

Our text this morning picks up in the midst of the Exodus narrative. God has sent Moses to deliver God’s people from slavery in Egypt. God has sent plagues on Egypt, including the death of all of Egypt’s first-born sons, to demonstrate God’s power to Pharaoh and his hardened heart. The institution of Passover, a holiday still celebrated to this day by Jews around the world, is described in chapter 12 and 13. I encourage you to look back through this narrative this week because Passover is THE remembrance of God’s deliverance and is so intertwined with Easter and Christian understanding of resurrection, that I’m not sure you can fully appreciate the communion image of Christ at a Passover meal of deliverance and remembrance if you haven’t read about Passover. So, I invite you to spend some time in this story this week.

In any case, our text this morning begins after the Passover, when the Israelites have left Egypt and are headed to the promised land, following God’s pillar of cloud by day and cloud of fire by night. Pharaoh, meantime, has had his heart hardened even further by God and decides to pursue his vanishing source of free labor.

Listen now for God’s Word to us this morning from Exodus 14:10-31...

Can you imagine hearing this story around the fire? After a day of wandering in the wilderness, heading toward the Promised Land, sitting around the fire after dinner, trying to keep warm in the cool desert night. Because this is the story the Israelites told. Again and again. Still today they tell it. And so do we. This is **the** story of deliverance.

And, yes, it has the elements of a great story. There’s the **Bad Guy**—Pharaoh who just can’t let the people go, who has continued in the 400 year tradition of exploitation and slavery, has changed his mind again—just when they thought they were out of there! There are the **Suspense with the Unlikely Heroes**—How are the unarmed, whining slaves with nothing but a stuttering leader and some unleavened bread going to outrun the Egyptian Army? There is the **car chase** scene as the chariots chase after the Israelites—will they make it?!—running stop lights and plowing their chariots and horses through stop signs and ditches in an effort to catch up to the Israelites. There is the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, which I suspect were not things that the people saw every day. Physical and very visible signs of God’s direction for the people, giving **Divine Assistance to the Underdog**. And then, the best story element of them all, **the miracle**, the divine intervention.

It has been a while since I’ve seen Charlton Heston part the waters in the 10 Commandments, or even Jim Carrey parting his tomato soup in Bruce Almighty, but I noticed something in the text this week that I hadn’t before. **Parting the waters took time**. While the pillars of cloud and fire kept the two camps apart over night, Moses stretched out his hand and an east wind drove the waters back all night. This sense of the time it took for God to part the sea struck me in the text this time because I’d been thinking about the Israelites and had honestly been wondering why God was bothering to save them at all. Because, let’s remember. God has already freed them from slavery with the signs of the plagues. God has directed them where to go and is leading their very path with the pillars of cloud and fire, and what do the Israelites say when they see Pharaoh approaching?

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

These are the people God is saving! People who so quickly forget that they’ve already been delivered. People who forget at the first sign of trouble that God has already been actively working in their lives to save them.

But, when I started to think about the time that the parting of the waters took, I tried to put myself in their dusty sandals.

Imagine, your people have spent 400 years as slaves to this brutal regime of Egypt. It is all you remember. It is all anyone remembers. You escape slavery, only to turn around and see the entire Egyptian army pursuing you. You moan and whine a bit to God and to Moses about how slavery wasn't really that bad and perhaps we should just go back quietly and forget this whole rescue business, hoping that Pharaoh will appreciate your acquiescence to his brutal force. But Moses comes to the locker room at half time with a great speech:

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!!”

So, despite the fact that they are up against a large body of water and have no boats, life preservers or inner tubes, the Israelites don't turn themselves in to Pharaoh. They keep going, heading toward a big swim. And all night long, while on one side they hear the noise of the chariot wheels and the neighing of the horses, the sound of the Egyptians cooking their dinner and singing around the fire as they anticipate the rout and destruction of the foolish Israelites in the morning, on the other side they hear the wind. It is dark, so they can't see what's going on, but they can tell that something is happening on the Red Sea. And then the morning arrives. Imagine that scene coming into view as the sun creeps over the horizon.

“What happened to the Sea?!”

“Is that a wall of water? How is it staying up there?”

And perhaps this is really the miracle of the story—these people whose faith was so shaky a few verses before—these same people walk into this alley of dry land, with walls of water on either side of them. And not just one of the people. But all of them. Helping mothers push their strollers. Carrying the toddlers. Assisting those on crutches and in wheelchairs. This is about the salvation of a community, not a bunch of individuals who happen to be walking in the same place.

And before the improbable wall of water remembered it was supposed to obey the laws of gravity, they all made it across safely to the other side. And while they stood there on the other side of the Sea, watching the destruction of the Egyptian army, I suspect their first thought was relief. A realization that Pharaoh would not be chasing them any more. They were free.

And moving from anxiety to trust and faith is a process, not usually something that happens in a moment. If it took God all night long to part the red sea, perhaps we should cut the Israelites some slack for taking some time to move into their freedom.

And, before you think that this is just an interesting campfire story, or even just history, consider this—Pharaoh and his system of fear based anxiety is alive and well in this world. Every time we become comfortable in our slavery, we are like the Israelites, crying out to Moses, “Let us alone! Let us serve the Egyptians.”

The Israelites had two paths to take in this story. One of them was a final return to slavery. The other was an impossible path to deliverance through a Sea Wall of water.

When have we done that? When have you disregarded all that the world would call “common sense” and turned your back on anxiety, slavery, your fear, and walked into the impossible deliverance God had prepared for you?

A friend of mine from seminary left her abusive husband after a number of years with him. Safety, even oppressive safety, had its attraction. There were concerns in leaving him—from

where would the money come to provide for her children? What if she lost even partial custody in the divorce? Where were they going to live?

But now, a few years later, she is on the other side of the Sea and is looking forward with hope.

Another example of an impossible deliverance, and one that is still being played out today, is race relations in the United States. I suspect that few slaves in the 1850's would have believed the idea that an African American would be a major party candidate for President. I'm not sure that many African Americans would have believed it 50 years ago. But some did.

Rosa Parks, by sitting down on a bus, became a part of an impossible deliverance. Believing that God's message of deliverance was as true for her as it was for the Israelites, she rode that bus across a sea of intolerance, racism, and anxiety toward a promised land that we haven't quite yet reached.

I'm sure that many of our lives have been impacted by addictions, either our own addictions or the addictions of people we love. Addiction is a Pharaoh that keeps people in slavery to drugs, alcohol and other things that take the place of our healthy relationships. And the impossible deliverance comes from, among other things, 12 steps. It isn't immediate. It is a process, but by turning to God and trusting that God will get you through the moment, the hour, the day, a person who is addicted can put one foot in front of the other and head out of slavery and to the promised land.

And, perhaps our greatest illustration of deliverance involved an unwed pregnant teenager giving birth to a baby in a barn. The impossible deliverance of God's people from the Pharaoh of Sin was accomplished not by military might, economic power, or worldly success, but by this baby, Jesus Christ, God's own son, who died a humiliating death on a cross, finding strength in defeat and, in weakness, triumph over death itself. Impossible deliverance, indeed.

Friends, we should still be sitting around the fire telling this story to our children. As you consider where you are on this journey of deliverance, I invite you to encourage each other along this path. It is a difficult thing to turn away from the messages of Pharaoh and trust in God's deliverance. But it is what we do. And it is what we do together. Amen.