

September 17, 2017
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Exodus 14:19-31 ~ Matthew 18:21-35

There was once a man who was tormented by all kinds horrifying fears. Night and day they would come to him. Nothing he tried would vanquish them. In desperation, he sought out a local holy man and confessed his dilemma. "Nothing I do seems to stop these terrible fears from coming into my head, Master. I know I am in danger. What should I do?" The holy man took his visitor outside and said, "Open your shirt and take hold of the wind." The man answered, "But I cannot take hold of the wind!" The holy man said, "If you cannot do that, neither can you prevent such fears from coming in. But what you can do is to stand firm against them."

We have all been there. For Moses and the Israelites it came immediately after that grace-filled moment when they realized ... that after all those years of bondage to their Egyptian masters ... day after day of meaningless drudgery without end and no hope whatsoever that things would ever change ... that freedom was within their grasp. Even tight-fisted old Pharaoh crumpled after that terrible last night of death. "All right, go! You and the Israelites, leave me and my people in peace! Take what is yours and be gone!" he said to Moses. It was the chance everyone had been waiting for.

The text fairly bursts with descriptive power. You can almost hear the Egyptian parents, even Pharaoh and his family wailing laments over their lost children. You can hear Moses and his lieutenants jostling and exhorting the people. "This is it! Let's go! Let's go! Fast, faster!" The race against time had started. It was late ... later than anybody thought. They had one night in which to break the vise that had held them for almost four hundred years. One night to escape a prison so familiar that it had become like home to them. It was now or never. Everybody knew that by tomorrow Pharaoh would change his mind. Tomorrow he would come to his senses and realize what he had done. Tomorrow would be too late ... tonight was the night!

You can almost see the people running breathlessly, grabbing whatever they could, without even glancing backwards. There was no time for that. They had to make for the sea. God knows, the sea was their only chance. Not the straight road to Canaan, which would have taken them there faster ... because that would have meant having to get past six (count them), six, heavily-armed Egyptian outposts. "The way to the land of the Philistines," it was dubbed in ancient times. The Egyptians traveled it regularly. They had constructed it to withstand the pounding of their chariots. They would have been run down like animals.

No, their only hope of survival was the wilderness of Sinai ... and to get there meant going by the sea. What they would do when they got there nobody knew, not even Moses. All they knew was that it was their only chance. The devil or the deep blue sea. Not much of a choice, but a choice nonetheless.

Then, finally, after a night of running in the dark, that long, straggly band came to an abrupt halt. There was the end right in front of them. The sea was there waiting ... and already they could see the dust of Pharaoh's chariots behind them. Terrified, they clung to the banks while Moses' leaders urged them on.

This well-known story is a story of resurrection ... for Israelites and later Jews it is *the* story of resurrection, and the focus is squarely on YHWH. When the grumbling and then terrified Israelites find themselves trapped between the forces of pharaoh and the angry waves of the sea (Ex. 14:9), they scream at Moses that their freedom has turned to imminent death. "Plenty of graves in Egypt, Moses," they shout ... "why bring us out into this place where death is even more certain and even more horrendous?" And Moses' response makes the central point of this resurrection tale. "Do not be afraid! Stand still and see the salvation that YHWH will work for you today. The Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you must only stand still" (Ex. 14:13-14).

And with that grand oration echoing in Israelite ears, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea and *two* separate and distinct events occur. We of course are most familiar with the "walls of water on their right and on their left" (Ex. 14:22), made indelible in our minds by the Cecil B. DeMille epic of six decades ago (done incidentally using Jello, and resulting in the only Oscar that the film won). But that is only one of the stories told in this complex account. There is another: "YHWH drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land" (Ex. 14:21). Here we witness some sort of long tidal event, rather than the instantaneous piling up of divided water walls. An event as magical and grand as this can hardly be confined to one telling!

We are not asked to choose the "right" story ... is the tidal account more "believable," hence more possibly "historical," than the walls of water story? This is not the point. *Both* stories have YHWH at the center ... *both* stories announce that YHWH is the God of life ... ever active against the forces of death. This ancient resurrection story mirrors and echoes all other stories of dying and rising gods from the ancient near east. It is not more or less historical than they ... its power is *not* found in its historical plausibility. It has power because it is *our* story ... it is the story that *we* choose ... the story that has lured *us* into its potent orbit ... the story that affirms *our* conviction that God is always seeking and creating life in a world too often overcome with death.

"Come on! Into the water! Into the water! God will lead the way!" shouts Moses." Terrified and panicking, the people began to do as he asked. But suddenly, Moses ordered everyone to halt. "Wait a moment!" he said. "*Think* about what you are doing! Enter the sea, not as frightened fugitives, but as free men and women! No matter what happens, Pharaoh cannot take that away from you!"

It was then that the Israelites advanced through the sea. Moses turned to God with a prayer; but God quickly reminded him that this was not a good time! "Tell the people to hurry!" And the people, united as never before, swept ahead and crossed the sea, which had drawn back just enough to let them through. So awesome was the moment ... so charged with faith and hope ...

that even the most humble saw within it more of God's mystery than even Elijah would see centuries later.

Then, when they reached the other side, Moses was so moved by what had happened that he burst into song. The old stutterer, the old pain in the neck who couldn't put two words together to shake a stick at suddenly became a minstrel! Well, they say that many stutterers have difficulty speaking, but not in singing. But Moses may have been the first; and the Hasidic explanation is that this happened because the people had faith in God and in Moses. For the first time since Moses had started urging them to get out of Egypt, they had rallied around as one. That was why he was able to sing. Because it was like the people were singing through him.

I have added my own spin to the story, of course, just as many later biblical writers added theirs. Just as you will add yours. No matter how we tell the story, trust was the issue. Would the people trust God ... and trust that deepest place within themselves that allowed them to have faith in God once their moment of defiance melted away? This was no Patrick Henry moment ... no ... "Give me liberty or give me death!" They knew that there would be no battle. Pharaoh was a formidable foe. They could no more stop him than they could stop the wind. What they could do was the only thing that Moses asked them to do. "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today..."

There comes a moment of unearthly silence for all of us ... when we stand firm in our resolve between the devil and the deep blue sea ... a moment when we must wait upon our own convictions and see what God will do because it is the only thing we can do.

A few days ago, I received a note from a friend, an Episcopalian priest who had been run out of her parish by its leaders ... the punishment voted upon her as a result of having faithfully done her job. "Your sermons are too political. We don't want to hear what's wrong with the world. And we don't want to hear what's wrong with us. Just tell us God loves us and leave it at that," they told her. When she couldn't leave it at that ... any more than Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. or Jesus could have before her, they insisted she resign. And her bishop supported their decision. Being faithful to the gospel ... having faith in God and in herself meant heading for the Red Sea ... not knowing what would happen next. Standing firm for the woman she was and for the God who had called her ... between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Yes, there comes a time for all of us when we must find out whether we have what it takes. That moment when we break free of the oppressive circumstances that have held us captive for so long ... and stand before an uncertain future. When matching the enemy blow for blow is not an option. When no one can see a way *for* us to the other side. When we must simply reach down within ourselves and find that source of fearlessness, dignity and integrity. The place that literally inspires us to be more than we know. It is then that a path opens before us ... in recognition of that which we were prepared to believe ... a way out of what seemed an impossible dilemma ... into that new day that God alone can provide.

Our own Red Sea today may be the vast cultural divide that stands between the glory days of the 20th century church and the new reality of a post-Christian age. Yes, there is a wilderness

beyond the waters ... and as with the Israelites ... there is no turning back. What once worked seems no longer viable, and much of the past wasn't really all that glorious anyhow.

We are *still* on a journey ... a journey of faith and discipleship. We are a countercultural people ... like the Israelites in their situation ... and we *do* stand at the edge of a sea of change in our culture and religious landscape. We can't go back to Egypt. To move forward and put a toe into the water ... trusting God to give us dry land on which to journey ... is to head into a wilderness of uncertainty and discernment. Neither path is easy, and fear of drowning and losing our way as "institutional church" accompanies the change of moving forward.

And yes, there may be casualties. The chariots and warhorses of our way of "being church" are drowning. It's no great secret that the way we've been church in North America is passing. Our central place in culture does not remain, and what we once prided ourselves to be is covered by the waters of change.

But there is hope, always hope! Our God is a God of liberation and salvation. The Creator of the Universe is always making things new and bringing forth new life ... from the remnant that follows cloud and fire... into a new and uncharted land. Our job is to stand firm like Moses ... to stretch out our hands in hope and point to the cross ... knowing that God is with us and that Christ's church will not be lost.

As you leave this morning, I invite you to dip your fingers into the font ... knowing that you have already been submerged in the waters of baptism and have come out the other side. Nothing can stop us now, as long as we keep our eyes on the Lord and our feet moving forward on the dry ground of faith. Stand firm and proclaim hope in the midst of fear and change.

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, just as our forbearers who crossed the Red Sea, help us transition as a people from fear to awe, from doubt to faith, from cries of despair to shouts of joy and worship. Because you heard their cries of injustice and delivered them ... they could then sing and dance with joy, liberated for a new life and new purpose. Let it be so now for us. Turn our fear into joy ... deliver us from those dark places of enslavement and exile and brings us through the deep into a new dawn. Amen.