

## A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*God Makes a Way*

Exodus 14:19-31

September 13, 2020

Our Old Testament reading drops us into the middle of a story, into the middle of a storm. Now, today you may not need one more storm in your story. But this one is a story of hope for a future when there is no hope, and we all need more of that kind of story.

This is the big one in the Old Testament. The liberation of Israel is at stake. And so is the liberation of Egypt though they didn't know to see it that way yet. Both were caught in a system of oppression that enslaved them. Israel needed to be free from slavery to stand upright, created in the image of God. Egypt needed to be liberated from the violent, unjust way of life in which they were trapped. One needed freedom and didn't think they could ever have it; the other needed justice but were afraid to let go of their privilege and power—and couldn't imagine life without them. The showdown at the Red Sea isn't just a conflict between Israel and Egypt; it's a conflict between past and future, between death and life, and between darkness and light. It has raged all through the centuries and goes on in the hearts of each person.

We are dropped into the middle of the storm.

The people of Israel have begun their Exodus. After 400 years in slavery, after the return of Moses and 10 plagues on Egypt, they have, in the dead of night, under the protection of the Spirit of God, fled from Egypt on foot. They were free. But their problems had just begun.

Once they left, Pharaoh and the Egyptians realized what they were losing: free labor to build their cities and sustain their economy, and perhaps just as important, another race of people cowering before you in fear gives you an overinflated sense of power. And who doesn't like to feel powerful? For as long as anyone could remember, the people of Israel had been a convenient source of manual and psychological fuel for the engine of Egyptian glory. Their lives didn't matter to the Egyptians, any more than the number of bricks they could make from mud and straw in a given day.

Slavery of every kind is the devil's ultimate corruption of human nature and by no means is this just ancient history or merely a spiritual metaphor. Slavery makes people less than human. It reduces God's beloved creatures to mere objects to be used by someone else. Slavery and its unholy refrains in our nation's history haunt the hallowed halls of our faith and, for many people, turn our national hymns of freedom into noisy gongs and clanging symbols. Who can't understand how painful this is? The yearning to be live free is utterly human and is utterly at the heart of the liberating God of Israel. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

By the time we join the story, God has set the people free. And now they were gone, walking off into the desert wilderness without even looking back. Power does not often relinquish its

grip easily, and so, even after 10 plagues, after all the suffering they had been through, to point of Pharaoh telling Moses, “Go, take your people and go.” Even after all of that, Pharaoh’s anger boiled. His resentment at the comeuppance of these people seethed within him. He wanted them back. He wanted revenge. He wanted the old way of life restored. It’s hard to know which was most important to him at the moment.

Pharaoh orders his militia: saddle up your horses, load up your chariots, we’re going to take back what is ours—not “who” but “what.”. And so, not long after Israel’s men, women, and children trudged into the desert, Egypt’s strongmen galloped after them.

That’s where we join the story. Israel’s walk away has brought them to the edge to the shore of a large and deep sea. They can’t go forward. But behind them comes Egypt’s army. They can’t go back. They can’t go forward; they can’t go back.

That experience, of being stuck, is an all-too familiar human experience. In English, we say “I’m between a rock and hard place.” In a French idiom, you are “between the sledgehammer and the anvil.” An ancient Latin proverb laments: “a precipice in front, wolves behind.” A Scottish soldier in a 17<sup>th</sup> century war described their predicament as being “between the devil and the deep blue sea.” In one of the best U2 songs, they sing: “You’re stuck in a moment and you can’t get out of it.”

Being stuck is often the way to true freedom. We just can’t see the path there yet. Shelden Van Aucken was a young skeptical, erudite graduate student at Oxford who began trading letters with C.S. Lewis about Christianity and life. In his memoir, *A Severe Mercy*, Van Aucken recalls how Lewis guided him to Christ until he found himself stuck at the critical crisis of faith. He wrote to Lewis, ““In my old easy-going theism, I had regarded Christianity as a sort of fairy tale; and I had neither accepted nor rejected Jesus, since I had never, in fact, encountered him. Now I had. The position was not, as I had been comfortably thinking all these months, merely a question of whether I was to accept the Messiah or not. It was a question of whether I was to accept Him--or *reject him*. *My God! There was a gap behind me too. Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble-but what of the leap to rejection? There might be no certainty that Christ was God-but, by God, there was no certainty that He was not.*”

Israel was stuck something like that. There was no certainty in going forward, and none in going back. They had gone as far as they could go. They can’t walk on water or swim, and they can’t defeat the Egyptian army. And now they are angry at Moses for getting them into this mess and giving them false hope. And angry at themselves for believing something so foolish as slaves could walk free.

Can slaves be free? This is the burning, existential, political question hanging over this story at this critical moment. You can walk away for a while, but can you be truly free? Pharaoh’s raging army is desperate to prove the answer is no.

No, Egypt says, you can never truly be free. Egypt is a powerful image here of evil. You will always be pulled back, pushed back, dragged back to the life you had before, if that's even a life. You will always belong to what owns you and controls you and wants to use you. St. Paul tells new Christians in Romans 6 they have been set free from the catastrophe of slavery to sin, but they all know sooner or later that Egypt still pulls them back. The pull of our past sins, addictions, temptations is a powerful magnetic force resisting our progress toward freedom, righteousness, and life with God. Even St. Paul felt it. After declaring emancipation in Christ from sin, Paul reflectively wonders in Romans 7, "But if all this is true, why do I do what I don't want to do? Why don't I do what I want? Oh, wretched man that I am. Who will free me from this body of death?"

From this angle, we are each Israel, and we are each Egypt. We can read ourselves into both sides of this struggle, a struggle that plays out within us. This tug-of-war, this battle rages inside us between the freedom we desire to live in and for Christ and the chains of captivity we still wear from Egypt. If Egypt wouldn't just straight up kill you, sometimes it seems easier to just go back and live bent over. Being bent over, that was one of C.S. Lewis most memorable images of life under oppression of enemies within and without that want to keep us in our chains.

But life is not to be found going back to Egypt. You may survive for a while, but it will kill you. It will rob you of your soul. It will steal away your hope. They can't go back. But they can't go forward unless God provides a way where there is no way. This is the miracle at the heart of this story. This is the miracle at the heart of the Gospel. This is the good news of a God who delights in providing a way when there's no way. They were stuck, and God provided a way through the sea. They were dead, and God provided a way of life. This is the resurrection story for Israel. Their baptism story. Into the water and then out to walk in newness of life. The sea parted and Israel crossed on dry ground. There was no way, until there was. They could see no way forward until a way appeared. They could do nothing more on their own strength, and then, God's grace saved them.

Egypt's army wouldn't give up that easily. Egypt's army followed right on behind them. Out of their minds, they followed them. Evil does not give up easily. They followed them but the wheels of their chariots mired in the mud and the water collapsed back upon them and they were drowned. Safe on the other side of the sea Israel looked back and saw the terror of Egypt washed up dead on the seashore. Martin Luther King preached a sermon early in his ministry called "The Death of Evil upon the Sea Shore." In the sermon, he reflects on this scene. Egypt, this overwhelming, powerful force of evil was now behind them. Evil was dead on the seashore. King preached, "This story symbolizes something basic about the universe. Its meaning is not found in the drowning of a few men, for no one should rejoice at the death or defeat of a human being. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil. It was the death of inhuman oppression and unjust exploitation. The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good. There is something in the very nature of the universe which is on the side of Israel in its struggle with every Egypt. There is something in the very nature of the universe which ultimately comes to the aid of goodness in

its perennial struggle with evil.” (<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-viii-death-evil-upon-seashore>)

O brothers and sisters, Israel and Egypt are all around and somewhere within every one of us. Is there a place in your life where you are stuck? And it feels like you can't go forward or back? A place where you yearn for freedom but can't be free. A place where you desire to live justly but can't seem to break free from the past for all it will cost you.

When you find yourself stuck and you can't go forward another step, but you can't go back either, look to God, do not be afraid. The brothers of the Taize community regularly sing a chorus with those words. It must be heartening to sing that often when you're in Taize, France, in the area where the Germans and allies battled ferociously for every inch of ground in the not too distant past. When it seemed the fate of the world was hanging by a thread, only in hope where it seemed like there was no hope.

Look to God, do not be afraid. Lift up your voices the Lord is near, always, lift up your voices the Lord is nearer than you know.

When you find yourself stuck and can't get out of it, salvation is nearer than you know.

Sometimes that stuck place is the way to true freedom. Martin Luther King foresaw an American journey to justice that would come to such a crisis point and believed God would show a way forward for all of us to live the dream of freedom and justice.

Paul envisioned the grace of Christ as liberation from slavery to freedom to serve God.

And Jesus taught that life is fraught with all kinds of shackles and chains, but that the way of grace is the way to freedom. It's a costly way—it will cost you everything, but the only way. Even a cross is not the end of the story.

We are never totally and finally, hopelessly stuck. When there is no way, for those who will walk in faith, God makes a way. God always makes a way.

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