

August 23, 2020 / Exodus 15:19-25a

Good morning. The Lord be with you. I'm Terry Zehr, pastor of Senior Ministries here at Waterford and this morning, we have before us one of the more iconic stories from the Bible. As a little boy in Sunday school it captured my imagination and then growing up watching movies like the Cecil B. DeMille's Ten Commandments with Charlton Heston the power and majesty of God was seared into my mind as the waters were parted and people walked through the Red Sea. And then, the Egyptian army, trying to follow was obliterated as God had the parted water resume its natural position.

But even those who are not especially religious know of the basic premise of this story, the parting of the Red Sea. I think of the movie Bruce Almighty, a movie that was not made for a religious audience, but people understood which story was being referred to when Bruce, having complained to God about the unfairness and inadequacy of God, is given God's powers while God takes a much deserved vacation. God hadn't had a day off apparently, since the seventh day of creation when God rested.

Anyway, Bruce, completely overwhelmed by what he is experiencing runs into a diner and orders a bowl of soup to calm him down. And of course the waitress brings out a big bowl of red tomato soup. And it is then that Bruce gets the hair brained idea, to see if he really has God's powers, to part the bowl of red tomato soup...which he does with the wind violently blowing around in the restaurant. Even if you were a non-religious person, this story is lodged in the psyche of humanity.

But yet, there is something revealing about these two movies. One movie speaks heavily of the power of God to save. And rightly so because it is theologically correct. God's power is revealed in God's saving acts. Sometimes they come in the form of miracles and are sprinkled throughout the stories of the Bible; and sometimes they come in some very common ways like the stories of our lives.

The other movie though, if you've seen it, leans heavily on the understanding that God has given us what we need and that salvation comes with a change of our hearts away from selfishness and grumbling toward the action of being the miracle for the other. And that is also theologically correct because it is, in a nut shell, the new commandment Jesus gives to us to love one another, because God in Christ has first loved us. God has already given us what we need.

Well, what does any of this have to do with us today? I love how this story, this iconic story takes place in a specific moment of time but yet, transcends time. It is in many ways, a templet for our lives that stretch across generations of time.

I remember a conversation many years ago with someone I had just met and the topic swung around to religion and he asked me in all seriousness, how can you believe in that stuff. The stories, like the one we are looking at this morning were fanciful, impossible to believe. The behaviors / requirements of God were oppressive and besides that, there was so much injustice and suffering in the world he didn't even think that God existed. "How can you believe in something that doesn't exist?" My answer, "I guess you just have to have faith." And that ended the conversation.

Looking back I realize two things. First, though we as believers might think that "you gotta have faith" is a good answer, that really isn't much of an answer. In many ways it is a very inadequate answer for you can't tell someone to have faith that doesn't have a context for that faith. Without context, there really can't be faith.

And secondly, I was young when this conversation happened and I really didn't have much context either. That is, the biblical stories hadn't really taken root in me. Yes I knew them, but I hadn't lived them.

A couple of weeks ago Cyneatha Millsaps spoke of this story from an African American perspective. The story wasn't some far

off story lodged in some by gone time period. No, the story was real because the Pharaoh of modern day systemic injustice, brutality and inhumanity is very much alive. This story of fleeing for their lives had context, a certain meaning. It made it real. Faith in God came in this context.

If I was redoing this conversation from years ago my answer would be different today. He was asking if I believed that this story and stories like this literally happened. My answer today would be, "I don't know and quite frankly I don't know if the literal understanding of this story is the most important thing. After all, I wasn't there and besides, I have my own questions like "how you can move 2 million people plus livestock," a number that most scholars believe would be an accurate reflection of all involved, "across a dry lake or sea bed in the few hours of a night?" But that is missing the point.

The context is, the question to ask is, what are the Red Sea moments in our lives? What are those moments when you can't go back, when you can't go around, you can only go through something. And whose hand will you be holding as you go through this as Pharaoh is hot on your heels? Faith needs context. And these stories become real to us because of the context of our lives. That is when these old stories that are hard to believe begin to feel familiar. That is when they begin to become real to us. It is not simply because we read them in the Bible. There is something else that goes on.

For example, speaking of context, there is a cemetery in central Illinois that holds special meaning to me. It is in the part of East Central Illinois where the roots of my family resided for many years. Though many moved away, this is where many were brought back to be buried. The ashes of my parents are there as well as some of my brother Brent's ashes, who lived in India. My parent's parents, my grandparents are buried there as well as my great grandparents. Aunts and uncles, great aunts and uncles as well as others from that part of Illinois who played significant roles in my early life are at rest there as well.

I mention this because of this story that we have before us and how it related to the context of their lives and their faith. My great grandfather Jacob who farmed all his life, took the last of his crops into town one fall day and getting paid for them, made the deposit at the bank. It was late and he said, "I'll be in next week to make the final payment on the farm." He had worked long and hard for that. No big deal, just another payment like so many before.

Except, it was the beginning of the Great Depression and by the time he got back into town to go to the bank, there had been a run on the bank and the money was gone, his money was gone. A Red Sea moment. He spent years trying to hold off Pharaoh from possessing his land as he cobbled that last payment together in the midst of a time when there was no money. It wasn't the quick parting of the Red Sea, but God provided a way. It is also I believe one of the reasons that down through the generations, procrastination held an unfavorable place in our family.

My grandfather Harold, one of Jacob's sons, a reluctant pastor drawn by lot, was one of two pastors of a large congregation when the revivalist tent meetings swept through the area in the late 40's early fifties. Charismatic in nature it drove a wedge between church members and between the two pastors. When his sister, whose husband was part of the holiness faction of the church, came down with cancer, they believed that God would miraculously heal her. And when God didn't, they believed that God would miraculously raise her from the dead in three days. And when that didn't happen, they believed that it was my grandfather's lack of faith that undid God's power and promise. And they came after him; and the church split, families split. An incredibly difficult time. A Red Sea moment.

And yet, while God did not miraculously part the waters and fix everything, God did provide a way through and my grandfather survived with great integrity and the remainder of his life lived in service to Christ's church. It is also probably why to this day that there is a reluctance if not resistance in our family system to the emotive / victory-olic parts of Christianity which we know can be

misunderstood and misconstrued and misused in ways that are incredibly harmful.

Then there is my father, one of Harold and Alma's sons who at the age of 30 with three small children, learned that he was no longer going to be needed on his uncle's farm as his cousins had changed their minds and decided to return. What to do. A Red Sea moment. Voices on every side told him to go work at Caterpillar Manufacturing Company. He would make good money and always have a job and besides, he needed to be responsible. Play it safe. Voices on every side that is except my grandfather and great grandfather who had been through their own Red Sea moments.

My father and mother instead saw the waters part toward finishing college and then on to medical school. And in those very lean years, God provided. I never knew we were poorer than poor. I just remember eating a lot of spaghetti. But yet my parents following the way that the waters parted completely altered my life and the lives of my siblings in the directions we would go and the people we would become.

Years later when I asked my dad about this moment in time he would simply say that those naysayers from years ago would comment in present day as to how lucky he was to have all the opportunities he has now had. To which he would say to me, "luck had nothing to do with it. God provided the opportunity and I worked my tail off to make it happen."

Down through the generations of my ancestors, this story of the Red Sea had context for their faith. It wasn't simply about having enough "faith." It was that in their contexts, these biblical stories became real and their faith came alive.

Someday, some of my ashes will be in this cemetery too. When, I don't know. But so you know, Pharaoh is chasing me through the desert again. I don't have the complete picture yet, but my numbers are changing, the lymph nodes in my abdomen are filling up. Cancer is my Pharaoh and he's back, on the horizon. It's

disappointing to say the least, but I've been here before and so has God. God has provided a way.

And besides, I hear my father's voice giving me encouragement from his Red Sea moments. And my grandfather as well, though he has gone for 45 years now. I have unexpectedly, providentially received words of encouragement from older pastors with whom my grandfather spoke into their Red Sea moments early in their careers and they have passed on his words to me as well.

There is something very powerful about this story for me. My faith is not dependent upon whether or not this story took place exactly how we see it in scripture. No, my faith is built on how the contours of this story are real because it lines up so cleanly with how I have experienced God in the Red Sea moments of my life. That experience, that context is the crux of my faith.

And that is why I included this last little reading about bitter water and a stick. It feels like it is a throw away story, an afterthought but it is not. Again, did it literally happen? I don't know. Not that important. What is important is the need for life giving water. But we live in a society where water is plentiful. And so what I find myself saying is that what is needed are things to help relieve the bitterness of what we experience in life. Bitterness robs us of life. As we grumble and complain, we miss it.

Sometimes I think that our complaining lies in the understanding, expectation that God will part the water like in Cecil B. DeMille's movie. It is incredible and the miracle is easy, especially since we don't have to do anything. We are passive. And when we don't get that quick fix, when it doesn't go our way and something more is required of us, we complain. We are distracted. We look around for something to blame and grumble about. And we miss the fact that God has taken something seemingly insignificant and thrown it into the water of our lives. And in so doing, we have been given what we need.

And like the movie, Bruce Almighty, our salvation comes with a change of our hearts away from selfishness toward the action of being the miracle for the other. Even when you have something like cancer or a career change or a church split or a Great Depression chasing you through the desert. I have stories too of how these generations in my family have been the miracle for others, in spite of their circumstances. And in so doing, the bitterness they experienced is lessened as they became life giving water to others.

Red Sea moments. You can't go back. You can't go around. You can only go through. And I'm left wondering about you. What have been the Red Sea moments in your life and how have you experienced God's saving acts in your context? Those are the faith stories that would interest me. Those are the faith stories that would be worth sharing with the generations that follow you, if you haven't already. May God continue to be with us and bless us in our days.