

“At the Heart of Our Faith”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park on September 4, 2011

Texts: Exodus 14:19-31, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. 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. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. 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. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses. (Exodus 14:19-31)

Finally, the Exodus began! Hundreds of years of slavery were now behind them. Recent struggles with the Pharaoh's changing and hardening heart and subsequent calamities were behind them also. Finally, the Israelites were on the road of Exodus, on their way out – out of Egypt, the land of bondage and oppression. Taking the lead along the way was the Lord God, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. (Exodus 13:21) What an exciting and expectant journey it must have been! On the road, called by God and led by God, toward the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey!

Yet, as today's Old Testament lesson begins, the Israelites find themselves in a tough situation, between a rock and a hard place. Behind them were Pharaoh and six hundred of his best chariots. In front of them was a great body of water, named Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds. Which way to go? Can you imagine how they must have felt, their panic and terror?

This is when and where today's lesson picks up the story, at dusk with the Egyptian army pursuing the Israelites right up to the Red Sea. Commanded by God, Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and God, with a terrific east wind all night long, made the sea recede. God made the sea dry ground. The seawaters split. The Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground with the waters a wall to the right and to the left. The Egyptians came after them in full pursuit, every horse and chariot and driver of Pharaoh racing into the middle of the sea. It was now the morning watch. God looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud on the Egyptian army and threw them into a panic. God clogged the wheels of their chariots; they became stuck in the mud. Then, Moses stretched his hand out once again, and the waters came back over the Egyptians, over their chariots, over their horsemen, drowning them all! Not one of them survived!

An astonishing story, isn't it? Astonishing, certainly. And, at least for some of you, frightening, I presume. As the story gets to this point, many of you may feel like clapping your hands, even singing

and dancing, praising God's mighty acts of deliverance. Yet, at the same time, some others may feel confused, not knowing exactly what to think. All those dead Egyptians, drowned in the sea. That violence, that scene of death and destruction - that is troubling, is it not? What a bloody mess! How can God let this happen? This is a serious question. Throughout history, and across different religions, not just in one specific religion, so many horrible, horrible, acts of atrocity have been committed in the name of a violent "god." A god who not only condones, but also ordains such violence. September 11 is an example

Before moving forward, let me make this clear. No, our God is not violent. No, our God neither condones nor ordains violence. You heard the story Jesus told in our Gospel lesson today. Our God is a God who loves and forgives, beyond measure, beyond our ability to quantify. Our God is a God of complete and boundless grace. God's business is about healing and restoration, and not about revenge and retaliation. We do not sing and dance about death and destruction, even if that death is Osama Bin Laden's.

Then, what do we make of our Exodus story? Should we simply discard it as old and obsolete? Are we dealing with two different gods, the god of the New Testament and the god of the Old Testament? Well, I am not unaware that that is what some people think. And I do not pretend that I am the only person to have the only and right theology. But, as for me, the Exodus story is one of the foundational stories of faith. It is important to note the existence of death and destruction in the story and in our world. However, I do not think that that is the main point. This is a story about God's mighty hand at work when God's people were absolutely up against a wall.

You see? This is not a story about one army against another, however outnumbered and however outgunned. This is a story of a ragtag group of impoverished ex-slaves escaping from their captors, not by their own strength, not by their own wits, not by their own organizational skills, not by their strategic planning, but by the power of God.¹

Yes, my friends, this is a story about a God who is with the slaves and not with the slave drivers. This is a story about a God who is with the oppressed and not with the oppressors. This is a story about a God who is with the displaced refugees and not with those who exploit them.²

When entering the sea, the Israelites were a group of refugees, terrified and in panic. When they emerged on the other shore, they were a people of God, in awe and wonder, with a firm understanding about who they were and who was their God. In the following chapter, chapter 15 verse 2, we hear them singing, "*The Lord is my strength, and my song. And he has become my salvation, this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.*"

I am sure that the people of Israel sang this song again and again, whenever they gathered together to worship. I am sure that they told this story again and again, whenever they had a chance. And, I am telling this story once again on this special day, because this is not just Israel's story and Israel's experience. This is also my story and my experience. And, I know that this is your story and your experience, also. I heard from so many of you how God had delivered you when you were in over your head. Yes, my friends, this is our story and this is our song: The Lord is our strength! The Lord is our salvation!

My dear sisters and brothers, this is the story at the heart of our faith. We are a people who trust. We trust in God's mercy, which is wider than the ocean. We trust in God's love, which is more than the measure of our mind. We trust in God's justice, which is more than liberty. We trust in God's power, which is mightier than Egyptian army. We trust. We believe. And we sing. The Lord is our strength! The Lord is our salvation! The Lord is our song! Amen!

¹ Kathryn Matthews Huey's Essay on Exodus 14:19-31 at [<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/september-11-2011-twenty-four.html>]

² Brian McLaren, "Is God Violent?" in *Sojourners*, January 2011.