

Sermon: Into the Sea

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, September 17, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A boy was sitting on a park bench, reading an open Bible on his lap. He was loudly exclaiming his praise to God, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! God is great!", he yelled without any concern of the passerby. It so happened that a man from a local university passed by, he asked the boy about the reason for his joy. The boy replied with a big grin on his face, "Don't you have any idea what God is able to do? I just read that God opened up the Red Sea and led the whole nation of Israel right through the middle."

The man, who happened to have taken a course on religious studies, was feeling quite enlightened and eager to share his enlightenment with the boy. So he chuckled briefly, sat down beside the boy and began to open his eyes to the "reality" of that particular miracle of the Bible. "You see, that can all be easily explained. Modern scholarship has demonstrated that the word 'Red Sea' in Hebrew, should really be translated as the 'sea of reeds', that is an area along the coast where, at that time, water was only 10-inches deep. It really was no problem for the Israelites to wade across."

The boy was stumped. His eyes wandered from the man back to the Bible laying open in his lap. The man, now satisfied of enlightening the poor, naive boy of the finer points of scientific and historical insight, turned to leave. Scarcely had he taken a few steps when the boy began again to rejoice, giving praise to God. Immediately the man turned back, and demanded to know the reason of this resumed jubilation. "Wow!" exclaimed the boy joyfully, "God is even greater than I thought!" "Not only did God lead the Israelites through the Red Sea, God topped it off by drowning the whole Egyptian army in 10 inches of water!"

It's a silly story, but it illustrates well the dichotomy between the acceptance of the Exodus story with wide-eye wonder, and the skepticism of modern scholarship (yes, even biblical scholarship) on the reality of what had actually happened. Alternate theories challenging the naive reading of the Exodus abound, including the latest that I have come across, in a recent book published by Richard E. Friedman, titled "The Exodus: How it Happened and Why it Matters". Friedman puts in an honest effort to try to

close the chasm between the original story as told by the Bible, and that of modern scholarship which pretty much dismisses the emergence of Israel from Egypt. I won't go into more details; one can always look it up on Wikipedia, that 'trusted' source of all knowledge and truth for more. But suffice to say that even Friedman's honest attempt rings somewhat hollow, as yet another theory that chips away at the child-like wonder many of us share, when we heard this story in Sunday School, for the very first time.

However, I am not going to bore you with theories today, but I want to invite you to the shore of the Red Sea, along with Moses and the Israelites, with the path forward all but impassable, and the rumbling of horses and chariots pressing in ever closer. I want you to imagine what would have happened had the Lord God not intervened?

In the time of the Exodus, Egypt was a rising superpower during the period of the New Kingdom (that is roughly from the 16th century BC to the 11th century BC)—think about the building of the pyramids, the sphinx, or that most powerful and revered Ramesses II, commonly known as Ramesses the Great. The rise of Egypt can be attributed to a number of reasons—the enclosure of deserts on three sides afforded Egypt of its geographical advantage; the river Nile provided a constant source of irrigation and life. But the most significant of all was Egypt's mastery of the chariot warfare.

There were mainly two types of chariot—light and heavy. Light chariots were pulled by two horses, with its compact carriage containing a driver and an archer; both may be armed with bow and spear. These were speedy, agile, first-strike vehicles that can run around the enemy in circles, causing fear and chaos while shooting arrows to thin out the rank. Heavy chariot were pulled by four horses, all armoured with metal plates, capable to charge head-on through the enemy rank, causing death and destruction along the way. Chariots were usually followed by infantry, advancing to exploit the resulting breakthrough, not unlike how infantry might operate behind a group of armoured vehicles in modern warfare. The Egyptians may not have invented the chariots, but they certainly had employed chariot warfare to perfection.

On the cover of today's bulletin, you will find a picture of Tutankhamun's box, the burial chest of a king in the New Kingdom, with battle scenes along the length of its sides, showing the king riding in his chariot, accompanied by other well organized chariots, archers, lancers

and cavalymen. Notice the confused and disorganized group of fallen enemies on the receiving end of the charge. That would have been the fate of the Israelites on the shore of the Red Sea. There is no way that a group of rag-tag slaves, with women, children, domesticated animals could stand a chance against a well armed, well trained chariot army, charging at full speed towards them. The result was pre-determined before it even began —carnage, destruction, and death.

Sure enough, the Israelites complained to God, and 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? But Moses calmly said to the people, in verse 13, “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.”

Standing firm, keeping still? That was the solution Moses proposed? The Hebrew verb used here ‘to keep still’ is literally to engrave, to plough, to dig down. It is not inactivity, it is not frozen in fear, it is a directed, purposeful movement downwards. It is not a question of what the Israelites do at that moment, it is a question of who they are to be—no longer slaves, but a proud people, unafraid for the Lord God is with them.

As psalmist proclaims and sings in Psalm 46:10, “*Be still, and know that I am God; Be still, and know that I am God; Be still, and know that I am God.*” Know that God has been fighting for you—in midwives and nameless Hebrew women, through the burning bush and the passover feast, God has been with you, on your side.

As psalmist proclaims again in Psalm 118:6-9, “*With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes.*”

Sure enough, when the people stood firm that day, the Lord God acted. The pillar of cloud which was leading the Israelites now moved back to block the advancing Egyptians. As instructed, Moses plough his staff into the shore, the Red Sea parted, parting and standing still on both side while the people crossed over on dry land. Then the pillar of cloud moved aside, permitting the chariot army to resume their pursuit. Shockingly enough they did, having learned not a single lesson from the ten plagues, the pillar of

cloud and fire, the parted water, the signs and wonders from this mysterious unseen God, Pharaoh's army charged right on ahead into the sea. Sure enough, 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. Powers, principalities and even the primordial sea all bow down before Yahweh, the Lord God, the creator of the heavens, the earth and all that is in-between.

Then Moses, his sister Miriam, and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord, *"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him; my father's God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name."* The actual song is much longer, you can read it yourself in Exodus 15.

I think, I hope the take-away for this story is the appreciation that on the journey towards liberation, the Israelites were rescued from a certain impending doom; they were delivered right from the jaws of death—that is a feeling no one could or should forget.

The New Testament equivalent to this Exodus story is the cross, where Jesus Christ was hung on a tree, a term that the Apostle Peter loves to use. This is what Peter said about Jesus (in 1 Peter 2:24-25), *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."*

Yes, by the self-sacrifice of Christ, we have also been rescued from a certain impending doom, we have also been delivered from the jaws of death. We were once like sheep going astray, but now we have returned to the Good Shepherd, and Jesus is the guardian of our souls. That is until the day when all peoples, all powers and all principalities shall bow down to worship Christ in glory, and the sea, the primordial chaos from the beginning of creation, shall be no more.

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