

Sermon: "Going Through Deep Water"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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A STORY OF CRISIS

Every community has a story which shapes its life.
Preacher Carol Noren told the story that shaped the life of the church she now attends.

It seems that in the 1920s this large church experienced a period of rapid expansion and change. The community was annexed into the city of Chicago, bungalows were constructed on what had once been prairie, and a high school was established (though there was no money to build a new building for the high school.)

The church saw those developments as both a challenge and an opportunity. They would build a new high school and expand their ministry. An ambitious building program was launched. A gymnasium, chapel, theater, kitchen and many Sunday school rooms were added. Every square foot was used by the growing congregation and the new high school.

Then came the stock market crash of 1929. The congregation was deeply in debt. Many were unemployed. The trustees saw no way to make the mortgage payments. They feared the bank would foreclose on the loan.

Then the women's society proposed a course of action. What if everyone in the church agreed to stop what they were doing at 10:00 each morning and pray for God's help with the overwhelming debt? The church council agreed to the plan, and the majority of the congregation went along.

That's not all they did of course. There were ice cream socials, Wednesday night suppers, and other fund raising activities. But what they did most of all was implore God's help.

And the mortgage was paid step by step ... little by little.

Money came from unexpected sources. Events made more profit than they ever dreamed possible. It was a defining chapter for that generation in the church. They paid off the mortgage ahead of schedule and had a great service of celebration and praise.

From then on, whenever troubles came to the congregation, the older members would tell the story of when "they all prayed together at 10:00 every morning." In their minds, they didn't do the impossible. God did. All they did was raise their hands in prayer.

They were a people in a desperate situation, but God led them through those deep waters to a better day.

In a way, our story from the Bible is like this story. Except in the case of our story for today the stakes were much higher. The people of God were not just putting their money on the line. They were putting their lives on the line betting that God could deliver them from the hand of their enemies, the Egyptians.

And so God did leading them straight through the deep waters of the Red Sea to salvation.

DEEP WATER IN OUR COUNTRY

After this past year, I think this particular story of deliverance holds greater meaning for us. Out of nowhere we found ourselves surrounded by enemies. What we thought was a stable world turned out to be a world fraught with danger and evil. Deep water.

We've been through quite a bit of deep water in our country, and "deep water" experiences can alter our life forever.

This past week as people reflected upon last year's attack on September 11, more than one person talked about the probability that many people will suffer from post traumatic stress syndrome. That's what they used to call being "shell shocked" in the army. But, we now know that any life threatening or life changing event can cause this syndrome to occur.

According to psychologists, it's important that people not pass through the "deep waters" alone. All of us need to know the signs of this problem and how to reach out to someone else for help.

Psychological help is helpful and needed, but I believe that the challenge of deep waters requires spiritual help as well.

Indeed there are some waters which are too deep for even the best counselor or friend.

There are some waters which can only be crossed by the aid of divine intervention.

MARCHING INTO THE DESERT

So it was long ago when Moses led the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. You know the story. God called Moses, a lonely nomad in the desert to come and proclaim a word of judgment to Pharaoh. And, reluctantly, Moses did just that.

But, as Moses feared, Pharaoh didn't listen. It took many plagues and the death of the first born in every household ... including Pharaoh's ... before the monarch finally allowed the children of Israel to leave. Indeed, after this last plague, Pharaoh and the people of Egypt roused their slaves in the middle of the night and begged them to leave. He and all of his people were afraid that they all might die if they did not let God's people go.

So Pharaoh finally did let God's people go, and the people of God began their long journey to the promised land.

Like a mighty army they took their possessions ... and the silver, gold and clothing that the frightened Egyptians gave them and followed their new leader, Moses out into the wilderness.

A FATAL MISTAKE?

But God commanded Moses to do an unusual thing. Instead of instructing him to take his people over the usual routes routes that would have caused them to pass through heavily fortified checkpoints and

into possible military conflict God had Moses take his people through the wilderness straight toward the Red Sea.

This looked like a fatal mistake.

No doubt the Egyptians took note of this. The people of Israel looked like they were wandering around in the middle of the desert with no clue as to where they were going.

I think that Pharaoh and his servants decided that this was an opportunity too good to pass up. It looked like the perfect set up for an easy military victory.

So Pharaoh's heart was once again hardened, and he said to his servants,

"What were we thinking about when we let our servants go?

We need to go bring them back."

Now in every period of history professional armies have had one great weapon of war, a weapon which struck fear into the heart of their enemies. In the ancient world, the chariot was such a weapon. And Pharaoh was prepared to use this terrible weapon in battle against his runaway slaves. The scripture tells us that Pharaoh prepared to do battle with his army and six hundred of his best chariots.

It's important to picture the hopelessness of the Israelite's situation. They were surrounded. Pharaoh's chariots were thundering up behind them. To their left and right was nothing but desert. And the way forward was blocked by the deep waters of the Red Sea.

BLAME AND FEAR

What do we do when we find ourselves hemmed in on all sides? Quite often we blame our leaders. And that's what the people of Israel did. They said,

"Why didn't you listen to us Moses? Didn't we tell you that we were willing to stay in Egypt as slaves? It would have been a lot better to have remained a slave in Egypt than to die here in the desert."

Why didn't the people of Israel have more faith?

Hadn't they witnessed the power of God in the plagues sent upon their captors?

Didn't they know the salvation of God when the angel of death passed over their homes because their doorways were stained with blood of the lamb?

Why couldn't they believe that God would save them in this new situation?

We shouldn't be too critical of the Israelites because I think that we are the same way. No matter how many times we have experienced God's power and care for us, we are uncertain in new situations.

When Pharaoh's army approaches from behind and all we can see ahead is deep water and desert, we too are inclined to ask ourselves in our heart of hearts,

"Can God really help me cope with this situation? There doesn't seem to be any way out. Oh, if only I had done something differently. If only I hadn't come to this place, maybe I wouldn't be in such trouble. Where can I find salvation now?"

Where can we find salvation when we are hemmed in by all sides?

THE BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD

I believe that salvation still comes from the Lord.

The battle belongs to the Lord, as our praise and worship song put it.

I believe that God still brings his people salvation by moving them forward.

I believe that God still calls His people to go through deep waters that seem so impossible to cross.

But, with God, nothing is impossible.

The presence of God can change any situation.

And sometimes God intervenes in the most hopeless of situations so that we can use that story as a paradigm of hope.

That's why our lesson for today is so important. It is not just a story about how God saved some people way back when. It is (as it has been used by Jews down through the centuries) a catechism of hope for future generations.

Tell this story to your people.

This is what God is like.

God brings salvation to his helpless people.

The Scripture tells us, "The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them."

Exodus 14:19

With the Egyptians blocked from pursuing the Israelites by the cloud of God's presence, God ordered Moses to stretch out his hand over the waters of the Red Sea. Moses did as he was told, and God parted the waters. There was a wall of water on the left and on the right, and the people of God passed through the waters to the other side on dry land.

FAITH TO MOVE THROUGH DEEP WATER

Have you seen Cecil B. DeMille's movie, The Ten Commandments? I think his portrayal of the crossing of the Red Sea is wonderful. That elaborate wall of water in the movie seems to accurately describe the biblical account.

Think of how much courage it took for the children of Israel to pass through the deep waters of the Red Sea. God parted the waters, but the Israelites had to have enough faith to walk through those deep waters to the other side.

This is the message of this passage. This is why this story was passed down from generation to generation. People of every age still need to know. God can still part the waters. God can still lead us through to the other side.

But, we must have the faith to walk through the deep waters.

We must still have the faith to go where God leads us.

We must believe that God is always present ... even and especially when we think the worst is about to happen.

A CREATION MIRACLE

As I've told you before, most miracles in the Bible are what I would call creation miracles, and that is true of today's miracle as well.

In the book of Genesis when the world is created God says,

"Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Genesis 1:9-10

In my mind, the parting of the waters of the Red Sea is reminiscent of the creation of the world. In the Bible, the water represents the forces of chaos and destruction, but God holds those waters back and creates dry land.

God creates by holding back the forces of chaos.

God creates by making a space that is not overwhelmed by the water
... a space where dry land appears.

In this case, God was creating a free people who would have a story of salvation to tell the nations. It was the first act in a drama that would have its fulfillment in salvation proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

WATERS OF DESTRUCTION

The Egyptians pursued the Israelites into the deep waters, but even the most modern of warfare technology was no match for the God who created everything.

The army was thrown into a panic.

The wheels of the driving chariots were clogged with mud and the great war machine slowed to a crawl. Moses stretched out his hand as God commanded, and the waters covered the pursuing army.

All of Pharaoh's army that followed the Israelites into the water were killed.

The people of God gave thanks for the victory. In fact, the whole 15th chapter of the book of Exodus, devoted to praise over the fact that Israel's enemies were destroyed. I guess it was only natural. After all, do we not cheer our military victories as well?

But, later, as God's people thought about this story, they also recognized that their deliverance came at great cost. Their deliverance caused suffering for others. Rabbi Johannah showed great spiritual insight into this fact when he wrote,

"When the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea, the angels in heaven were about to break into songs of jubilation. But, the Holy One silenced them with the words, 'My creatures are perishing, and you are ready to sing?'"

SALVATION FOR ENEMIES

The Rabbi had it right. We believe that God was in Christ.

And the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who loves the world. How does that familiar passage

from John 3 go? God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17)

We must modify this old story with insights derived from the new. We must remember that this was just the first act in the salvation drama and that the ultimate purpose of the God who created heaven and earth is not destruction even of enemies.

The ultimate purpose is redemption.

That's the message of the cross isn't it? Jesus died for us all on the cross ... entering the deepest water of all for our sakes, the deep water of death. And because he entered that deep water, we know that even that terrible deep water is not too deep for God's power.

He delivered Jesus from death as a sign of his power and hope.
And one day it will be the same for those who have died in Christ Jesus.

They too will be raised to praise God's salvation in glory.
They too will rejoice over on the "other shore," but it will be more than celebrating a victory over enemies. It will be a celebration of victory over the final enemy even death itself.

My sermon title for today was inspired by the famous old hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." We're going to sing that hymn today, and I want you to pay particular attention to the third line of that hymn. It goes,

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."

Friends, don't fear the deep waters.
God delivered His people through them long ago. And God will deliver us even today.

Amen.