

“Go Forward”

Exodus 14:5-31

14th Sunday after Pentecost

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Ben Dorr

I imagine that most if not everyone here today has experienced a wide range of emotions after the events of this past week:

Shock, horror, sadness.

Frustration and fear at yet another horrific act of political violence in our country. Anxiety and despair after yet another school shooting in our country.

I also suspect, right alongside those feelings, there have been a host of questions:

As a Christian, what should I do?

What can I do?

How do I talk to my kids not just about last Wednesday, but about what they keep seeing on social media?

Is there an off-ramp to all this?

There's a national conversation going on right now.

I suspect it's a conversation that's been going on in your own households.

So how do we enter that conversation not simply reverting back into our politically preferred identity, but by tapping the deeper wells of our baptismal identity?

Let's start with our text.

It's one of the best-known stories in all of scripture. The story of God saving the people of Israel from Pharaoh by parting the Red Sea.

It's a story that speaks of God's power over evil.
It's a story that says God hears the cries of the oppressed.
That God comes to them in their suffering.

It's a story that says when we feel trapped, and helpless, and don't know the way forward in our own lives of faith, God will get us where we need to go.

How many of you first heard this story as a child?
I did too.

But there are marvelous details here that don't always get included in the children's version of this story. For example, in verses 13-14, Moses tells the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...you have only to keep still."

It sounds like Moses is telling the Israelites:
Just wait!
Watch what God is going to do.

Then we read verse 15:
"...the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.'"

Go forward.

Moses told the people to keep still.
As if God would do all the work.
But God said, "Go forward."

I think those two words have something to say to us right now.
We too cannot wait around for God to do all the work.
We have a responsibility to do something.

To promote civil conversations.
To stop cycles of violence and hate.
To build God's beloved community.

Go forward...

What do those words mean to you this morning?
What does going forward look like in this time in our nation's history?

I think about what going forward meant to Jesus.

Jesus spent his ministry using WORDS, not WEAPONS, whenever he was angry or disagreed with someone. And not only did he never endorse violence against those who stood against him.

He actively opposed it.

When the authorities came to arrest Jesus on the last night of his life, one of Jesus' own disciples took out a sword...you remember this, right?

This disciple struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.
And what did Jesus say to that?

"Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matthew 26.52)

In other words, Jesus spoke out explicitly, when his own life was on the line, against the use of violence. And I hope that's a point on which all of us can agree.

Going forward means condemning not just acts of violence against one's own political party, and certainly NOT attributing political violence to one particular political party...but standing against ALL acts of political and public violence ANYWHERE in this country...

Whether it was the shooting of Gabby Giffords in 2011, or the attack on Steve Scalise in 2017, or the attack on our nation's Capitol in 2021, or the assassination attempts against President Trump last year, or the murder of Minnesota state representative Melissa Hortman and her husband this past June, or the murder of Charlie Kirk this past week...political violence is always an act of evil.

But going forward means more than condemning the violence that's out there.

It also means CONFESSION of what's in here.

It means taking an honest look into our own hearts.

Examining where we fall too easily into demonization of another person, refusing to admit that the image of God is always in another person, even when it's hard for us to see.

As the pastor Derek Penwell wrote this week:

"We're a people enthralled by what Walter Wink called 'the myth of redemptive violence,'...I've been socialized by this myth too...I've imagined safety...not [as] the courage to reconcile [but] as the ability to overpower...[my] imagination has been shaped more by force than by the cross."

He goes on:

“We...who follow Jesus don’t express our rage with bullets or vengeance. We...[work for] a world where we actually believe the Prince of Peace meant what he said when he told us to love even our enemies.”¹

We need to practice enemy love in public.

The word enemy may be too strong a word to describe the relationship between Chief Justice Warren Burger and Associate Justice Thurgood Marshall back in the 1970s and 80s. But they certainly did not see eye to eye very often.

In 1987, the United States engaged in a bicentennial celebration of the drafting of the Constitution. Recently retired Chief Justice Burger presided over this event.

As the celebration took place in Philadelphia, Burger said:

“If we remain on course, keeping faith with the vision of the Founders...we will have done our part to see that the great new idea of government by consent—by We the People—remains in place.”

Justice Marshall offered a different interpretation of the day. Marshall, you will recall, became the first Black American to sit on this nation’s highest court in 1967. And twenty years later, Marshall saw the bicentennial celebration through a lens and an experience that was much different than Chief Justice Burger’s.

Marshall remarked:

¹ From a Facebook post by the Rev. Derek Penwell, September 11, 2025.

“The government the Framers devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war, and momentous social transformation” to better realize the promise of a more just society.

Credit for the Constitution as it presently stood, Marshall went on to say, belonged also “to those who refused to acquiesce in outdated notions of ‘liberty,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘equality,’ and strived to better them.”

As the Presbyterian pastor Tom Are helpfully puts it:

“Marshall believed in America, but he could do so only because he knew that America was still becoming. [Our] nation cannot be defined [only] by some [glorious] yesterday...if America is to be America, we must be defined by a tomorrow we have yet to see.”²

A tomorrow we have yet to see...

I think we get a glimpse of that tomorrow in our text.

Who was saved during the parting of the Red Sea?

The Hebrew people. The Israelites.

That’s the story we heard today.

And of course, it’s true.

But according to the book of Exodus, it’s not the ENTIRE truth.

In chapter 12, when the Israelites are fleeing Egypt, verses 37 & 38 read like this:

“The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed crowd also went up with them...”

² This story comes from Tom Are’s book, *Joy Even on Your Worst Days*, Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021. The story is originally told by Michael J. Graetz and Linda Greenhouse in their book, *The Burger Court and the Rise of the Judicial Right*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Wait a minute.
A mixed crowd?

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman translates the phrase as “a mixed multitude,” and what he says about that phrase is this:

“The phrase that is translated ‘mixed multitude’ conjures a disordered or confused array of folk without ethnic or linguistic identity.”³

In other words, people of different heritage were also slaves in Egypt. People of different races. Different backgrounds.

All set free together.

This “mixed multitude” did not have the luxury of saying to one another, “Hey, I don’t want to get out of here with YOU. I don’t want to go forward with YOU. I don’t want to create a community with YOU.”

And neither do we.

Going forward means going forward together.

When we go forward as God’s church and as a country, it is with all the diversity that God sees fit to give us...no matter one’s race, no matter one’s sexual orientation, no matter one’s gender identity, no matter one’s economic status, no matter one’s educational status, no matter one’s political positions.

Going forward means finding not just common ground, but **HIGHER GROUND** than where our society often wants to drag us.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Delivered Out of Empire*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021.

But may I suggest that this higher ground is what our baptismal identity is all about?

Finding that higher, more hopeful ground?

There's a story that Andrew Young recalls from the Civil Rights protests in Birmingham:

Easter Sunday dawned with Martin [Luther King, Jr.] in jail. . . . We planned a march from New Pilgrim Baptist Church to the city jail for the afternoon of Easter Sunday. . . .

By the time church ended some five thousand people had gathered . . . dressed in their best Sunday clothes. The marchers set out in a festive mood.

Suddenly they saw police, fire engines, and firemen with hoses in front of them, blocking their path. Bull Connor bellowed, "Turn this group around!"

Five thousand people stopped and waited for instruction from their leaders...I asked the people to get down on their knees and offer a prayer.

Suddenly Rev. Charles Billups...jumped up and hollered, "The Lord is with this movement! Off your knees! We're going on!"

Stunned at first, Bull Connor yelled, "Stop 'em, stop 'em!"
But none of the police moved a muscle...

Even the police dogs that had been growling and straining at their leashes . . . were now perfectly calm.

“I saw one fireman, tears in his eyes, just let the hose drop at his feet. Our people marched right between the red fire trucks, singing, ‘I want Jesus to walk with me.’

“I’ll never forget one old woman who became ecstatic when she marched through the barricades...she shouted, “Great God Almighty done parted the Red Sea one mo’ time!”⁴

You see, I think this story of the parting of the Red Sea shaped the faith of Jesus. It told him that the God he worshipped takes the side of the powerless, that this God stands with the vulnerable...because who did Jesus reach out to in his life?

The poor, the sick, the vulnerable.

Which means if we want to know what our job is this week, it’s the same job we’ve always had.

Not to grab a weapon...but to open our hands and hearts to the marginalized in our society, to seek out and welcome the stranger in our society.

Naomi Shihab Nye is an Arab-American poet who was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father was a Palestinian refugee and her mother an American of German and Swiss descent.

She tells the story of being in the Albuquerque Airport one day when she heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.”

⁴ As told in The Pastor’s Workshop, [Great God Almighty Done Parted the Red Sea One Mo’ Time](#). The story appears in Andrew Young’s book *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008.

She writes:

“Well—one pauses these days.

Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

“An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.

The airline attendant said:

“[Please] talk to her.... We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her...

The minute she heard any words she knew...she stopped crying.

She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment.

She thought the flight had been canceled entirely.

I said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just later...who is picking you up? Let’s call him.”

We called her son and I spoke with him in English.

I told him I would stay with his mother, and would ride next to her...

Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it.

Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends.

Then I thought ... why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her?

This all took up about two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then.

She had pulled a sack of homemade cookies from her bag—*ma'amoul* cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. They all ended up with powdered sugar on their faces.

It was like a sacrament.

And then the airline broke out free beverages ... two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar, too.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary [travelers] and thought:

This is the world I want to live in.

Not a single person in that gate...seemed apprehensive about any other person.

Not everything is lost.

This can still happen anywhere.⁵

I wonder if anyone here know the recipe for *ma'amoul* cookies?

I don't know the recipe.

But I bet you know the recipe for something.

I bet someone in your house knows how to cook.

How many of you live in a house where someone knows how to cook?

⁵ As told by Richard Roher at the Center for Action and Contemplation, [Kindness at Gate A-4 — Center for Action and Contemplation](#). The story originally appears in Naomi Shihab Nye's "Gate A-4" in *Honeybee: Poems and Short Prose*, New York: Greenwillow Books, 2008.

And I bet someone in your neighborhood sees the world differently than you. How many of you live in a neighborhood where at least one of your neighbors sees the world differently than you do?

If you want to teach your children how to respond faithfully to the events of this past week, invite a neighbor over for dinner. A neighbor whom you suspect might see some of the issues of our day...differently than you.

You don't have to discuss politics.
Just get to know one another.
Break bread together,
 find common ground,
 extend grace to one another.

And who knows...
The risen Christ might just decide to join you too.

Amen.