

“Crossing the Red Sea”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, September 17, 2017

Exodus 14

Do you have trust issues? We’ve all had trust issues at some point in our life. I remembered an experience around trust that I had as a child. As I mentioned in the sermon last week, our family would travel to Florida every July for our summer vacation. We stayed in a small motel that had a kitchenette and enough room for all of us to sleep. It was on the south end of Daytona beach.

And my father would say to me, “Want to go out in the waves?” Which involved me climbing up on his shoulders and hanging on for dear life while he walked through the waves. I was terrified because I thought the waves would push him over. In hindsight I realize that the waves were about a foot high but as a little girl I had to trust that my father wouldn’t let me go. And he never did.

Today’s Exodus passage sits in that experience of being fearful and yet trying your hardest to trust at the same time. The Israelites are on the run from the Egyptian army. A few verses before our text, we read this: “As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, “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.” On the brink of their day of salvation, of their freedom from slavery, their courage has disappeared.

Moses says to them, “Do not be afraid, stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will accomplish for you today.” For 430 years the Israelites had been enslaved by the Pharaoh. It had been a way of life for generations. Most recently they had endured the devastating plagues on the land and people of Egypt. God had sent ten plagues in order to convince Pharaoh to let God’s people go.

God turned the waters of the Nile to blood. Frogs covered the land, followed by gnats and then flies. All the livestock died. Then everyone was covered in boils. Hail destroyed all the crops, and then locusts came and ate everything that was left. Darkness covered the land for 3 days. And lastly, all the firstborn sons died. And only then did Pharaoh relent and let the people go. But then he decided that he wanted them back and set his army after them. And here, as the Israelites stand on the edge of their freedom, at the shores of the Red Sea, they begin to have trust issues.

It is much harder to find the courage to move forward when the hardship you have known is more acceptable than the uncertainty of the future. We can see the path ahead and we are very aware of what we’re leaving behind. And it is as if we have the walls of the red sea water to the left and to the right of us as we begin to walk that path, trusting in God, but very aware that the

walls to the left and to the right could come crashing down on us at any moment. “God keep us safe”, we’ll say. “God, get me through this”, we’ll say.

What is it that enables us to go from moments of great certainty and knowing, to absolute doubt and uncertainty? It’s as if we have a toggle switch in our brains that switches from trust and hope, to doubt and despair.

And so, while I find it hard to believe that the Israelites begin to wish they had stayed back in Egypt as bad as it was rather than face this unknown future, I understand it, and you understand it. Because we do move from certainty to uncertainty very quickly when faced with fear.

The Israelites are in the position of facing death by the sword, or death by drowning. They shout in their frustration, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?’

And yet, God listens to their words. And God delivers them. Moses stretches his hand over the sea and the waters part – it took a while – all night in fact, but by daybreak, there was a discernable strip of dry land for the Israelites to walk to the other side on. We’ve seen the Charlton Heston movie where the walls of water seem to be impossibly rushing upwards and downwards and the power of the moving water is a terrifying sight. Hollywood certainly upped the fear factor in that scene.

My commentary mentioned that the first person to step onto that dry strip of land between the walls of water was a boy. “Jewish legend praises a boy, Nachshon ben Aminnaddab, who first stepped between the walls of water”¹ And so the curiosity of a boy led them out into the path that would lead them to the promised land.

The story of the crossing of the Red Sea is the bedrock of the faith of the Israelites. For it is their salvation story. Exodus 14:30, “The Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians.”.

And it is this story of the Crossing of the Red Sea that is read as part of the Easter Vigil. The Easter Vigil is the worship service that is held on the Saturday night before Easter Sunday. The readings for the Vigil remind the worshipper of the story of God’s relationship with the Israelites, of God’s enduring promise to be their God. The story of Israel’s salvation as God delivered the people from slavery into freedom becomes part of the salvation story of our Christian faith.

Adult baptism is often a part of the Easter Vigil. As the adults are baptized with the waters of baptism, they symbolically die to their sins and rise to new life in that water. And so the baptismal experience echoes the salvation story of the Israelites as they walked through the waters to the promised land, moving from death to life, from bondage to freedom.

Exodus 15 continues with the celebration of the Israelites after they have crossed the Red Sea and found their freedom from captivity. Miriam, Moses and Aaron’s sister, takes a

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2, p. 331

tambourine in her hand and all the women go out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And they sing a victory song, ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.’ (15:21).

In the 4th century, Bishop Jacob of Sarug linked Miriam and the Israelite women to Mary and Christian women.² For in Matthew 28 we read how the women at the tomb were the first to know the glorious news: “So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.” (Matthew 28:8)

Miriam and the women, in their joy, take up their tambourines and dance and sing. For God has triumphed gloriously. Mary and the women, in their joy, run to tell the great news, ‘He is risen!’. Jesus has triumphed gloriously.

And so in the worship service of Easter Vigil there is this wonderful meeting of the themes of salvation from the Old Testament and the New Testament, in the story of Salvation, in the movement from death to life, from bondage to freedom. Jesus is risen, the waters are crossed, and the people of God continue to walk forward, trusting in God.³

The dance of Miriam and the women, the dance of Mary and the women, belongs to everyone who has been set free by God. It is the dance that celebrates our release from what has held us back, and to move forward with courage and hopefulness as God leads us into new life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Feasting on the Word, Year A. Vol 2, p. 332

³ Feasting on the Word, Year A. Vol 2, p. 332