

October 2, 2022
Exodus 14:5-7, 10-16, 21-29
First Presbyterian Church, Concord
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As a reminder of where we are: The Hebrew people are enslaved in Egypt and Pharaoh feels threatened by them. Pharaoh's order that all Hebrew boys be killed at birth is thwarted by two courageous midwives. Next Pharaoh orders all Hebrew baby boys be thrown into the Nile.

This is when Moses enters the scene. To keep him safe, his mother puts him in an ark made of reeds and sends him floating down the river. The baby is found by the daughter of Pharaoh. She adopts him and Moses grows up surrounded by the wealth and privilege of palace life. At some point, Moses is moved to stand up for his kinsmen. He protests the beating of a Hebrew slave, and ultimately kills an Egyptian guard. Moses flees to the wilderness and lives as a shepherd.

Back in Egypt, Scripture says: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." ¹

It is then that God appears to Moses in a burning bush and commissions him to return to Egypt and go to Pharaoh with the message: "Let my people go." Pharaoh resists. God persists, through a series of plagues. After the last plague, the death of every first-born Egyptian child, (the Hebrew first-borns are spared, by the way) Pharaoh says the people can go. The Egyptians hurry the Israelites out of town, giving them their gold and silver too. It doesn't take long for Pharaoh to change his mind and decide he made a mistake in letting the people go.

Exodus 14: 5-15, 21-29

As I reflected on this story in the past few days, the images of the destruction wrought by Hurricane Ian have been fresh on my mind. Most of us have seen videos of water surging from the ocean at tremendous speed, overflowing bulkheads and covering towns and neighborhoods. I heard one man speak of riding out the hurricane in a large boat. At one point, he said the boat rose to the height of the power lines! We have seen the destructive power of water as it slammed boats and cars into houses and buildings, leaving rubble in its wake. Water is life-giving and it is powerful and it can be a destructive force.

I admit. When I try to imagine this story unfolding, my mind goes straight to the film version starring Charlton Heston. If you are of a certain age, perhaps you do as well. In this particular Exodus scene, Heston, as a tan, blue-eyed Moses with great hair, stands confidently with his arms outstretched. The sea divides into two walls of water as the Israelites cross, readily and without hesitation, on the dry ground.

Really? Do we think the people are not frightened out of their wits by all that water? So much of the complexity of the Biblical text is left out in this particular scene.

At least in *The Prince of Egypt*, DreamWorks animated movie, the fear and hesitation of the people is on full display as they face the sea. Even Moses looks afraid.

In our reading today, the journey into a new life has just begun for the Israelites. This journey from slavery to freedom is a huge change in their life together. They are just beginning to allow themselves to dream of the possibilities of a life lived in freedom. And then...fear gets a hold on them. They look back and find Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit. The Israelites feel trapped. When they look backwards, they see Pharaoh's army barreling towards them with chariots and spears. Yet, when they look forward, they see chaos, the churning water of the sea, much too deep to swim, with its opposite bank much too far away. And I imagine, if they looked down, they saw their own children, hanging on to them for dear life, eyes as big as saucers. Of course, hope wanes and fear takes over! They complain to Moses...because...well, fear likes a scapegoat. "What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Were there no graves there? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?"

In their fear, they momentarily forget why they left Egypt in the first place. "Maybe slavery wasn't so bad after all. We can endure the sting of the whip and the back breaking work of brick making. At least we would be alive. At least we would have something to eat and a place to sleep. At least the children would live." Trapped between Pharaoh's army and a sea of chaos, their hopes and dreams of a life of freedom vanish and they cannot imagine that anything good lies ahead.

When I lived in Richmond, I spent many years volunteering at a Shelter for Victims of Domestic Violence, mostly answering the hotline. I am aware that both men and women are victims of domestic violence but in the 80's, only women called the hotline. I heard harrowing tales of both physical and emotional abuse. Women talked with hope about leaving their abuser and finding safety for themselves and their children. Yet taking that first step is hard. It takes, on average, seven times for a woman to leave an abusive relationship before she can leave it permanently behind.

She looks behind her and sees the abuse and knows that this is not the way it is supposed to be. Yet, when she looks forward, she sees a great unknown and worries: "What if he finds me? Where will we live? How can I provide for my family? What will my family and friends think? Will they believe me? What if he sues for custody? Is it possible he could win? He is well thought of in the community, you know." Like the Israelites, the waves of chaos and the unfamiliar landscape ahead sometimes seem worse than what she is trying to escape.

You don't have to be in an abusive home or have Pharaoh breathing down your neck to understand how this feels- to know what it is like "to stand between the old life that leads only to dead ends"ⁱⁱ and a new life filled with unknowns. Some of us know what it is like to stand between an old life that is no longer available because of death or disease or disaster and a completely unfamiliar landscape that is the future. It is easy for hope to be overcome by fear.

As the Israelites are standing between the old life and the new, feeling trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea, as it were, Moses says this: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. “As long as the people focus on Egyptians, fear will paralyze them. Moses calls the people to redirect their looking ⁱⁱⁱ- to remember the God who heard their cries and came to save them- the God who remembered God’s covenant with their ancestors and has already been active in their midst to free them. Moses calls them to trust this God of the covenant- a God who makes a way out of no way- a God who is already shown to be on the side of the poor and the oppressed, the God who wants freedom for all God’s children- freedom from slavery and oppressive economic and social systems freedom from poverty and hunger; gang violence and war... and also freedom from abusive homes, addiction, paralyzing grief, and anything that stands in the way of abundant life.

Someone in Bible study said, “That sounds great! God makes a way out of no way-Just trust God.” But when walls of water are closing in around you, when all you can see is chaos, how do you keep the faith, how do you maintain hope? It’s a good question.

There is a Jewish midrash on this text. A midrash is a kind of literature written by rabbis that flows out of studying the Torah. The rabbis were puzzled over verse 14: “The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground.” Why “into?” they asked. Why not say “they went on dry ground through the sea?” Why “into the sea?” The ancient Rabbi Judah answers the question this way:

When Moses raised his staff, nothing happened to the Red Sea. The Lord said, “What are you waiting for?” So the twelve tribes of Israel started arguing about who would have “the honor” of going into the sea first. As they argued, a man named Nahshon, brother-in-law of Aaron, the brother of Moses and Miriam, takes the first step into the swirling sea. He walks into the sea up to his ankles. Nothing happens. He keeps walking... until the waters are up to his waist...his chest...and then his neck. The people are watching. Nothing happens. Still, he keeps walking in faith. When the waters reach his nostrils, the Sea opens up and the waters become dry ground, just as God promised. It is as Nahshon walks forward in faith, trusting the promises of God, that the way appears. And this one act of courage and trust from within the community emboldens all of them to step into a new life of freedom.^{iv}

Maybe holding onto hope in the face of a future filled with unknowns, maybe keeping faith when the army is behind you and the sea of chaos is before, is as simple and as hard as taking one step, and then another, and another as Nahshon did- deciding to doubt your own doubts, trusting that God will indeed make a way though you cannot see it or even imagine it. And when even one step is impossible? Well, that is when we lean on the community. That’s when we allow the community to be Nahshon to us, helping us to discover our courage and hope, helping us to beat back the fear that threatens to overwhelm us.

It is often when women in abusive homes connect with others who have experienced the same thing and gotten to the other side of the sea that they gain the courage to take the first step. It is what Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is doing in Florida and SC even now- providing tangible help and support to those who have lost so much so that they can begin to take the first steps necessary. It is the idea behind AA, and refugee resettlement agencies, and Habitat for Humanity and so many other organizations. The community surrounds those who are stuck with love and tangible support to give them the courage to move into a new life. And, friends, that is what we as the church are called to do-to be Nahshon to one another and to the broader community and world.

Today we come to the table today as free people. In Christ we have been freed from the bondage of sin, and we are freed for service in Christ's name. Christ wants all God's children to be free of all that distorts and diminishes the abundant life he brings.

To whom are we, to whom are you called to be Nahshon today?

One more thing, and I quote Shannon Kershner here:

"If you go to the genealogy of Jesus as recorded in the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, you will find the following in verse 4:

"Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab, the father of Nahshon."

[Nashon is part of Jesus' family tree!]Now doesn't that say something about this God who makes a way no one can image, a God who can make a way of salvation that begins in a manger, in the middle of nowhere, yet becomes the way that leads to the reconciliation and healing for creation.

That's Hope with a capital H." ^v

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 2:23-25

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter's Bible*, pg.793

^{iv} adapted from the retelling by Shannon Kirshner in her sermon, *Backwards and Forwards*, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2014/091414.html>

^v Kirshner