



“Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea”

Text: Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

Sunday, September 30, 2018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The story of Israel’s escape from Egypt is the central event of the Old Testament. Nothing is more important than God’s action on behalf of Israel in setting them free from slavery and seeing them safely into the land of promise. What the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to the New Testament and Christian people, so is the story of the Exodus to the Old Testament and the people of Israel.

But we need to get something straight. This story of Exodus – of liberation from enslavement and the journey to freedom – is our story, too. One of the things I love about worshiping with Jews is that the pronouns are never “they” or “them.” The pronouns are always “we” and “us.” The closest I’ve ever come to hearing it, in a Christian setting, is when people like Mary Dannettell and other older members of the church, deeply connected to its history, would tell the story of our congregation with phrases like, “now, when we were the Walnut Street Church,” or “when we had pastor so-and-so” (who was here a hundred years ago). The story was both ancient and modern - history and contemporary. It is *our* story. It is a narrative which we share and in which we play a part. The story of the Exodus is our story. It is a narrative which we share and in which we play a part.

The story and its set-up are well known. Israel has been enslaved in Egypt. Moses has been born and grows up in the Pharaoh's house, kills an Egyptian overseer abusing an Israelite slave, flees for safety, encounters God and receives God's calling to be God's chosen leader. Moses goes back to Egypt, speaks God's word of liberation, and is rejected by the Pharaoh. Plagues come upon the land of Egypt, with the final plague being the death of the first born, which finally breaks Pharaoh's resolve and the Israelites are told to leave Egypt and to take with them the plunder they can carry and haul away, and off they go.

Then, Pharaoh looks around and sees what life without his workforce will be like. He doesn't like what he sees. He changes his mind. Imagine that, a politician that has a change of mind! He sends the chariots and the army after the Israelites to recapture them and bring them back to their servitude.

Now, the part we didn't read this morning is where God tells Moses to lead the people in a particular way. That particular way leads back toward the sea. God intentionally sends the people back toward the sea, causing Pharaoh to think that they are woefully lost and wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. God says to Moses, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 14:4) Beyond setting the Israelites free, God has another lesson to teach Pharaoh. That lesson is simply this: I am the Lord - not you.

But consider the people. They are standing on the seashore. In front of them is a body of water, described as a sea. Behind them is an army of foot soldiers and charioteers. They are literally between the devil and the deep blue sea. And the people begin to panic. "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 and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Moses speaks to the people. The first thing he says is, "Do not be afraid." Don't you love that? It's like the old line from the comedic sketch when the leader says, "This is no time to panic" and the people respond, "When will it be a good time to panic?" There are times when fear is real and overpowering - like when an army is bearing down on you, or when you are in exile in a strange land, or when the sky is filled with angels singing in the night. "Do not be afraid."

And then, "Stand firm." Think of it as "get ready and watch." Moses is telling them that they don't have to worry about standing up to Pharaoh and his army. They don't need to get their armaments. They don't need to devise and develop defensive positions or attack formations. "The Lord will fight for you." Put it another way: "God is with us."

And what happens then we all know. The pillar of cloud that had led the Israelites came behind them, blocking the Pharaoh's approach. A wind from the east blew all night, blowing back the waters and making a way through the sea - a new act of creation, creating dry land in the midst of the waters. The Israelites pass through the sea and when they are safely on the other side, the waters return to their appointed place, bogging down and, according to one tradition, wiping out the army and horsemen.

God made a way when there was no way. When the people were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, God simply moved the deep blue sea. When God had created the people for freedom, God made sure that they would not be returned to slavery. When there was nowhere to go, God made a new way.

Do you need me to finish this sermon? Do you need me to remind you of all the times each one of us has faced the sea with an army coming up behind us? Do you need me to remind you of the sheer number of times that God has made a way when there was no way?

There are times when we wonder if God is concerned or interested in what we are living through. It may be an illness that threatens to drag us down. It may be the demise of a relationship that we thought would bring us meaning and purpose. It may be the betrayal of a friend or a family member. It may be a death of one we loved too much to lose. It may be watching our child go through a terrible time without the ability to make it better. "Where is God?" we cry out. "Doesn't God care?"

Sometimes it's hard to know where God is, or why God doesn't just make everything the way we want it to be. All those clever little sayings that people post of Facebook - "when God closes a door, he opens a window" - "it is always darkest before the dawn" - to receive a blessing copy and paste this as your status - that's all just people trying to make sense of nonsense - which is, of course, an impossible task.

Here's what I know: God doesn't abandon us. God doesn't forsake us. God doesn't leave us to our own devices. God doesn't smack us down or punish us in the way most people believe.

The word from God is, most always, "Don't be afraid...be still and watch what I will do." Do not let your fear control you, or manipulate you, or speak through you. Don't use your fear to make others do what you want them to do. Put away your fear, because love always casts out fear. And then watch for what God will do. Watch how God goes about making a way through the sea of doubt and worry. Watch how God opens up a way through the swamp of fear and anger. Watch how God opens the clouded heavens of your troubles and lets the pure joy of God's own light shine in. No matter how shadowed the path, no matter how deep the grief, no matter how raw the feeling - God is with you - with us.

This is our story. God has set us free. God has done great things.
God continues to make all things new.

There's the good news. We are never caught between the devil and
the deep blue sea. God always makes a way.

Always.

For now and evermore. Amen.



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

First Presbyterian Church
is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
of Presbyterians.

