

September 17, 2017 – Crossing the Sea

Exodus 14

The Israelites were free. Using horrible plagues, Moses had convinced the Pharaoh that he should let the Israelites leave Egypt. They were free for the first time in generations. They were no longer forced into hard labour by their Egyptian overseers. They were on their way to the Promised Land. The Exodus had begun.

Moses and his people had reached the edge of the wilderness and were now camped beside a sea. Some translations call this body of water the Sea of Reeds, others the Red Sea. Let's just say it was wide enough and deep enough that it created a formidable barrier.

But then Pharaoh changed his mind and sent an army of warriors on chariots to bring them back. The army grew close enough that the Israelites could see their enemy behind them. The Hebrew people realized they were trapped between the water and the approaching Egyptian army. So panic set in. They cried to Moses, "Were there no graves in Egypt that you must lead us to die in the desert? What have you done to us? Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" In that moment they forgot about the new land that had been promised to them. They could only focus on the danger and the uncertainty of the journey.

How many times in our lives have we started on a journey to new life only to have fear and panic stop us in our tracks? I know I have to fight fear every time I try something new. Last summer I picked up a golf club for the first time in 30 years and I was terrified of being seen as a failure. My last semester at Emmanuel College I lost several weeks of work because my feeling of unworthiness was so strong it was paralyzing. My personal demons took over for a while and I couldn't write a word.

What journeys have you begun only to find yourself stopped in your tracks? When have you had to cross a sea that seemed way too deep and wide? When have you had demons like fear, grief, depression, or addiction take over your lives? When has this church community missed an opportunity to move forward because of fear? Is there a deep and wide sea that is blocking your path or our path to new life even now?

When Moses heard the panic in the voices of the Israelites he said, "Don't be afraid!" This is a statement that we hear over and over in the Bible. Some people even claim it's there 365 times... once for every day of the year. YHWH said it, Moses said it, Isaiah said it, the writers of the psalms sang it and of course, Jesus said it. "Don't be afraid." It's easy to say, but how to do we do it?

Moses goes on to say, "Stand your ground, and you will see the victory YHWH will win for you today.... YHWH will do the fighting for you; you have only to keep still!"

First of all let's ask ourselves, "who is this YHWH, this God, that is going to fight for us?" Is it the YHWH who hardened Pharaoh's heart so that the Egyptian army would follow the Israelites into the wilderness? Is it the YHWH who says, "I will glorify myself at the expense of the ruler and the army?" Is it the YHWH who deliberately drowns the entire Egyptian army? One thing I know for sure, this manipulative, glory-seeking, murderous God is not my God. I believe in a God whose power is love, a God who is the essence of love. I believe in a mighty God whose only weapons are mercy and compassion.

So who was this manipulative, glory-seeking, murderous YHWH? This was the God that the Israelites worshipped over 3000 years ago. For them, YHWH was a mighty war God. But then Jesus came and lived among us and showed us a different God, a God of love. So I invite you to understand this story in a different way than the Israelites would have. I invite you to see this story as metaphor. To see this story as a way of understanding how God is there for us as we fight our own personal demons, as we fight to overcome the evil that is within each one of us.

Yes, we have to stand our ground. But we don't do it alone. We do it knowing that the power of God's love is with us. We do it knowing that God's love is able to conquer evil. Think of those Egyptian warriors as all the demons within us that we need to fight... our own fear, grief, depression, addiction, the many ways that we can sin through deceit, pride, lust, sloth, wrath and the list goes on. The God of love is there to help us overcome those barriers to our own freedom.

And often standing our ground isn't enough. We actually have to move forward, forward into the unknown, just as the Israelites had to walk into and across the Sea of Reeds. YHWH provided a dry place for them to walk, but they had no way of knowing how long those walls of water would stand. They had no way of knowing if they could travel fast enough to stay ahead of the Egyptians. They had to trust in YHWH and go forward into the sea. They had to move through their fears and allow God's grace into their lives.

This week, after I sent out the bulletin, Staci Schaitel sent me a wonderful poem by a woman named Danna Faulds. I have chosen to share it with you now. It is called *Allow*.

Allow (Danna Faulds)

There is no controlling life.

Try corralling a lightning bolt,
containing a tornado. Dam a
stream and it will create a new
channel. Resist, and the tide
will sweep you off your feet.

Allow, and grace will carry
you to higher ground. The only
safety lies in letting it all in:
the wild and the weak; fear,
fantasies, failures and success.

When loss rips off the doors of
the heart, or sadness veils your
vision with despair, practice
becomes simply bearing the truth.

In the choice to let go of your
known way of being, the whole
world is revealed to your new eyes.

YHWH saved the Israelites by creating a stretch of dry land with walls of water on either side. God's saving grace can take many forms in our lives. When I feared playing golf, it was a friend who went with me and gave me the courage to fail. When I was writing my final assignments at university it was my mother who provided a safe place for me to complete my work and it was a trusted counsellor who helped me name and thus diminish the strength of those paralyzing demons. God's methods are rarely as spectacular as a wall of water in the sea but they are just as effective. The power of God's love works through each one of us.

Just as YHWH saved Israel on that day from the power of Egypt, so the power of love can save each one of us. Our task is to overcome our fear and allow God's love to work in our lives. Our task is to have the courage to take that first step onto dry land and to begin crossing the sea. Our task is to believe in the grace of God.