were creatures of God and all victory—however important, however necessary—is penultimate because of its costs. For every victory there is defeat, for every triumph, there is a loser, at least now, at least until. And while we can rejoice at victory even when merited, God cannot, for both the perpetrator and the victim is are God's creation."⁷

Almost 1,000 years earlier, another Rabbi dealt with this theme by telling a story about the guardian angel of Egypt trying to defend the Egyptian people in God's heavenly courts. The story goes,

"When God decided to drown the Egyptians in the Red sea, Uzza, the guardian angel of Egypt came and stretched himself out before God, saying; 'Lord of the world, you created your world (using your) attribute of mercy; why do you want to drown my (Egyptian) children?' Immediately God assembled the entire heavenly host and said to them 'Make a judgment between Me and Uzza'. The guardian angels of the (other) nations began to plead the defense of Egypt. When the (archangel) Michael saw what was happening, he made a sign to the (archangel) Gabriel and then flew off to Egypt and pulled up a brick with a baby's bones sunk into it and came and stood before God, saying 'Lord of the world, this is how they enslaved your children.' Immediately God judged (the Egyptians) with the attribute of justice and they drowned in the sea. At the same time, the angels requested to sing a song of praise before God. He said to them, 'The work of my hands is drowning in the sea and you are singing before me?!'"⁸

That story is an important reminder. Yes, there is evil in the world. And there are those who commit evil acts. And they must be opposed. At the same time, we must never forget our common humanity, even with our enemies. All of us are children of God.

And it is God who brings us ultimate safety. It is God who brings us salvation.

⁷ Rabbi Michael Berenbaum

⁸ from the Midrash Abkir

Do not be afraid.
God is our deliverer.
Be still, and know his power.