

North Kildonan United Church

13th September 2020

Exodus 14: 19-31

"Escape through the Reed Sea"

Matthew 18: 21-35

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

"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."
(Exodus 14: 21)

For the past three weeks we have been following the story of Moses and his call to lead the Hebrew people to freedom and new life beyond the borders of Egypt. Last week we heard of the institution of Passover, a festival kept to this very day.

Passover, so named because the angel of death would pass over, that is avoid, any Hebrew homes with the blood of the Passover lamb on its doorposts and lintels. For those without the blood marking, that is the Egyptians, the angel of death would kill the firstborn children and the first born livestock. A terrible night, yet necessary to persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt.

And the Hebrew people were more than ready to leave. Life in Egypt was cruel, slaves to a capricious monarch who saw himself like a god, with the power of life and death over all the people. The Passover instructions were designed for a quick exit. Eat with your sandals on, prepare a quick unleavened bread that is ready at a moment's notice, don't dawdle over the roast lamb-tuck into it and finish it off because very soon you'll be on the move.

As the mournful cry of grieving parents across Egypt filled the land, Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron to tell them they needed to leave Egypt. *"Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!"* (Exodus 12:31b-32)

The long awaited time has come.

Ruth Duck, in her hymn *Lead On, O Cloud of Presence* captures the essence of that event.

"Lead on, O cloud of Presence, the exodus has come. In wilderness and desert our tribe shall make its home. Our slavery left behind us, new hopes within us grow. We seek the land of promise where milk and honey flow."

But as we will hear in future lessons, that journey just begun will be neither easy nor brief. No sooner does Pharaoh tell Moses to get out of town than Pharaoh has yet another change of heart and he sends his crack charioteers after the departing Israelites.

So the journey begins. The way the people must go is shown by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, the cloud of Presence in the hymn just quoted.

It will be a long, trying, painful trek. The second verse of the hymn underlines this.

"Lead on, O fiery Pillar, we follow yet with fears, but we shall come rejoicing though joy be born of tears. We are not lost, though wandering, for by your light we come, and we are still God's people. The journey is our home."

So the wandering begins. Things seem to be going alright, though it's a lot of walking and the sun is awfully warm sometimes. But then a few who look back behind this vast pilgrim crowd see a horrible sight. Six hundred plus horses and chariots and armed soldiers of Egypt are racing towards them. For not the only time in this story, the people cry out 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."* (Exodus 14:11-12)

So soon the people forget the intolerable life in Egypt but that's not an unusual phenomena with most people. The memory of the former days, be those days good or bad, is clouded by the present situation. If the people weren't so terrified of the approaching soldiers they wouldn't be longing for the Egyptian lash and mistreatment.

Moses replies in words perhaps more believable afterwards: *"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."* (Exodus 14: 13-14)

Moses and the people are at a crucial point in their history. The Egyptians are headed towards them and in front of them is a seemingly insurmountable body of water. The pillar of cloud was all that kept the Egyptians and the Israelites apart.

This body of water is known as the Red Sea but the name can also be translated as Sea of Reeds or Reed Sea. Reed Sea actually is a more accurate description.

Now, before I go any further, I have a question. As you heard the account of Moses stretching out his hand over the sea, and the waters dividing, and the Israelites calmly or not so calmly walking on seemingly dry land to the other shore, and Pharaoh's charioteers with their horses stuck in the mud then submerged by the waters, as you

heard the lesson from Exodus, did Charleston Heston and the Ten Commandments come to mind?

Perhaps you remember the scene. With great drama Mr. Heston, I mean Moses, spreads his arms over the water, the deep, deep water, and powerful winds push the water high on either side. The wind is so strong that the bottom of the sea is now dry, safe for the Israelites and their livestock and carts to pass to the other side.

This, of course, is theology according to Cecil B. DeMille and we need to be mindful of not allowing our beliefs to be shaped by theatrical interpretations or dramatic presentations, no matter how thrilling.

So, how might we understand what happened. First of all, this event is described as the supreme miracle of the exodus, but that doesn't mean Mr. DeMille is accurate or even correct in his dramatization.

You might see this division of the Reed Sea as a supernatural event, perhaps as vivid as the movie version. Or you might see it as a natural event, achieved by God using the laws of nature to achieve the rescue of God's people.

The text tells us that the strong east wind blew all night and the waters were divided. Imagine, if you will, that the Israelites had arrived at the Reed Sea, so named because of the vast amount of papyrus reeds in the water. Say the point they arrived at was shallow. Possibly there was a ridge in the sea bed, a ridge normally covered but occasionally, when for instance a strong east wind blows, it becomes exposed.

I thought about this the other evening when I was out for a walk. The footbridge from Portage Avenue to Assiniboine Park offers a wonderful view of the Assiniboine River. Looking westward, I saw a vast array of geese on the water, probably preparing for their eventual flight south. Some were floating along, while others were on top of the large landmass in the centre of the river. Depending on the height of the water, that ridge is either visible or invisible. It looked to me that some of the birds were not so much floating as standing on land that was just below the surface of the water. Perhaps the Reed Sea was a bit like our Assiniboine River, more shallow than one might expect. I will say the sidewalks around that area of the park are much cleaner with the geese in the water instead of on land.

So, can a strong wind create a pathway through a body of water? In his book The Miracles of Exodus, author and Cambridge University physicist Colin Humphreys writes:

"Wind tides are well known to oceanographers. For example, a strong wind blowing along Lake Erie, one of the Great Lakes, has produced water elevation differences of as much as sixteen feet between Toledo, Ohio, on the west, and Buffalo,

New York, on the east... There are reports that Napoleon was almost killed by a "sudden high tide" while he was crossing shallow water near the head of the Gulf of Suez."

So, let's assume the wind was strong enough to clear a pathway, and the papyrus reeds underfoot assisted the Israelites to walk on the seabed. Since they were walking, even a few mucky bits on the way were not enough to stop their progress-sort of like the way we manoeuvre through deep snow or muddy pathways.

If it's winter and we encounter that same level of snow that makes walking awkward but not impossible, but we are driving and we haven't changed over to winter tires, we quite possibly may become stuck. That would have been the problem for the Egyptian army.

Here they are, the most powerful military force in the world, proud of their speedy chariots, virtually invincible, now totally stuck up to their axles in the mud of the seabed. Their wheels all clogged up, they can't go forward and they can't go backwards. They are at the mercy of the wind, a wind that may slacken and with it allow the water to return. In their struggle to free their precious war machines, in their pushing and in their pulling, in their fury to get unstuck and attack the retreating Israelites, they lose track of the changing conditions and then realize they are trapped. The mightiest army of the ancient world, with their proud chariots and strong horses, defeated by their own folly, defeated by ignoring the changing weather conditions. Their strength, their reliance on their weapons and training was actually their undoing. Their strength proved to be their weakness, as indeed did Israel's weakness prove to be their strength, and this will not be the only time is the Biblical story when we discover this reversal. We think of Mary's song, the Magnificat, in the gospel of Luke, when she sings of her joy in becoming the mother of Jesus: *"He (the Mighty One) has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty"*.

Does this understanding of the escape through the Reed Sea take away from this being a miracle? Maybe it's all in how you understand miracle.

We often limit miracle to that which defies natural laws. Unexplained healings and so on. And perhaps we seek such miraculous events too often. And then we become disheartened when the prayed for, hoped for healing or good thing doesn't come to pass.

But we can understand miracle more broadly. What if we were to see this event as a natural phenomenon, within the laws of nature, yet it is so amazing, so profound that it evokes in us wonder, wonder and gratitude that God has intervened in history. As Rabbi Sacks says, *"The weak are saved; those in danger, delivered. More significant is the moral message that such an event conveys: that hubris is punished by nemesis;*

that the proud are humbled and the humble given pride; that there is justice in history, often hidden but sometimes gloriously revealed." And as Mary said, so many centuries after the event: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ...he has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts..."*

However you understand the escape through the Reed Sea, natural event or supernatural phenomenon, remember that this story is a part of our story, that the God who led the people of Israel from slavery to freedom, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is the same God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the same God who wills freedom for us and for all. The God who claims us at our birth and new birth in baptism is the One who loves us all our days and is the One who names us as a beloved child of God. And in our baptism, and at renewals of our baptism, this story, the passing through the waters at the Reed Sea, is remembered with justifiable thanksgiving.

Until we can sing again in worship, let us conclude with the final verse of *Lead On, O Cloud of Presence*.

"Lead on, O God of freedom, and guide us on our way, and help us trust the promise through struggle and delay. We pray our sons and daughters may journey to that land where justice dwells with mercy, and love is law's demand."

May it be so. Amen.