Exodus 14: 5-8, 10-14, 19-25
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Daring to Trust

Last week's text left off with Joseph, Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson in prison, a trusted leader in the mind of the head jailer. While behind bars, Jospeh reveals that he is not only a dreamer but also gifted interpreter of dreams, leading Pharaoh to ask for his help. In Pharaoh's dreams Joseph sees promises of plentiful years and warnings of an impending famine and suggests that the king make plans accordingly. Joseph winds up serving as Pharaoh's second in command, entrusted with decisions that ultimately save Egypt and Joseph's own family from starvation. Joseph's brothers and father settle in Egypt, meaning the twelve tribes of Israel grow and thrive there for generations. The book of Exodus begins by telling us, "Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph."[1] Threatened by the growing population of outsiders, Pharaoh decides that they must be put in their place, so he enslaves them and oppresses them with forced labor. And their numbers continue to grow. Increasingly frightened, the king instructs midwives to kill baby Hebrew boys upon birth. When that plan does not work, thanks to the courage of midwives like Shiphrah and Puah, Pharoah calls on every Egyptian to throw every baby Hebrew boy into the Nile. One Hebrew baby who avoids this fate is of course Moses. Placed in a basket by his mother and pulled from the water by a daughter of Pharaoh, Moses grows up under Pharaoh's nose. After killing an Egyptian guard he witnessed beating a Hebrew, Moses flees to the wilderness. Through the power of a

[1] Exodus 1:8, NRSVue

burning bush, God calls Moses back to Egypt to free the Hebrews from Egypt's grasp. And after ten plagues, including the final plague when every Egyptian firstborn is killed overnight, Pharaoh relents and tells Moses to take the people and leave. [Read Exodus 14: 5-8, 10-14, 19-25]

Until now the Hebrews have not known anything beyond the oppressive grind of slavery. Every hour of their day has been planned for them. Every meal, every move, every breath has been dictated by Pharaoh's whims. They have crafted brick upon brick with their hands and broken their backs building cities for Pharaoh's regime. All because Pharaoh is terrified of what they might do. And after God pummels the Egyptians with lice, flies, fleas, frogs, and the death of their firstborns, including Pharaoh's own son, Pharaoh is frightened in a different way and tells them to leave. And then he and his advisors realize what they have done. Their fear has resulted in the decimation of the workforce that has built the empire. Without the Hebrews the empire building grinds to a halt. "What have we done?" they wonder with one another. And so they decide to chase down the very ones whom Pharaoh told to go.

As a child I sang about the Hebrews being "Freedom Fanatics" in a musical by the same name. The Hebrews do not seem to be all that fanatical about freedom in this moment. They are panicked. Pinned between Pharaoh's army and the sea, they cry out to Moses, "What have *you* done?" They blame him and bemoan the dead end they face, because that is the only thing they can see ahead:

> Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very

thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.[2]

A scholar I listened to this past week referred to this chorus as the Back to Egypt committee, asserting that every church, every seminary, every institution has one.[3] He's not wrong. In every institution there are those who clamor for things to go back to the way things were. In just over 30 years of ordained ministry I have served on the staff of one seminary and seven different congregations. Each one has had some form of the Back to Egypt committee, and on occasion I have been a vocal supporter of that committee if not a charter member. In those moments, I have struggled to see how a new thing, a creative turn, a bold initiative could really work. I have been the first to grumble, an early voice to cast doubts, even if only in my own mind. And very little that came before for me resembled Egypt. Much of what came before was good and lovely. I would not be where I am without the church of my childhood and all that came with it. It makes sense that I might be nostalgic for much if not all that came before. And yet, there is no going back. That old life no longer exists, nor can it be retrieved, which means I am occasionally tempted to grumble about and even doubt what lies ahead. And if I am honest, those grumbles, those doubts almost always arise from fear—fear of the unknown, fear of failing, fear of getting it wrong, whatever *it* might be.

It is fear that has a grip on the Hebrews too. All they can see is that they are trapped between an army and the sea. They insist that the life they knew before is a better option than

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[2] Exodus 14: 11-12, NRSVue

[3] https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/680-rescue-at-sea-october-4-2026

the place where they find themselves. They have no way to fight back, and they cannot imagine a way to navigate the water. That imagination piece is crucial. Fear has a way of silencing imagination. Fear tells them that a life of oppression under the thumb of an empire is superior to the unknown future in front of them, because while it was awful, it was also familiar. They cannot begin to imagine another way or another life.

Moses does not berate the Hebrews for their fear. He tells them not to let fear have the last word. He tells them to stand firm, and to watch as God fights for them. In other words, he tells them to trust the God who has brought them this far, the God who has liberated them from Pharaoh. Pharaoh will not and cannot save them. Pharaoh wants to drag them back into slavery; Pharaoh has no concern for their wellbeing, let alone their thriving. Pharaoh cannot and will not make them whole. God can. So Moses tells them to stand firm, to trust, and to watch God work. They have been captive for generations; their imaginations have been captive, too. They need to be taught how to imagine that a new life is possible.

And God parts the waters, just as God did at the dawn of creation. God makes a new way, a new beginning, a new world by leading them through the sea, with walls of water on either side. They have heard stories about water, the waters parted at creation, the water that covered the world during the flood. And here God uses water to mark a new beginning, a way forward. And at the same time the fire and the cloud, signs of God's presence move from leading them forward in the front to standing between them and all that threatens them from behind, preventing them from going back.

This afternoon, Casey and I will gather with this year's confirmation class. Between now and the Sunday when they will be confirmed in February, we will discuss and explore the big questions they will answer on that Sunday, the same questions our new members answered last week. And this afternoon we will begin with the first part of the first question, "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God." It is easy to pass over those words, hearing them as a nice preface, a pretty introductory phrase, but those words are crucial. To respond to God's call upon our lives, we have to be able to trust God. And trusting is not always easy. Ahead of this afternoon's class I asked the parents and the students to talk a bit about trust and grace and mercy at home, to talk about how they would define these terms in their own words. Some of our confirmands were baptized as infants in this chancel. In those moments this community promised those children and those parents that we would nurture them in the life of faith. What have we taught them about trusting God? What are we teaching them now? What does trusting God look like or feel like for them or for us? In a time when trust is in short supply in the larger world, what shape does trusting God take? *Do* we trust God? *Do* I trust God? Enough not to romanticize the old life? Enough not to try and race back to that life? Enough to keep walking toward the sea?

On my good days, yes. And then there are days when fear, nostalgia, and cynicism yell loudly in my ear, all but drowning out the persistent whisper of grace. And on those days, by the gracious mercy of God, through the words of a friend, through the laughter of a child, through the honest wisdom of voices in bible study, through the prayer of an acquaintance, through a simple meal of bread and juice shared around this table, I am reminded of God's

faithfulness, of God's steady, stubborn, unyielding love for me, for us, and for this entire frightened, fretful world, and my heart dares to trust once more. Because the old life is not the answer. The past cannot and will not save me. Pharaoh cannot and will not save me, nor can I save myself. God can, God will, and God does, over and over and over again, and so I venture another step toward the water, emboldened by the footsteps of the ones who have gone before me and the ones who walk alongside me even now, daring to trust that God will make a way.

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