

“On the Other Side of the Sea”

Reading: Exodus 14:1-14; Acts 2:1-21

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In the mid-twentieth century, there was a movement in the church in some parts of the world that came to be known as liberation theology. It arose out of a concern for unjust practices in Central America that were leading to crushing, inescapable poverty for many people, and so some church leaders began to emphasize the fact that God consistently shows concern for the poor and marginalized and He cares about things like justice and freedom and equality. Some people took liberation theology in a troubling direction and began using it to justify Marxism and violent revolution, but in spite of the problems, one of the good things about liberation theology is that it helped bring the story of the Exodus, the story of God saving His people from oppression and injustice, back into the foreground of our reading of the Bible.

In fact, we really can't overemphasize this story in the larger story of what God is doing with His people. As Christians, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the focal points of our faith; all of our events and celebrations and preaching and teaching centers on Him. Jesus is the main event in our theology. But in the Old Testament, before the event of Jesus' life, the central act of salvation, the focal point of theology, was the Exodus. For us, God saves us from sin and death through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. For the Israelites, they knew that they served a God who saves because He saved their ancestors from slavery in the Exodus event.

And of course liberation theology is right, that as Christians we affirm God's concern for freedom. The grace of God is effective in our lives and our relationships and our world; God reveals His power to transform through Christ. Central to our message is that Jesus is one who sets us free, whether we need freedom from sin, freedom from the bonds of addiction, freedom from sickness, freedom from our past, or even freedom from the cords of death; there is hope for freedom through Christ. When we talk about salvation, freedom is what we mean.

And that's good theology. We like freedom, right? Especially as Americans, freedom is kind of our thing. What do we find stamped on the front of every one of our coins? "Liberty." "Give me liberty, or give me death!" one of our forefathers said, and that's part of our American spirit: freedom is worth fighting to the death over. Freedom from tyranny, freedom from oppression, freedom from too much government interference or too much taxation; these are all part of our national self-identity. And we are truly blessed to have the freedoms we have. But as much as I hear about freedom *from*, something that I don't hear as much about, and I wish I did, is freedom *for*. Okay, so you want to be free from tyranny. Why? What is your freedom *for*? What are you going to do with it? Because I'm afraid some people get to thinking that their freedom is there so that we can all be free to do whatever we want, which sounds to me like kind of a selfish use of our freedom. I'm free from tyranny so I can do what I want to do. Well, yes, that's true, but what's your freedom *for*?

We read in our chapter of The Story this week about God's showdown with Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and his gods. In the last few chapters, our God has started the ages-long project of redeeming the wonderful creation He made that was damaged by our rebellion against Him. He planted the tiniest seeds of a new creation right in the midst of the old one on what would appear at first glance to be a rabbit trail, a distraction, a totally different story. But it's not a distraction. The

plan is to cultivate a relationship with one small family and through them build a nation that is bought back from sin and is loyal to God, and then through that family, build a relationship of blessing and salvation with other nations to eventually redeem the whole world.

But God's people have become trapped in a land that is not their own and is not a part of God's promise to them, and they have been enslaved by the Egyptians. God hears their cries for relief, and sends Moses and Aaron as their deliverers. He has to send a series of ten plagues on Egypt to prove His power to Pharaoh, with each plague serving as a duel between God's power and the power of Egypt's false gods. And eventually God's people are set free from slavery, though Pharaoh changes his mind and begins to pursue them, which is the setting for our reading for today. They watch as God literally parts the sea for them, and they march through it to safety on the other side, and the sea closes in over their pursuers. They are now truly free from slavery.

But an interesting thing starts to reveal itself, especially once they're on the other side of the sea. Even before they cross the sea, when they see Pharaoh's armies coming for them, their reaction is to complain that "it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert." Later on, as they travel through the wilderness, again and again and again they complain to Moses about their circumstances. They grumble when they can't find water, and they grumble about the food, and then they grumble because they don't like the food that they get. They start thinking that maybe it wasn't so bad in slavery, because at least then they had different kinds of food. At one point they even said, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?" That's gratitude for you.

They have been set free *from* slavery, but they don't yet seem to know what they're set free *for*. God has started a work of freedom in them, but they're not done yet. They have died to their lives in Egypt, so to speak, but they haven't yet received new lives. They're not the only ones. The same thing still happens. Sometimes today we find ourselves on the other side of the sea, set free from slavery with our pursuer drowned behind us, but we don't yet know what we're set free for. It's only natural; when you're trying to get free, freedom *from* is the only thing you can think about, and you'll worry about what happens afterward later. But freedom *from* is not the end of the story.

I've been trying to think if I've ever been properly chased by a terrifying animal before, and I'm not sure I have. Maybe I should put that on my list of things to experience before I die; it seems like one of those adventures everyone should have once. Though, of course, if one goes and try to get a bear to chase you, it may be an adventure that you *only* have once. I remember one time I was out for a jog, back when I was trying to convince myself that I liked running, and a little dog came running out of someone's yard to chase me. Some people say you're just supposed to ignore them and keep running when dogs do that, but in this case I decided to stop, face the little bugger, and stare him down. I did it partly because I figured that if it was going to attack me, I'd better at least be facing it, but mostly I think I just didn't like the idea of running away from a little ankle biter. Sure enough, in that case, the dog stopped when I stopped, and then it went away and left me alone.

In most cases, though, it seems to me that if you're being chased by something that wants to eat you or attack you, it's a safe bet that the only thing on your mind is getting out of there as fast as possible. If you're being chased, you run until you're not being chased, or you hide, or whatever it takes to escape. If you're trapped or oppressed or ensnared or enslaved, the most important thing to

you is getting out of it. But then what? What happens when you're safely on the other side of the sea?

It's a legitimate question for us today, because we still preach that God sets people free in Christ. It is the core of our message and our hope that you, no matter who you are or where you are or what you have done, can have hope of freedom in Christ because of what He has done for you. The old life can pass away, and the new can arrive for you. But what about the in between time, when you've crossed the sea and left the old life behind, but you're not yet to the new one? The thing is, sometimes when you're on the run and you're heading into the unknown, when you've got a new life of freedom ahead of you but you don't yet know what it looks like, sometimes the old, familiar life doesn't sound so bad anymore, even though it was a life in slavery.

Sometimes we get stuck by that seashore and we don't go on to the life of freedom *for* that was the intent all along. Sometimes, like the Israelites, we get scared of what we don't know, and we start to want to head back into captivity because as bad as it was, at least it's familiar. Maybe when we've been set free from sin we've seen God do miraculous things in our lives, He's parted the sea for us to set us free, so we set up camp right there and bask in the glory of what He did, and we never go on to see the glory that's waiting for us. Maybe as we start to journey with God in our newfound freedom we realize that it's not as easy as we'd hoped, and maybe God is asking us to do some unexpectedly hard things, and so we start to grumble about this new freedom we have. What do we do once we're on the other side of the sea?

The Exodus event is indeed one of the most important events in the Bible; it is one of the definitive events that prove to us that our God saves. In fact, throughout the Old Testament, the Exodus is one of the ways of identifying God: over and over and over again, He is referred to as the God "who brought you out of Egypt" or something similar. We know who He is because He saves us. And likewise, that Exodus event identified God's people as well. Time and time again, He commands them to be compassionate toward the marginalized, because they were once slaves themselves. The fact that they have been set free from slavery defines who they are, at least in part. But it's not their whole identity, because they don't yet know what they're free for.

The followers of Jesus, some thousand years after the Exodus, were still making sense of Jesus' death and resurrection when it was revealed to them what they were set free for. They had come through the crisis of Jesus' death and resurrection; they were on the other side of the sea, wondering what was next. Then Holy Spirit came upon them while they were in prayer on the Pentecost holiday, filled them, gifted them, and sent them out in mission as the church. Setting the Israelites free from slavery was one huge step toward giving them freedom in the Promised Land as the people of God; setting us free from sin and death through the work of Jesus was one huge step toward giving us the freedom of life in the Spirit. In other words, we cannot truly make the best use of our freedom from sin unless we are living in the Spirit of God. We are set free for His gifting and mission. We are set free so that He can teach us to love. We are set free so that He can craft us into the people of God, marked by Christ. We are set free so that He can transform us as His church into the hands and feet of Jesus Christ. We rejoice that Christ sets us free from sin, but until we are set free for His mission to transform us and the world, we, like the Israelites that day, are stuck by the side of the sea.



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