

A Sermon for Covenant

Exodus 14:19-31

Covenant Baptist Church, San Antonio

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I spent Labor Day weekend in North Carolina. It was beautiful. And rainy. The part of my trip that was relevant for today was that while I was there I had the unexpected pleasure of discussing today's lectionary text with a Rabbi. We talked about the Parting of the Red Sea, and Rabbi (Phillip) Bentley told me stories.

In case you didn't know, when Jews interpret Scripture, it's fun. I can see why people sat at the feet of Rabbis and followed them around. As you may already know, the Midrash is a Jewish collection of stories that help interpret Scripture, and the way Midrash interprets is quite engaging. Midrash often takes the gaps in Scripture—that is, the places in the Bible where we don't get all the details—and the Midrash offers up stories to fill the holes. With Midrash, the concern is not whether the story is historically reliable; rather, the goal is to tell a side story in such a way as to illuminate the main story.

Let me show you. In the case of the Red Sea, there's a Midrash story that says when the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea, the angels of heaven were celebrating and rejoicing, basically having a party. But then God came, and God told the angels to hush, saying, "We never celebrate the downfall of my children."

This story, though not historically verifiable, helps us interpret the Biblical text with a particular slant. We Christian theologians could exhaust hours debating the violence of the Red Sea story and the slaughter of the Egyptians; we could throw around abstract concepts concerning God's wrath, God's justice, debate whether violence is necessary for liberation, so forth and so on. But with simple story the Midrash offers us one interpretation free of complex theological jargon. God's exchange with the angels suggesting that though God joyfully delivered the Israelites, God still mourned the loss of the Egyptians, whom he also loved.

So you see, that's how Midrash works—interpretation and illumination by way of story.

And Rabbi Bentley was full of stories. He also told me that in one Midrash tradition, they say that all the Israelites had to walk into the Red Sea, up to their noses in water before the waters began to part in two. Up to their noses. Talk about faith in God.

Imagine the moment with me. You may remember, a lot of weird stuff has happened since Moses first saw the burning bush. I mean, a lot of stuff, and all of it weird. Locusts, frogs, boils, blood, like a horror film on steroids. Pharaoh finally had enough, and in the middle of an especially dark night, he went to Moses bearing the exhaustion of a very old man. "Just get out," he groaned, too doubled over in grief to really care what happened next. Of course, his grief would soon turn to rage, but there was time enough for the Israelites to embark on their exit.

From the beginning of the mass exodus, there was a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire from God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, which was cool, but the pillars lead them the long way, by the Sea, which was not as cool. At first, the Israelites didn't mind the extra distance. They were free! Who cared where they were going or how long it took. They weren't making bricks anymore, and that's all that mattered. But then they looked behind them, and lo and behold, Pharaoh had changed his tune, and the Egyptians were marching after them. It was clear from the frenzied pace of the chariots, this was no friendly farewell parade.

It's amazing how quickly freedom overwhelms, and the Israelites are ready to go back to captivity. In a way, slaves are like children—someone else feeds them, houses them, clothes them—such that when they experience freedom, it's a peculiar kind of shock. It's like when you get your very first grown-up bill in the mail, and all the sudden you'd give up your new freedom and your new apartment and take back the rules, curfews, and quirks of your parents if only you didn't have to pay that first month's rent. My little sister just started college, and Friday night she tried to convince my parents to drive out to her school and rescue her: there were mice in her dorm room. Freedom is oh so sweet . . . until mice run across your floor, until rent is due, until you look back and a whole swarm of chariots are breathing down your neck. "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" Sometimes we falsely expect freedom to be easy. We think we'll get to do whatever we want; we forget that freedom brings a whole host of challenges and responsibilities.

Did you notice that in their long list of complaints, the Israelites did not mention the name of God one time? The Egyptians behind them and the Red Sea before them became their whole reality; they removed Yahweh from the picture. Which suggests to me that the Israelites thought freedom meant they'd be on their own. They didn't yet understand that freedom is a partnership with God, that God rescues his children from enslavement *for* relationship with himself. The Israelites' false understanding of freedom isolated them from their Source of help and deliverance. They had witnessed God's power in Egypt just days before, but their memory is characteristically short, and their understanding of freedom is still immature, and thus they feel alone and lost, so much so that they'd prefer to go back.

But Moses quickly reminded the people of the partnership for which they have been freed—this miraculous partnership in which the divine chooses to engage with humanity and allows mortals to share in the glory of creation. "Do not be afraid," Moses reminded them. "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

"The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." Verse 14 appeals to the contemplative in me. "You need only to be still." Ah, be still, breathe, be silent.

But then verse 15 is rather jarring: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on!'" Be still. Move on! At first read, this feels a little contradictory to me.

But anyone who has spent much time in prayerful stillness knows that being still requires it's own kind of fight. Walking the labyrinth may be a silent kind of thing to do, but if you walk it

right, it requires something of you as you walk it. This is the paradox, the mystery of trust. Trust is surrender, but trust is never passive.

The Israelites are to trust God to fight for them, but such trust requires that they put one foot in front of the other. You see, this thing called freedom is a partnership. God is the deliverer, the conqueror, the miracle-worker, but God's people must opt to participate in the miracle. God does a lot of the work, don't get me wrong. In this particular story, it says that "all night God drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land." The sea is so massive, imagine how strong those winds must have been, and even then, it took the whole night. But the Israelites had a choice, and they chose to walk out into the middle of a Sea which great walls of raging water on either side, like monsters caged behind invisible bars, the wind whipping hard around them, surely making each step more labored, and who knows? Perhaps they even had to walk into the water up to their noses before the water parted at all?

In the ancient world, the Sea represented chaos, and the Israelites are to walk right into the middle of it. Coming from the structured life of a slave, this is scary business. No one's been that way, through the Sea, before. There is no road map. No one's been to the other side and sent back a postcard. They are stepping into the unknown.

If you remember, the whole story of the Bible begins with a sort of chaotic scene in Genesis: The earth was formless and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and what was to come next was unknown, but, the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters, about to create something new. Into that pre-world chaos, God spoke, "Let there be a vault between the water to separate water from water," and eventually, dry land appeared. God called it good, and we call it an act of creation.

And when Moses stretched his hand out over the surface of the deep waters, the water separated from the water, and dry land appeared in the middle. That language evokes the creation story, and we know now that the combination of God's great power and the Israelites' *choice* to partner with God resulted in a new kind of creation, a new identity for God's people, a new path for them to walk. The angel of the Lord moves behind the Israelites, the water forms walls on either side, which gives us this image that the Israelites, who were so scared and so fixated on their past life in Egypt, are now surrounded in such a way that they can only look forward to the re-creation happening before their eyes. God is redeeming their identity from that of slave to that of partner. God takes them to a place like the pre-creation chaos and pushes to walk through the chaos and to discover the new reality he's creating for them, something they never could have dreamed up on their own.

Rabbi Bentley told me one other story about two Israelite men walking across the dry land in the middle of the Red Sea. And apparently the land wasn't Texas-drought dry, but more like riverbank "dry," because their sandals were sinking into the mud, and with every step the mud was caking on, squeezing between their toes, clinging to their feet, and making each stride heavier with the weight of the river sludge. And the two men complained and complained to one another about the mud. They watched their feet as they walked and they bemoaned their labored path through the miry mud. Not once did they look up and marvel at the miraculous walls of water being held open to make their path.

My dearest new friends, may we marvel at the work of our Creator, who delivers us again and again and again. There is chaos ahead and mud at our feet, but may we have the courage to put one foot in front of the other, even if takes wading in up to our noses. We are in partnership with the Creator, who never quits re-creating. May the challenge of this peculiar freedom bind us to God all the days of our life, that we might walk his path and know his face and never be the same. Amen.