

Season after Pentecost

Rescue at Sea

Narrative Lectionary Year 1, Week 4

September 28, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Matthew 2: 13-15; Exodus 14: 10-14, 21-29

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen

More than 400 years after Joseph brought his family to Egypt, the Pharaohs of that nation no longer remembers what Joseph had done to save Egypt and the surrounding countries from a devastating famine. God's promise that Abraham would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky was coming true. Joseph's family, the tribes of Israel had greatly increased and the Pharaohs had become nervous. Couldn't these Hebrews, as numerous as they are, turn against us, join our enemies and overthrow Pharaoh?. So they enslaved the Hebrew people; making life unbearable for many generations. The people prayed for deliverance. Surely some wondered if God had forgotten about them¹ Surrounded by the dominant Egyptian culture with its many idols, perhaps even more Hebrews had forgotten about the Lord of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God made promises to Abraham — to make his descendants many and to provide a land of their own *so that* they would bless the world. The same Lord heard the cry of those descendants suffering as slave in Egypt. The time had come for the Lord to keep that promise; to show up and claim for the first time, not only a man and his family, but an entire nation as God's own. God's promises to Abraham made some 560 years before was now to be realized.² The Lord God worked through a reluctant Moses and his brother, Aaron to battle with Pharaoh, the declared god of Egypt. They duke it out through rounds of plagues until Pharaoh concedes and tells Moses to get the Hebrews the heck away from Egypt immediately. The God of the Israelites has proven mightier than the Egyptian God-Pharaoh. The bondage of the Hebrew slaves has been broken. They were free to pursue a different destiny as God's chosen people. It appears they did not fully understand what that meant, but they began following the Lord who had rescued them from slavery by following Moses, who spoke on the Lord's behalf. Like many of us who may have first come to know God through our own Moses --- a parent, spouse, grandparent, Sunday School teacher -- whom we trusted and who pointed us toward the love of God with their own love for us. Never underestimate the potential impact of one who bears God's presence, voice or hands in the world.

That rediscovered, tenuous faith of the Israelites in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was soon challenged on the shores of the Red Sea. Caught between Egyptian soldiers and the sea, they cried out in terror to the Lord by laying into Moses.

“Why bring us out to here to die? Better to be slaves in Egypt than die here.” Their terror is understandable if all you see are those two choices — slavery or a sea that looks too great to cross. It’s not an unfamiliar situation. When faced with obstacles, isn’t our first thought to retreat to the imagined safety of the past. Our old ways can seem like the only alternative as we face the unknowns of trying something different, out of the ordinary, scary. Maybe that sore joint, abusive relationship, addiction, unhealthy weight, declining church, over-taxing job, draining grudge isn’t so bad, we might tell ourselves, as we face the fear of surgery, job hunting, change, or giving up life-draining abuse, drugs of choice, or self-righteous anger. We too cry out to the Lord, wondering how we will ever survive Pharaoh’s army bearing down on us or a sea we don’t know how we’ll ever cross.

On that day, Moses told the panicked Hebrews to fear not, stand firm, be still and watch the Lord deliver you. “Fear not?” “Stand still?” “Wait upon the Lord?” I wonder how many wanted to throttle Moses. All they could see were those two alternatives – death in Egyptian slavery or death by drowning. They did not yet understand or believe there was another alternative that meant life — that other possibility was the way of the LORD their God. Moses raises a common, ordinary staff at God’s command and the seas parts. You’ve seen it in the old Cecil B Demille movie, The Ten Commandments or at Universal Studios or Sight and Sound — the sea parts. Still the Israelites must choose whether to go or stay. They still must decide to step out in faith onto that dry land with walls of water on either side. Somewhere, in desperation or a mustard seed of faith, they do. The Egyptians charge with their chariots in to the sea bed after the Hebrews, still convinced of the superiority of their technology and power as oppressors are apt to do. Soon they find themselves mired in their arrogance, disarmed by a Lord who is champion of the poor and downtrodden. The slaves and oppressed freed for a new life.

Normally our lives are not nearly as dramatic as crossing the Red Sea. But we **are** rattled by difficult crossroads or earth-shaking situations that can’t seem to be resolved by anything we do or say. What then? In the crossing the Red Sea we are reminded that God goes with us. Ultimately our lives are in the hand of God who has the power and will to see us through the sea and to another place where we can breath and know life again. It may not seem obvious, miraculous or immediate but God is at work to bring peace and victory where we may only see defeat or deadends. At the Red Sea rescue we see that despair need not enslave us.

In 1525, Martin Luther was besieged with threats, surrounded by enemies and excommunicated from the Roman Church. Utter despair and discouragement infected him. His friends tried to get him out of his depression, but couldn’t reach him. One day

he came home and found his wife Catherine wearing a funeral dress and weeping in grief. Luther asked her, "Catherine, who died?" She said, "God is dead, and I can't bear it; all his work is overthrown." Luther was shocked at hearing what could only be described as blasphemy from his wife's mouth and told her so. To which Catherine responded, "Well, you've been going around acting as if God were dead, and if God no longer was here to keep us. So I thought I should join the funeral and your bereavement." Catherine's remarks struck a bull's eye. "Luther, get a grip." Luther realized he had taken his eyes off the Redeemer.³ He had been relying on himself alone, forgetting it is the Lord who parts seas, resurrected Jesus from the dead, and delivers us to new life.

Maybe that is why Luther advises us to return to our baptism daily, tracing the cross upon our forehead and claiming a fresh, forgiven start each day. Remembering our baptism reminds us that we too have been claimed and saved in the waters of our baptism by the same Lord who parted the Red Sea and rescued our ancestors from bondage in Egypt. We have been freed from slavery to sin and death. There is more than two alternatives as we face obstacles, crises, Red Seas. Baptized in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, God promises to show us another way through our struggles with sin, temptation or circumstances that threaten to enslave us or God's church. God promises to walk with us every step through our Red Sea. In the waters of our baptism we are not only promised eternal life but a life in which our Lord will be with us now and always, inviting, pointing, calling us through dangerous seas to new places where we can find peace, purpose and new life.

The Israelites crossed through the sea to dry land into a wilderness. Scripture says they began to believe in the Lord and trust his servant Moses. They had experienced a miraculous rescue and now would enter the classroom of the desert --- a time of more learning about trusting and obeying the almighty God who loves them completely and keeps promises. Wet and blessed in the grace and promises of our baptism, let us follow in the footsteps of our ancestors — learning and obeying God's ways, living full, rich lives so that we can be God's light for others. Don't be afraid. Stand firm. Our Lord never promised the Israelites or us that a life following God would be easy. But what our Lord did and does promise is that a life of following God will be worthwhile. Thanks be to God.

Linda M Alessandri 9/27/14

ENDNOTES

1. "Promises Kept – Background" Narrative Lectionary *Promises Kept* Worship Resources Copyright 2014
Clergy Stuff

2. "Promises Kept – Background" Narrative Lectionary *Promises Kept* Worship Resources Copyright 2014
Clergy Stuff

3. Adapted from C. Douglas Weaver, *A Cloud of Witnesses: Sermon Illustrations and Devotionals from Christian Heritage* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993) p. 73 as cited by Curtis and Tempe Fussell, "Going Through the Waters" as posted on www.sermons.com