



BIBLE STUDIES FOR GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2018

SESSION 2 : Walking the Way through Deep Waters (Exodus 14:8-16)

[Biblical quotations are all from the NRSV]

EXODUS 14:8-12

⁸ The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. ⁹ The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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."

1) 'HERE'S ANOTHER FINE MESS YOU'VE GOTTEN ME INTO!'

The story of Israel's escape from Egypt by going through the parted waters of a sea is told again and again in different parts of the Hebrew Bible, both in prose and poetry. The details vary with each retelling but the essence of the story is the same.

A QUICK REMINDER: I'm interpreting the geographical places in this narrative metaphorically to see what clues they have to offer us about a way of life – so, not in terms of geography or political ambition but in terms of a way of life, a relationship with God and the world, to which the people of God are called. The real destination of our journey isn't a physical place; it's more like an identity, a way of being the people of God. In today's story, "Egypt" represents "Empire", a type of mindset, a philosophy of life that is alien to the kingdom of God and that is very much part of the world context in which we find ourselves today.

As with our Bible Study yesterday, I'd encourage you to make a note of any mental connections that you identify between your own experiences and details of the narrative as we go along.



Let's picture the scene. The people of God are stuck in what seems like an impossible situation – no way forward and no way back. The story tells how God brings them through it with a mighty act of power that demonstrates his authority over the whole of creation.

If you're a fan of Laurel and Hardy films, you can probably recall the look of resignation on Oliver Hardy's face as he recognizes that, once again, his friend Stan has somehow got them into trouble. In the scene described in our passage, I can just imagine Aaron turning to his younger brother Moses and saying these words. 'Well here's another fine mess you've gotten us into!' Because they and the Israelites are definitely in a bit of a pickle!

How did they manage to end up in such a mess?

More than once in the story of God's people we find them settling in places where, initially they might have had good reason to be, but where they were never meant to remain long-term. The family of Joseph had settled in Egypt out of necessity to escape a famine, but several generations later they had apparently made no effort to return home – even though their circumstances in Egypt had got progressively worse. They knew things weren't going too well, but they did nothing about it.

The longer they stayed where they were, the worse things got, and the more difficult it was going to be for them to ever break free from their present circumstances where they were virtually enslaved as conscripted labourers for the Pharaoh's ambitious building programme. Only by breaking away from the power of Empire would they find the freedom they needed to develop as a nation of God's people.

2) A TEXT ABOUT DANGER

The first part of our text describes a situation of great danger. Pharaoh's army has been sent in hot pursuit of the Israelites and has come upon the place where they have made their camp, which we're told is 'by the sea'. So in front of the escaped slaves is a large body of water, and behind them the army of the Pharaoh is closing in. They are sandwiched, trapped between two unappealing options! To drown in the sea or to be captured? It looks as if the only chance they have of survival is to throw themselves on the mercy of the Egyptian army and



hope they'll be taken back into forced labour and not killed there and then for having had the audacity to escape.

Whenever things are going terribly badly, the easiest course of action is to find someone to blame. It won't make things any better but at least we can tell ourselves it wasn't our own fault. Well, it was easy for the Israelites in our story to find someone to blame for their predicament. It was *Moses* who got them into this mess!

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?
12 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.

Actually, if the fault lay with anyone it would be with their forebears who for so many years had found it more convenient to stay in Egypt than to leave. If we look at the back-story, we find that it was their ancestor Joseph who, many years earlier, had created the statute that gave Pharaoh the legal right to enslave anyone he wanted to in Egypt (Genesis 47:20-21). That legislation had been appropriate during a time of national crisis, but it had never been changed, and now Joseph's descendants had become the victims of a scheme that he had put in place a long time ago. The problems they face are the result of historical decisions.

However, now, finally, the Israelites are moving on.

i) What finally motivated their exodus from Egypt?

The answer to this is perhaps surprising. You'd think that the way the people were being treated as slaves would make them desperate to leave. Yet from the way the story is told, we can see that the Israelites were hardly motivated at all to leave the place they had come to regard as home, despite the fact that they were oppressed and enslaved there. Even Moses wasn't that keen on getting involved.

From the scene at the burning bush onwards, we're left in no doubt that the prime motivator for everything that happened wasn't Moses – and it certainly wasn't the people themselves. They were oppressed, apathetic, worn down, scared – completely unmotivated to set out on a journey into the unknown. That's what long-term oppression does to a people.



No one had the will, or the courage, to believe there might be a way out, let alone a way forward into an exciting future.

Throughout the book of Exodus we're given the impression that they were never exactly thrilled to have left Egypt behind. Life in Egypt had at least been predictable; life on the road was going to be filled with unknown difficulties and danger. However, it seems that when they initially set out on their long-delayed journey home, they were maybe just starting to feel that this was going to be a good thing after all. The NRSV tells us the Israelites were 'going out boldly'. Literally, they went out 'with a high hand' – with their hands raised high, perhaps in defiance or perhaps in rejoicing.

Unfortunately, that mood of positivity evaporates at the first hurdle they face after their escape from slavery.

Like our passage yesterday, here in the story of the exodus we've got a narrative that is a bit puzzling in the way it has been put together.

For example, several times in chapters 4 to 14 in the book of Exodus, we're told that God 'hardened' Pharaoh's heart. So on the one hand God has worked hard to persuade Moses to persuade the people to come out of Egypt, yet on the other hand the same God is hardening Pharaoh's heart to make sure he keeps refusing to let them go.

We might wonder why God didn't *soften* Pharaoh's heart, to make him sympathetic to what Moses and Aaron were asking of him; to make him say, 'Oh, all right then, you can go.' Wouldn't that have been easier? It's as if God is determined to get the Israelites to leave, yet is equally determined to make it as difficult as possible for them to do so.

Whatever our theological position might be on the idea of a God who would intentionally harden or soften an individual's heart in order to make them behave in a certain way, the point being made by our storyteller is clear: Egypt, or any other 'Empire', will only be kind to you when it's in the Empire's own best interests to be so. This is not a good place for God's people to be in for a long period of time. It might be okay for a visit in times of trouble, but it's not where God's people are supposed to settle long-term. We may have to live with the reality that



mighty Empires have great power in our world, but the people of God have another home and answer to a different King who isn't cruel, or capricious, or selfish, or proud.

We now move on to the most extraordinary and memorable part of the story.

3) A TEXT ABOUT MIRACLES!

EXODUS 14:13-16

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." ¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ 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.

Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid' – words often spoken by God and by angels when they appear to people.

This seems like the right thing to say, doesn't it?

But then the LORD seems to be giving Moses a bit of a telling off.

'Why do *you* (singular, not plural so it's 'Why do you Moses) cry out to me?' This is odd, because the text doesn't actually tell us that he did that. And anyway, isn't that what we're supposed to do when we find ourselves in trouble – cry out to God for help and guidance?

Here's the thing:

Exodus 7:19 Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt...

Exodus 8:5 Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, the canals, and the pools...

Exodus 8:16 Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth...

Exodus 9:22 Stretch out your hand toward heaven...

Exodus 10:12 Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt,

And again in **Exodus 10:21** Stretch out your hand toward heaven...

Sometimes Aaron was told to stretch out his hand and his staff, sometimes Moses did it, and each time something miraculous happened. Why hadn't Moses and Aaron and all the people worked it out by now, that there was a pattern here?

Our narrator is telling us that they had all experienced enough to know what to expect. The implication is that Moses ought to have had enough faith to instruct the people to *go forward* in expectation, rather than to stand firm and *wait* for God to act, hopefully in the nick of time – like the cavalry coming just before the Egyptian army can recapture the Israelites. Standing firm isn't always the best plan when danger is fast approaching.

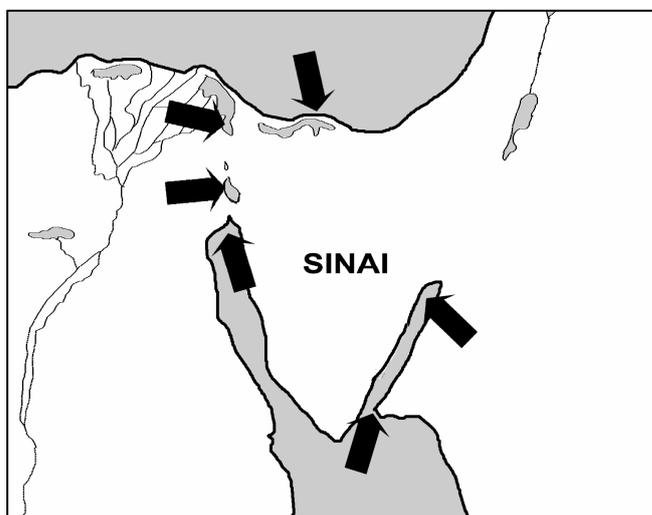
It has often been noted that God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites to go forward and only *then* to lift up his staff and 'divide the sea' to enable them to continue safely on their journey. The way the story is told here, it looks as if the people had to move forward towards the sea before they knew for sure what was going to happen. They had to move forward in faith, based on the experiences they'd already had of God's dealings with them.

ii) Where did it all happen?

This is an interesting question. In our study passage and elsewhere, this body of water is just called 'the sea', while in others it is named '*yam sup*', or 'sea of reeds', which the Septuagint interprets as referring to the Red Sea.

This mysterious sea is, however, almost impossible to pin down. Different scholars have their theories, but when you add them all together the answer is that we don't honestly know.

The arrows indicate some of the locations that have been suggested for this mysterious 'sea'.



They include the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Suez, a salt marsh, a reedy swamp, the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, and the point where the Gulf of Aqaba meets the Red Sea. It has also been suggested that this wasn't a real sea at all, but a mythical sea.



Scholars have also come up with a number of theories to explain how the water-parting miracle might have occurred – ideas ranging from a tsunami, a temporary lava bridge, a sand bank, to ‘it was just a muddy swamp’, or ‘it never happened at all.’

However, if the Hebrew authors had wanted us to know exactly where it was, they could have given us a bit more help. Perhaps the whole point is that the sea is wherever we are when we’re really ‘up against it’. The sea is everywhere but nowhere specific. Exactly where this sea might be located on a map is less important for the meaning of the story than the dynamic imagery of a great ocean being commanded to divide, thus creating a highway of dry land.

We’re meant to understand that what happened when Moses raised his staff at God’s command was something that had no natural explanation. Any attempt to provide it with one is to undermine the theological message. We’re being given a glimpse here of the same cosmic reality that we encounter in Genesis 1 where God says ‘Let there be’, and so it was, and it was good. The parting of the waters was something that only the God who had parted the waters at Creation to create the dry land could do.

However, in the part of the story at which I’ve paused the people are having to make a decision. They could still surrender to the power of Egypt. Nothing has happened to the sea in front of them and the danger from behind is getting closer and closer.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

What might be the equivalent of ‘Egypt’ for us – a situation from which we really need to break free but perhaps it’s hard to find the courage or motivation to do so?

What might be our equivalent of the Big Sea – the thing we believe is preventing us from moving forward, that keeps us rooted to the spot even when we can see trouble looming from behind?



4) IDENTIFYING SOME THEMES

Here again are some of the themes that occurred to me when I reflected back on the story.

HABITUALITY.

The story emphasizes the folly of staying put if we know we're in an unsatisfactory place. People can get used to adverse conditions and learn to accept them as normal or inevitable. They perhaps hope that things will somehow get better all by themselves one day. There are hints in this story that miracles happen after the people move forward in faith.

SHAKENESS.

If ever things seem to be going badly for the community of God's people, this could be what *God* is doing to stir things up and make staying put less attractive. Moving forward is always going to be better than waiting for disaster to overtake us, and maybe the barrier we perceive to be standing in our way isn't insurmountable after all if we are walking in the way God wants us to walk.

PERSEVERENCE.

The Israelites left Egypt with hands lifted high in triumph but at the first sign of trouble they wanted to give up and go back. They frequently complained and wished they'd never left Egypt. Our walk with God might not always be easy, but it's better to keep going in faith rather than giving up and letting the powers of this world have the last word. Remembering ways in which God has helped us in the past can be an important source of encouragement.

LEADERSHIP.

Moses didn't volunteer to be the one who would lead the people out of slavery. He needed a lot of arm-twisting by God, and he was promised that God wouldn't expect him to accomplish the task without help. Churches often say they need leadership in order to move forward. Of course, as churches we have Jesus as our strong leader but we also need people to step up in response to God's call.



TOGETHERNESS.

Good leadership is important, but so is working together as a community. Without the leadership of Moses, the exodus wouldn't have happened, yet he encountered a lot of resistance from the people themselves. They were quick to blame him when they encountered difficulties and the biblical text is clearly critical of them for that. Creative challenge is good, but we don't want grumblers. Finding fault with one another, or finger-pointing, isn't going to help us to move forward with God.

RE-CREATION.

The parting of the waters reminds us of the story of creation. The Israelite slaves didn't merely escape from oppression and danger; they were made a new creation – as in a kind of baptism they died to their old life of slavery and were born afresh as a nation of God's people. Sometimes it is necessary to die to the past in order to be reborn as the people of God for today.

LIBERATION.

The story of the escape from slavery in Egypt has served as an inspiration for diverse groups of people who have found themselves in need of liberation, because the story illustrates the power of God to bring hope in seemingly impossible situations of injustice and oppression. It tells oppressed people that God is with them in their struggles. As such it calls on people like us to care about victims of oppression too, because God cares.

TO SUM UP:

We can lose the desire to change what we've come to accept as normal, and we can even become resistant to hope.

God may give us a shake if we're stuck in a rut.

Good leadership empowers supportive communities

Supportive communities empower good leadership

God can always create something new

We are called to stand beside victims of injustice and oppression