

**Exodus 14:10-29**

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? 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.’ But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.’

Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.’

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.’

Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.’ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not

one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

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Sometimes we read scripture, and sometimes scripture reads us. For anyone who has ever felt themselves between a hard place and a rock, they will instantly understand some of the emotions as the narrative plods through chapter 14. And truth be told, most all of us have been in such a tight spot and needed to deal with the raw feelings generated when such circumstances unfold. In contemplating the section of Exodus 14 Tammy just read, a lectionary offering of the day, I felt drawn into the story. The text was reading me. Some call this a “sacred reading” of scripture.

A sacred reading of a biblical text does not require knowing the ancient languages or theological streams. Such learning can enrich the experience or detract from it. Many call this form of bible study *Lectio Divina*, so named by 12<sup>th</sup> century Benedictine priest and prior Guigo II. It is a four-step process and here is how it works.<sup>1</sup>

1. *Lectio*/ Read: read the biblical text slowly several times
2. *Meditatio* / Meditate: consider those parts of the text to which we are drawn, the feelings and emotions generated with us
3. *Oratio* / Pray: in relation to the words, phrases and feeling to which we are drawn, ask God for illumination, guidance, and potential action
4. *Contemplatio* / Contemplation: rest in God’s presence; abide in God’s presence

It is something I strive to do with a scripture text prior to a sermon. It is what I did with Exodus 14. It brought to my mind, heart and gut those emotions from moments I have found myself in a precarious position.

There are times we hear the distant thunder of the war horses on the move. The instinct is to get out of the way, as far away as possible. What happens when there is no way out? We have often heard of the fight or flight responses, but that theory has been expanded. Now psychologists talk about fight, flight or freeze.<sup>2</sup>

Fight and flight are pretty easy to understand. Freeze is a type of defense mechanism as well. As I was meditating on this part of Exodus 14 I began to realize that I am often a paralysis person rather than one who fights or flees. I am not alone. Think about the opossum who plays dead when surprised or under duress. Think about that deer which suddenly appears in the headlights of an on-coming vehicle and doesn’t move—why did it not run?, we ask. They too freeze up when surprised or ambushed.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), pp 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> [Understanding Fight, Flight, Freeze, and the Feign Response | Psychology Today](#)

The trapped Hebrews have not frozen. With no where to run, the fight with their words. They raise a loud complaint. Yes, complaining is a part of this Exodus story. The Hebrews are professional bellyachers through most of Exodus. Surely God could have found a more gracious people for Divine selection, but maybe that is a lesson which is important for the generations of God's people to hear. They launch three angry questions at Moses. In their tirade, they mention Egypt five times. "It is the only name they know, that name upon which they rely, the name they love to sound. In the speech of the protesting, distrusting people, the name of Yahweh, however, is completely absent. They do not perceive Yahweh as being in any way a pertinent, active member of the plot".<sup>3</sup> Here is the score line: Yahweh—0; Egypt—5; not a great one for the maker of heaven and earth.

This episode invites us to consider the other gods to which we turn when feeling the pinch. Are we drawn to shopping to comfort ourselves? Are we drawn to booze to ease the pain? Are we drawn to alternative realities like gaming or Netflix to escape? These are some of the questions I was pondering. In this process I reaffirmed my desire to be a Yahweh person recognizing that too often I find myself thinking about Egypt.

There is wisdom in forming healthy spiritual habits when times are good; they can become reflexive and ground a person in crisis situations. This is the power of forming good habits—be it with food, exercise, or spirituality. If we can form good spiritual habits, like calling upon Christ to shed light and love on our dyings or any number of other mantras, it becomes easier in the challenging times.

The biblical narrative as a whole, I would suggest, describe God as inviting our laments and complaints. Nearly half of the Psalms in the Psalm books in your pew are either private or communal laments. God is the good shepherd in Psalm 23 guiding the Psalmist in dark valleys, in the midst of enemies, and into eternity. In John 10, Jesus is the shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep. Do we think we need to be perfect to approach God with or grief or to be found by Jesus?

To this question I offer a theological reflection on the Red Sea crossing from a commentary co-authored by Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa and James Newsome. They write, "As the story is crafted in this reading, it is a narrative "toward faith."... The salvation of Israel, then, has nothing to do with the people's strength or cleverness, for if left to their own devices, they would never have emerged from slavery. The salvation of Israel was nothing other than the work of God...The walls of water that hold the sea at bay are emblematic of Yahweh's grace, which protects and shelters the people...That which Israel could not do for itself was accomplished by Yahweh, not because Israel deserved to be

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes—* *vol 1*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 793

saved or contributed to its own redemption, but simply because Yahweh, a God of justice and mercy, chose to deliver people from their oppression”.<sup>4</sup>

I like that quote. The story describes a people moving toward faith, and God has mercy on their inadequacies. The story details a people more interested in Egypt than Yahweh, and still God has compassion on them. God and Christ desire to hear our anger, our complaints, and even our doubts. They know that we are a people moving toward faith, and bumps will occur along the way. Creator, Christ, and Spirit wish us to continue the journey. Back to my “sacred reading” of Exodus.

When last we left Patrick in one of his episodes stuck between chaos (remember that in the Ancient Near East  $\text{𐎗}$  is a God of the sea and water storms)<sup>5</sup> and war chariots, he was momentarily shocked and somewhat catatonic. Noticing my weakened condition, I sought out counsel. It took me several conversations with several spiritual advisors (one can never have too many spiritual advisors) to ease my paralysis. It is a gift to have wise and supportive people in our lives. In the context of Exodus 14, I liken these souls who grace our lives to angels who shield us in our vulnerability. They are like enlightened clouds giving comfort in the night. Fears and doubts often plague us, and spiritual elders bring perspective and wisdom. These angels do this even amidst whining, anger, and our delusions. These sources of solace are great, but they don’t necessarily offer a way out of being sandwiched between a grumpy army and an impassable sea.

Now we come to the part of the Exodus story which awaits some kind of Divine resolution. When we are stuck in a tough place, who will be this Moses figure that will raise a staff to part the waters before us? When will that wind start drying out the soil so that a path may appear where no path exists? We don’t know. And that takes me to a few thoughts on the disciple of this text.

In the case of Hebrews at waters edge, Moses says to fear not, to stand firm, to await the deliverance that Yahweh will accomplish. Do we know how? No. Our first act of discipleship is simply to trust the Great Shepherd of the Sheep who has chosen us, has compassion on us, and seeks to bless the world through us. Be patient. Entrust the futures into the hands of the One who knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more deeply than we can hope for or imagine. We are invited to fear not, to stand firm, to await the assistance Yahweh will bring.

While we await the deliverance of the LORD, we may have time to fill. Spiritual prayers and sacred reading are a couple of ways to enrich that space. Recounting God’s miracles which have gotten us to this point is one way to remain

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), pp 478-480.

<sup>5</sup> [Yamm | Canaanite God, Storm God & Sea God | Britannica](#)

grounded. Many years ago, I was visiting my grand-mother who was languishing in a nursing home bed. Through the previous few years she had been racked with a series of small strokes called “TIA”s. She had lost her sight and was no longer able to walk, but with effort she could talk. I asked her if she had any sense of the presence of God at this time. Her answer was clear, “no”. And then she added, “but I recall it from the past and right now that is enough”.

We remember our bible stories. Take, for example, Exodus 14. In this account, the term for wind (רוּחַ) is mentioned. Susanne and I have at various points gone to great effort to point out that this precise term appears in all kinds of creation and restoration stories within the biblical text. It is translated as spirit, wind, and breath.<sup>6</sup> In the beginning when the earth is a formless void in the dark, God’s breath / wind / Spirit hovers over it and speaks a good creation into being. In a valley filled with dried bones, God’s breath / wind / Spirit restores those dry bones. In today’s Exodus story when God’s people are trapped, God’s (רוּחַ) created a way where there was no way. The Spirit’s activity continues in the New Testament. Think of Jesus breathing on terrified disciples who had locked themselves in a room. Think of the Spirit’s descent at Pentecost. Think of the wonders and miracles of Acts. The upshot is that when all seems like a dark and formless void, when there seems to be no way through the water, when there are dry bones all around, when we are terrified, surprising things can happen. Or not.

Sometimes God’s people get brutalized by Bolsheviks. Sometimes God’s people are terrorized by tyrants. Sometimes God’s people are swept into the sea. Sometimes God’s chosen ones are forcibly mistreated, crucified and buried. When this happens, and it can happen, we remember our most foundational story as Christians—that of the death and resurrection of Jesus. He reminded us that a grain of seed fallen into the earth has potential to produce great fruit (Jn 12.24). And then he lived it. His Spirit continues to dwell among us and with in us and testifies to this reality.

In summary, when we find ourselves in uncertain or precarious circumstances, we have opportunities. We can affirm our trust. We can engage in spiritual habits which connect us more deeply to the Divine. We can draw strength from our spiritual guides. We can remember our personal and collective pasts—miracles have taken place for us to get this far! We can remember the stories of our biblical tradition and church history. May it be so for us personally and congregationally. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> רוּחַ in Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press), p. 924-926.