

WHEN THE HELICOPTER COMES
EXODUS 14:5-15
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARCH 3, 2024

Hear the word as recorded in Exodus, chapter 14, verses 5-15:

⁵When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, ‘What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?’ ⁶So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; ⁷he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. ⁸The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. ⁹The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by **[pi-huh-high-rath]** Pi-hahiroth, in front of **[Ball zefon]** Baal-zephon.

¹⁰ As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. ¹¹They said to Moses, ‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?’ ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, “Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians”? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.’ ¹³But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.’

¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.’

Stop me if you’ve heard this one. [Well actually, don’t!]

A man found himself in a rushing flood and took shelter on his roof. He began to fervently pray, “God, I have faith, rescue me.” Along came another fellow in a rowboat with a neon rescue flag. “Hop in, sir, the waters are rising and I can’t make a second pass!”

The man paused his prayers long enough to decline. “God will save me, you go on.”

The fellow in the boat argued for a moment but, sensing coming danger, was forced to paddle to safety.

Some hours later a fan boat came along. The captain of the boat shouted over the waves, "Get in!" Still praying, the man declined. "I have faith that God will rescue me. You go on."

The waters rose until they began to lap the roof where the man found himself praying. Terrified, he began to call out for God's rescue.

I grew up around the water and spent many summers down in the lowcountry savoring the wide beaches of Seabrook and the bustle of Charleston which, by the early 90s was marked by its own flood, the lines of Hugo having fundamentally altered the Holy City. I'm no competitive swimmer but I was confident enough to not be particularly concerned by the vast ocean and changing tides. Until one summer in college, when I found myself caught in a rip tide off Folly Beach. I knew better than fighting the tide, but as I watched the shore get further away, I was terrified. When I finally came up, nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from our umbrellas, I was winded and weary. The waters that I loved were, I began to realize, also waters that threatened.

All that to say, water is an odd thing. Contrarians will disagree with my usage, but it's a bit paradoxical: without it we can't live. But too much of it will destroy us.

So it is in Scripture, too, when we remember the wild flood that tossed Noah about and destroyed a good-creation-gone-bad. But we also recall the promise of baptism, of the water that covered Sloan's head today, marking her as a member of God's family forever.

Somewhere between those two stories, a story of destruction and a story of new life,

lies this story:
the miracle at the Red Sea.

Oblivion for Egypt, salvation for Moses and the Hebrews.

Back to the roof and the coming flood: the man's prayers have turned into cries, when suddenly the spotlight of a helicopter trains on him. The rescuers in the chopper descended enough to throw him a rope. "Climb it!" they shout.

They are mystified when he declines. Soon he will have to tread water. The storm is raging. He refuses their pleas.

Now those of us who have grown up in Sunday Schools have the story of the Red Sea crossing imprinted in our minds. But it's not only ours, the Red Sea belongs to the culture at large: Charlton Heston with his mighty staff sending the waters ripping on some unseen axis. Monty Python's *Brian* yelling "I'm a Red Sea Pedestrian and proud of it!"

But all that familiarity may have dulled us to the terror of the scene. The Hebrews have been promised salvation from the horrors of the Imperial machine. They escaped slavery narrowly. But Pharaoh grew to regret freeing the Hebrews. So, while they are still close, Pharaoh sends his best-in-class army to pursue the rag-tag Hebrews: six hundred chariots and every officer in his army. While the former-slaves — families with young children and elders — walk through the Egyptian desert, all Pharaoh's horses and all Pharaoh's men swiftly approach, ready to attack.

The Hebrews are between two impossible foes: the swirling, uncontrollable chaos of the waters and the ferocious, violent malice of the army.

It is no wonder that they begin to cry out to Moses that he well should have left them to die in Egypt, slaves to the Pharaoh.

If you've been following along these past weeks you know that we are in the midst of a sermon series called "The Fabric of Faith." We've explored faith as friendship, faith as patience, and faith as letting go (among others). You may be wondering if I've lost the thread that binds us together in the fabric of faith.

But what interests me today is faith as paradox, "a situation, person, or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities" (Oxford). Our Lord is both Lamb and Shepherd, for instance, a paradox par excellence; and is both victor and slain. Or, in an example perhaps more accessible to those of us on the other side of the millennia, we hold as a paragon of faith the father who, fearing his child's death, cries out to Jesus, "I believe Lord, help my unbelief."

Paradox lies at the heart of our faith. We see it in the person of Christ, fully human, fully God. We see it in the leap of faith that requires trust without certainty. And we see it on the banks of the Sea as the army approaches.

Addressing the fear of those who have followed him, Moses (in verse 14) encourages steadfastness. He has heard from God that God will do some mighty and powerful deed. The God who liberated will continue to lead the march toward freedom.

“The Lord will fight for you,” Moses tells the people,
“and you have only to keep still.”

Picture the scene again. The darkness, the chaos, the fear. Hear Moses’s assurances,

“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

When at the gates of heaven,
the man who only moments ago had been surrounded by the waters of the flood began to argue with St. Peter.

He is bewildered.

“I had faith,” the man said, despairing his lot! “I knew God would save me — why didn’t God save me?” “What else would you have,” replies Peter, “God sent a canoe and when you refused God sent a fanboat! Then after those long hours God sent a helicopter. Having declined, you find yourself here.”

Between the man on the roof and the Israelites, who are rightly afraid as they face the army of Pharaoh and the watery chaos of the sea, my mind turns to paradox.

Moses assures the people that God will fight. They need not worry about raising their arms. God’s gonna sub in for this one. All they have to do is stay still.

But.

If they’re gonna get across that sea and see the deliverance of the Lord they also have to keep walking. Moses tells them, “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” The Lord replies: “Tell the Israelites to go forward.”

Faith is the paradox that holds the crucified, resurrected king at its center.
It is the paradox that believes amidst disbelief.

It is the paradox of God's salvation in a fanboat driver,
the paradox of baptism: death and new life.
It is the paradox that keeps still while putting one foot in front of the other.
following right into the lapping waves of the sea.

Keep still, get moving.

A few weeks ago I had the great honor of preaching at a pride service at Duke Divinity's Goodson Chapel. Now I've been a Presbyterian all my life, but Duke is just smack full of Methodists with a healthy dose of Baptists and Pentecostals on the side. The service proceeded much like our own services — I hit my stride in that sermon and heard a few “amens” and some knowing “umhs,” and I gave thanks for those warm-hearted Methodists and righteous Baptists. I could get used to that live (positive!) feedback.

Following the sermon I returned to my place on the chancel, seated upright in my robe, and preparing for the prayers. My friend Ryan, a pastor and community organizer doing work in Louisville, got up to pray. He wore a long, serious black robe and I assumed he would take his place at the lectern and lead us through our everyday liturgy. *Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.*

But I forgot one thing about Ryan: he's a Baptist. As he strode to the center of the chancel he loudly pronounced that as a community organizer and man of faith, he was a person who prayed with his feet. And for the prayers of the people he asked the worshippers to get up and start talking. “Who do you need to pray for,” he said? “And whose work do you need to give thanks for?” “What do you need to confess? Find someone you don't know, walk around the chapel. Pray with your voices, but don't forget to pray with your feet.”

You have never seen someone so fervently try to melt into a gothic stone column until you have seen a Presbyterian pastor in Goodson Chapel being asked to 1) stand up without an asterisks, 2) find a friend, and 3) spontaneously pray *while walking in the middle of a service.*

I would have gladly let the waves of the Red Sea lap me right up.
I, who am so comfortable with my well-planned piety and nicely rehearsed prayers found myself paralyzed.

And then I remembered the Hebrews.

Rightfully afraid.
Embracing stillness, devotion, and salvation,
by moving their feet.

The Lord fights for those we hold in prayer.
The Lord fights for us.
The Lord, according to the Psalmist, fights for those bent down low, the imprisoned,
those struck by malady, and immigrants and orphans and widows.

But while the Lord is fighting,
bending the world to look more like the New Heavens and New Earth,
we faithful, by [through, in] our stillness, are required to get moving.

There are times for rest and stillness,
times to withdraw.

But faithfulness — paradoxically — is not waiting for some *deus ex machina* to pluck us
out our fear. It's trusting the God who walks with us *through* the ocean. It's getting on
your feet and following after the God who is always ahead of us, the God of liberation,
the God of the Empty Tomb.

When they looked back the Israelites saw the encroaching army. The threat was acute.
How often, I wonder, do you find yourself looking back? Stuck in some nostalgia for the
past and caught between two threatening poles. Having come to such a crossroads in
your life, what do you find yourself inclined to do?

Perhaps you turn on Netflix, burrow in the covers. Perhaps you attempt to take control
for yourself? Perhaps you deny your very real fear, or minimize the problem in hopes
that it will go away? Or you dwell in it, and lose yourself to inconsolable angst.

Or do you, in those moments, look for where God is, and find a way to follow? Do you
put one foot in front of another?

Sometimes you may be the fanboat driver. Sometimes you may be the one needing
rescue. Sometimes there's no crisis at all, and you just have to figure out how to live into
the baptismal vows you made — to follow and walk and raise up people in this faith.

The point is, if you don't ever get to moving, you won't get to experience that great deliverance — to see the rivers part as they open the path to the Promised Land, still far off but up ahead by the grace of God. If you don't get moving, you don't experience the joy of community in It's Elementary and WPCYG, in bible studies and out on the road, in places you would never lead yourself but, by the grace of God, you have been led.

God is the author of our salvation. We can't save ourselves, we can't orchestrate the world we want. God is the one who will bring the Kingdom to our shores. But God is weaving together a mighty tapestry from the stuff of our lives, pulling at our fears and providing a pattern for the living of our days.

God does it.

But y'all the gift for us is in the following.

Following God, we have the opportunity to labor in God's kingdom and to work for liberation, in service to one another and to the God who leads us between two opposable forces and (and!) in the everyday mundanity of life.

Faith is paradox.

It is stillness-in-movement.

Prayer and progress.

Trust between the wall of the sea and the chariots of a great army,
between morning and evening,
and in all of our living.

Faith is God's work, but our benefit.

It is not *only* an interior movement, a matter between us and God:

the kind of thing that lands us in isolation on roofs, afraid of what comes next.

Faith is for all those who file in on the road, and seek to do God's will and follow after God's ways here and now, among this community and beyond it.

Be still.

Just don't forget to get moving: to the places God is calling you to go,
to the peace that comes in service,
to the joy that comes with working the fields of the kingdom.

Be still.

Onward.