

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2020

(Exodus 14:19-31)

I learned something new this week as I studied today's passage from Exodus. It was something I hadn't noticed before and is a further sign that scripture is living, breathing and continually revealing new layers to familiar stories.

The verses we just read about the escape of God's people through the sea – not across it, but *through* it – are a story of *creation*. Yes, in the midst of the fear and the flight, woven through this narrative of Israelite panic and Egyptian pursuit, we see glimpses of *creation*. On the surface there is one very strong echo of the early days of God's creative process in Genesis. Then, at the beginning of time, as now, in the escape from Pharaoh, water is pushed back to reveal dry land. Then, at the beginning of time, it was to allow new forms of life to flourish in a new habitat; now, in the escape from Pharaoh, that action once again allows life for the Israelites to continue in a new land.

But in the heat of that moment, in the midst of their flight, creation wasn't visible to the Israelites – just as it wasn't visible to me as I once again read this passage. In everything leading up to this moment on the edge of the sea, it must have seemed to all of them to be nothing more than a series of acts of survival. For Moses, it was a bit more than just survival. As with everything for him, starting in that first moment when he met God at the wilderness bush that burned but wasn't consumed, it was a series of acts rooted in his faith and obedience to God.

There was without question great pressure on him; just a few verses earlier the people were questioning his decision-making and leadership, decisions that brought them to this moment with a sea in front of them and an army behind them. “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?”¹ Moses wouldn't have known – he *couldn't* have known – what the path ahead held in store for him, his family and all those fleeing into the unknown. What was most important however *wasn't* that *he* knew; what was important was that “God had decided what to do. The stage is set for the divine victory over the forces of chaos.”²

The past several months have filled many of us with feelings similar to those experienced by the Israelites. We have certainly encountered fear and panic as all that was familiar in our lives was transformed into the unfamiliar. Adjustments to the way things were traditionally done here at church and in the world around us have resulted in uncertainty. The flight away from the normal has resulted in questions and doubt. But as I found right there in the story of this moment of the Israelites' journey through the sea, these past several months have also been a time for creation, a time of finding new ways of being the Church.

¹ Exodus 14:11 (NRSV).

² Terence E. Fretheim. *Exodus – Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, p. 158 (Kindle edition).

Church hasn't stopped. The parameters of what was familiar have been altered and stretched, but *church hasn't stopped*. In some ways the water of the old days has been pushed back to reveal the dry land of this new time, and through that revelation we're finding other ways to experience creation in what we create to touch the world.

Our food pantry looks a bit different and certainly operates in a vastly different manner, but it continues to serve all those who depend on it to push back the waters from their dry land. The members of our Vestry continue to come up with ideas about other ways to serve our community; some may work while others can't be done – but all of them are offered as a means of creating opportunities to help push the sea of uncertainty away from the dry land of hope. Melanie and I continue to rely on technology – more than either of us expected at the beginning of this year – to reach people near and far, creating opportunities to push through the chaos and deep water to offer worship, education and conversation on virtual dry land where we can continue to gather.

Although I have a tremendous amount of empathy for him and for what he experienced, I am *not* Moses. However, like Moses I can say I don't know what the path ahead holds in store for any of us. All I can do - all that *any of us* can do – is continue to act out of faith and obedience to God. All we can do is continue walking ahead through the divided sea of this moment, moving toward what lies ahead of us on the dry land where we will continue to grow and thrive.

Above all, what we can do – what we *must* do – is remember that while we don't know the specifics of the plan laid out for us and certainly don't have all the answers, *God has decided what to do*. And when we reach the moment when the sea has closed behind us and we are once again on safe ground, may we pause to give thanks for the journey and for the opportunity to be witnesses to the new creation that awaits us.

I'd like to close with the words of Thomas Merton. Taken from his 1956 book *Thoughts on Solitude*, I offer them as a prayer for this time of uncertainty – this time of walking through the divided sea toward the dry land of new life:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.³

Amen.

³ <https://matthewjabate.wordpress.com/2014/07/18/thomas-merton-on-walking-in-uncertainty/>