

Proper 19 A
Exodus 14:19-31
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On the Other Side
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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. God 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 God's servant Moses.

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A little Jewish boy once returned home from Hebrew school and his father asked, "What did you learn today?" The boy answered, "The Rabbi told us how Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt." "How?" his father replied. The boy said, "Moses was a big strong man and he beat Pharaoh up. Then while he was down, he got all the people together and ran towards the sea. When he got there, he has the Corps of Engineers build a huge pontoon bridge. Once they got on the other side, they blew up the bridge while the Egyptians were trying to cross." The boy's father was shocked. "Is that really what the Rabbi taught you?" he asked. The boy replied, "No. But you'd never believe the story he DID tell us!"¹

The last we heard of Moses, two weeks ago, he was taking off his sandals in front of a burning bush that talked. We learned that the voice was God's and that God told Moses to go back to Egypt, plead with Pharaoh for his people's freedom, and lead them out of slavery in Egypt. A lot happened between the burning bush and our reading for today from the book of Exodus. Moses did return to plead his people's case before Pharaoh, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. In an effort to change Pharaoh's mind, Moses called plagues down upon the Egyptians: first, the water turned to blood, then the land was overrun with frogs, then the people and livestock were afflicted with lice, then flies, then illness smote the livestock, then painful sores erupted among the people, then a thunderstorm of hail and fire, then locusts devoured the crops and plants, then darkness enveloped the land for three days, and lastly, the angel of death claimed the first born of every Egyptian household. Finally, Pharaoh agreed to let the Hebrew people

¹ "An Unbelievable Story," Haggadot.com: <https://www.haggadot.com/clip/an-unbelievable-story>.

go. They fled Egypt, but it wasn't long until Pharaoh had second thoughts and decided to pursue them. And that's where today's reading picks up the story with the defeat of Egypt at the Red Sea when Moses stretched out his hand and the dry path that had been miraculously formed through the water, closed again and washed away the great power of Egypt.

It is an unbelievable epic story, isn't it? Academic opinion on the biblical account of the Exodus ranges dramatically among both Jewish and Christian scholars. Most modern scholars date the composition of the book of Exodus to between the 9th and 5th centuries B.C.E. and favor the 13th century B.C.E. for the events described in the book of Exodus.² I am not a scholar, but I think the Exodus from Egypt and the book of Exodus itself represent ancestral or foundational myths or mythological histories. As such, they comprise "a brilliant mix of myth, cultural memories and kernels of historical truth."³

Regardless of when it was written or the historicity of the events described, the Exodus has had an effect on people the world over that can hardly be overstated. It's led to the creation of countless works of art, literature, music, and film. Beyond its original Jewish audience, it was an inspiration to early settlers in America embarking on their own exodus from Europe. It was a source of solidarity, encouragement, and hope for enslaved and formerly enslaved people of African descent in this country prior to the Civil War, throughout reconstruction, during the Jim Crow era, and during the Civil Rights movement. And it was an impetus in the development of South American Liberation Theology.

In addition to being the story of a particular people at a particular time, the Exodus continues to inspire precisely because all of us can find ourselves in it. All of us have an Egypt to escape. Right now or at some other point in our lives all of us have had, do have, or will have an Egypt

² Book of Exodus. Oxfordreference.com:
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095804691>.

³Teresa Watanabe. "Doubting the Story of Exodus," Latimes.com, April 13, 2001:
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-apr-13-mn-50481-story.html>.

to escape and this is our story too.

Whether it's a bad relationship, or a bad habit, or a dead-end job, financial hardship, or a life-changing illness, all of us face an Egypt. We can relate to this story. But our connection goes further. We are empowered by this story.

From the two midwives who refused to kill Hebrew baby boys, to the frightened mother who stowed her child in a basket and floated him down the river, to the intrepid sister Miriam who watched and intervened when a princess discovered her brother, to the hot-headed Moses who went too far when his kinsfolk were abused, to the well-spoken Aaron arguing before Pharaoh, to the Hebrew people who protected their homes and families from the final plague with blood and walked out of Egypt laden with the treasure of their oppressors, this is a story about human agency. About getting sick and tired of Egypt and actually doing something about it. We are empowered by this story. But our connection goes deeper still.

This is a story where good triumphs over evil, and we like that. The oppressed Hebrews make it out of Egypt and the hard-hearted pharaoh and his minions finally get what's coming to them. This is a story where the little guy wins. And like the Hebrew people facing down the Red Sea, we don't know what life will be like on the other side of victory, but we know it will be better than Egypt. There is something on the other side of that raging sea that makes stepping out and into the mud in faith a worthwhile risk.

In many ways, the story of the Exodus is our collective human story. Whether we're facing our Egypt now, or we're walking alongside someone who's facing theirs, or we're safely on the other side, all of us have an Egypt. All of us want to know that we have some power to fight it. All of us want to believe that good triumphs over evil. All of us want to believe that life on the other side of the sea will be better.

Even so, our Egypts can seem pretty tolerable at times. We can be afraid to take that first step. We may look back and second guess ourselves. We may get tired on the journey.

May we remember that we are never alone. Everyone has an Egypt and the road out of it is brimming with fellow travelers. May we keep hope because countless billions have walked the path before us. And may we have peace because the journey toward healing and wholeness begins with the very first step and we're leaving Egypt behind.

Amen.