

Wade in the Water
Pentecost 15A
PPC
13 September 2020

Psalm 114
Exodus 14:19-31; 15:20-21

Pharaoh has, for the moment, let the people go. Now they are on the run. After all those years of slavery, harsh treatment and meaningless drudgery, freedom is in sight for the Israelite nation. You can almost hear the Egyptian parents, even Pharaoh and his family wailing laments over their lost children. Above the lamenting, though, you can hear Moses and his lieutenants jostling and exhorting the people. "This is it! Let's go! Let's go! Fast, faster."

The race against time had begun. It was late. The slaves had one night in which to break the vise grip that had held them for almost four hundred years, one night to escape a prison so familiar that it had become like home to them. It was now or never. Everybody knew that by tomorrow Pharaoh would change his mind. Tomorrow he would come to his senses and realize what he had done. Tomorrow would be too late. Tonight was the night.

Can you picture them? The people running breathlessly, grabbing whatever they could, without even glancing backwards. There was no time for that. They had to make for the sea. God knows, the sea was their only chance. It couldn't be the straight road to Canaan, which would have taken them there faster but that would have meant having to get past six (count them) six, heavily armed Egyptian outposts. The Egyptians traveled that road regularly and had constructed it to withstand the pounding of their chariots. The Israelite nation would have been run down like animals.

It was a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea.

But, then, when they got there, after a night of running in the dark, that long, straggly band came to an abrupt halt. There was the water in front of them. How would the children be able to cross? Most of them couldn't swim. What to do? Ahead of them lay what looked like certain death but behind them now was Pharaoh's army in pursuit. They could see the dust of the chariots. Terrified they clung to the banks.

But the pillar of God now went behind the fleeing Israelites and formed a cloud that lit up the darkness. The pursuing Egyptians found the wheels on their chariots clogged with the dust of the cloud so their wheels did not turn easily.

Moses spread out his hands, as instructed by God, and the deep waters parted. But perhaps like that fellow Black pastor who was very occasionally was allowed to preach to the slaves on the southern plantations, Moses said to the group, "Wait a moment! Think about what you are doing. Enter the sea, not as frightened slaves and fugitives, but as the free men and women whom God created you to be. No matter what happens, Pharaoh cannot take away what you were created to be."

In another sermon, we can parse what God did to the Egyptians. In this story of the Great Escape, we may wonder why it needed to have a large group of people be killed. Who is the enemy? Who is the oppressor? Who is free?

After their escape and their arrival on dry ground, scripture first gives us the response that Moses gave. After that song of exaltation, there is a small snippet of Miriam's song. Biblical scholars believe that this is actually the earliest known writing we have in scripture. It would have been the women's role to do the singing and dancing. And so, Miriam has restored to her lips the song that is associated with the Exodus: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has

thrown into the sea” (Ex. 15:21). With the women leading them in song and dance, with tambourines in their hands, the freed slaves began their forty year journey through the wilderness.

Who is Pharaoh today? This may be a hard thing to hear but I think I know why the terrorists first attacked the WTC 19 years ago. They knew who we bowed down to in this nation - the Almighty dollar bill. The second building they attacked was the Pentagon. Our enslavement to our guns is at an unhealthy level today. We are slaves to the accumulation of those bills. Our nation failed to act responsibly in this pandemic because of the fear of what would happen to the economy. We acted as if money was more important than people. We expect those essential workers - the hospital janitors and cooks, the nurses, the chaplains, bus drivers, garbage collectors - to show up at work but we won't help them financially. We know that doctors and nurses and other hospital workers have died because of their jobs. We know that the BIPOC communities across the country have been hit the hardest by the coronavirus and the death rate in those communities is disproportionately high compared to our white communities. We know all of this and yet our Congress won't pass a bill that might help relieve the stress for those workers who have lost their jobs because of COVID 19. Is this evil? Who are the oppressed?

We look out at all the BLM marches and make comments such as: “I wouldn't be so upset by them if they'd just use nicer language” or “I could accept what they're doing until they begin to destroy property.”

In an article in Education Week, educator Bettina L. Love writes: “Racism is violent. It systemically kills, destroys, and diminishes the dreams and real lives of

Black, brown, and Indigenous people every day in the United States and has for centuries. Racism killed Breonna Taylor, racism killed George Floyd, and racism is a major factor in determining who will live and die from COVID 19. The idea that whiteness is fragile or weak does not reflect the racial terror people of color have experienced in this country.”

Can't you hear Moses pleading with Pharaoh, "Let my people go!"?

What direction will the oppressed go? They are clinging for dear life right now at the edge of some great sea that appears as if it will never let the waters part.

In the past week, I have heard from many friends who are in Rochester. I was sent an article from the local paper, the D&C, with a column by a current white Rochesterian. Pam Sherman writes that when the marches in Rochester attracted international news outlets, the concerned texts and calls started rolling in from friends all over the world. "Are you OK"?

Sherman said she received these queries while she was sitting on the front porch of her house on a beautiful Saturday morning. And she thought, of course I'm OK. Why are you asking me? I'm a white woman living in America in 2020. I have the unearned luxury of being OK.

Are we OK with that? Sherman goes on to say that while she appreciated everyone's concern, they needed to hear the truth: WE are not OK.

We are not OK because we live in a world where a man named Daniel Prude could have a hood put over his head and die, rather than have a blanket put over his shivering, naked body in the middle of the street on a cold March night in Rochester.

We are not OK because police-officers, who probably were following their duty and trying their best to keep the peace, are instead taught “protocols” that leave little room for humanity. Police actions too often cause division and anger.

We are not OK because a family in mourning had to wait five months before anyone paid attention to their truth. We are not OK because police officers can murder a Black woman, in her own home, sleeping. The DA refuses to take action on this.

We are not OK because peaceful protests in response to the travesty escalated to conflict. We are not OK because a 17 year old can carry his AR-15 in to Kenosha and murder two people and be called a hero by so many people.

We are not OK because instead of being outraged at these actions, we protect those who are white.

None of us is free. Not when too many of us are so desperately hurting.

Who are we in this story of the Exodus? Are we the fleeing Israelites or are we the elite who sat back home in their comfortable surroundings depending on the Egyptian police force to take care of those rabble rousers? Do we hide behind the police so we don't have to look at the ugliness that is in front of us?

When I was in high school, back in the dark ages!, each spring the youth of the church were responsible for preparing a worship service. A small group of my friends and I, guitars in hand, sang out from our hearts “The Times They Are A'Changin'”. It breaks my heart that today that song is as relevant as ever.

Paul asks us in Romans to not be conformed to this world but instead to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. What does that mean? Maybe it means for many of us as white people that we need to let go of our belief that the way we have

acted for the last 400 years in this country has been a good thing. We moved west! We grew a great industrial military complex! We became the richest country in the world!

Letting go is never easy. What would it mean if we decided to focus more on the gifts of life that all of us need to be healthy? Where there weren't Black people living in places where the sewers back up into their living rooms? What would it mean if we didn't blame the poor for their poverty but instead developed programs that gave everyone dignity and pride in who they are?

That's the place I want to be. That's the place that God created. That's the place that Jesus talked about. That place on the other side of the Reed Sea where the oppressed were at long last free.

AMEN.