

“Ordering a Permanent Wave”
Exodus 14:10-31

Series: The Way Home Week 1.

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A man driving on the highway saw a rabbit hopping across the middle of the road. He swerved but unfortunately the rabbit jumped in front of the car. The driver, being an animal lover, pulled over to the side of the road to see what happened. Much to his dismay, the rabbit was dead. The driver felt so awful he began to cry.

A woman driving down the highway saw the man crying and pulled over. She asked him what was wrong. “I feel terrible,” he explained. “I accidentally hit this rabbit and killed it.” The woman told him not to worry. Going to the trunk of her car, she pulled out a spray can and sprayed the contents on the rabbit. Miraculously the rabbit came to life! It jumped up, waved its paw at the two humans and hopped down the road. 50 feet away the rabbit stopped, turned around, and waved again. It continued hopping and waving until it disappeared in the distance.

The man was astonished. He asked the woman, “What did you spray on the rabbit?” The woman showed him the can. The label read: “Hair spray: Restores lifeless hair. Adds permanent wave.”

The Israelites need a permanent wave. Trapped between the Sea and Pharaoh’s swiftly descending chariots, it seems there are only two outcomes: slaughter or slavery. They need to find the way out.

Have you ever been trapped in a dilemma? There are periods in life when changes crash on you like waves – one after another. At this moment in history, the changes in our world are coming at us faster than Pharaoh’s horses: skyrocketing prices, ever widening political divides, increasing threats from the Trojan Horse of AI, a world at war. Maybe there are significant changes going on in your life: Past due notices, parents getting ill, children acting out, pressure from work, struggles in school, rejection from friends, arguments with your spouse. In the middle of all these waves of change there is only One we can count on to be steadfast, dependable and sure: The Lord.

This is why our fall churchwide series is The Way Home – the journey of God’s people from slavery to the Promised Land. During their forty years in the desert, the Israelites faced tremendous changes. There were detours, delays and many misdirections. Yet God led their steps and got them back on track. Along the way they learned to open their eyes, hands and hearts to the Lord. This fall, we’ll follow their desert journey, learn how to deal with change and discover how God will lead us home.

If you feel a little reluctant to launch out of this journey, you are in good company. So were the Israelites. There is a radical change between the end of Genesis

and the start of Exodus. We finish the first book of the Bible with the death of Joseph, the prime minister of all Egypt. Four hundred years later a new dynasty arises.

Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. Exodus 1:8-11

Moses and Aaron, two dusty shepherds, march into Pharaoh’s palace and demand he let God’s people go. Pharaoh doesn’t agree. “Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go’” (Exodus 5:2). ‘Make bricks without straw and keep up the quota.’ He gives them an impossible task and then beats them when they cannot do it. The children of Israel complain to Moses. He in turn cries to the Lord. And the Lord replies by humbling Pharaoh.

The gods of Egypt give Pharaoh his power. So the Lord knocks over each idol like so many dominoes. The sacred Nile is polluted with blood. The Egyptians worship Heqt, the frog goddess, Hathor the cow goddess and Apis the bull god. So the Lord covers the land with reeking dead frogs and bloated bovine carcasses. They worship the sun. So, the Lord plunges them into three days of darkness. After nine plagues, the only god left is Pharaoh himself. On Passover night, Pharaoh’s first-born son dies.

During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord as you have requested. Exodus 12:31

Now you would think all their troubles would be over. But for Moses and the Israelites, there is still one more battle in the war with Egypt. The whole nation of Israel, six hundred thousand men plus women, children and even some Egyptians, set out from the Nile delta. But instead of taking the direct route along the Mediterranean to Canaan, they wander aimlessly up and down on the edge of the desert. From Succoth to Etham to Pi Hahiroth to Migdol. The elders wonder where Moses is taking them. Finally, they encamp across from Baal Zephon next to the sea. When Pharaoh learns that the Israelites are dazed and confused in the desert, he decides to take his revenge. The most powerful king of his age mounts his golden chariot and leads 600 elite charioteers followed by divisions of lesser chariots, horsemen, officers and foot soldiers.

The crimson sun lights up the western sky as the Israelites settle into their tents by the shore of the sea. Suddenly, a wave of panic washes through the quiet camp. Scouts on the edge see a growing dark line on the horizon. The thunder of hoof beats vibrates through the earth. Pharaoh is coming! Mothers scream and grab their crying infants. Fathers run about in confusion. The Elders pull Moses out of his tent and shout,

Did you bring us out here to die in the desert because there weren’t enough graves in Egypt? Didn’t we say to you, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert! Exodus 14:12

At that critical moment, Moses has only a few choices. He can rally his people to arms and be massacred or surrender and return to slavery. Running away is not an option. A nation of former slaves do not move as fast as swift chariots. Besides, there is nowhere to go. The children of Israel are cornered with their backs to the sea. And God is the one who told Moses to camp there. So what does Moses do? He prays. I imagine he says, "Lord, why did you bring us here? We're trapped. The Egyptians will slaughter us. What do you want me to do?"

"Move on," says the Lord. "Move on?" asks Moses "You want me to attack the Egyptians?" "No," replies God, "the other way." "Into the sea?" "Yes," says the Lord. "How?" asks Moses. "Raise your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea, and command it to move out of the way. Then I want you to march the Israelites through the sea on dry ground. I am laying a trap – not for you - but for the Egyptians." Now if I were Moses, I probably would have said, "Is there anybody else up there?"

When Moses comes out of his tent, the Elders crowd around him. "Do we fight or flee?" "Neither," Moses replies. "God told us to just stand still." "Stand still?!" they shout in disbelief.

Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still. Exodus 14:13-14

With that, a desert wind picks up and blows an impenetrable dust cloud between Israel and the Egyptian army. Meanwhile, Moses walks to the shore, raises his staff, stretches out his hand over the sea. A strong east wind drives the water back into two permanent waves on either side of the path. All night long it holds while the whole company of Israelites passes between the walls of water. When the last tribe reaches the far shore, the dust cloud lifts and the Egyptians pour into the gap between the waves. But in the heart of the sea, confusion reigns. Chariot wheels fell off, horses are spooked, soldiers are terrified. "The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt," they cry. Desperately they try to turn back. But when Moses stretches out his hand over the sea again, the waves cascade down upon the mighty army and they are no more.

When the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. Exodus 14:31

What lessons can we learn from the shores of this sea?

Sometimes we, like the Egyptians, are fighting against God. Pharaoh has one objective, to keep Israel in chains. That's why he finds himself in a wrestling match with the Almighty. For hundreds of years, our beloved country enslaved a whole race of people. For more than a hundred years since slavery was abolished, prejudice and fear have kept those same people down. A modern Moses, Dr. Martin Luther King, did not advocate taking up the sword. Nor did he run or shrink from the fight. He said,

Let us be dissatisfied until slums are cast into the junk heaps of history, and every family will live in a decent, sanitary home. Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout, 'White Power!' when nobody will shout, 'Black Power!' but everybody will talk about God's power and human power. Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon ... which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals."¹

Martin Luther King's Dream is still not reality. Let us work with God to deliver every person who is still not free.

Sometimes we are like Israel: cornered with our backs to the sea. It's so tempting to give up, to run back and willingly put the shackles on again. It would be so simple to go back to the old behavior, the old habits and addictions, the old doubts, the old way of life. When faced with a dilemma, it seems only natural to do something, anything, instead of waiting for God. But before you return to the old ways, stop, be still and pray. Talk with Him, depend on Him, let go and let Him fight for you. Stop, be still, and pray. Let God open up a new path.

Finally, there will be moments when you are Moses. People are depending on you, forces are converging on all sides, and God tells you to walk out, raise your staff and stretch out your hand. I imagine, with all the confusion and terror swirling around, with every eye looking to their leader for an answer, Moses probably looks pretty foolish standing on the seashore with his staff in the air and his hand horizontal. What good will that do? Moses takes a risk, a very costly risk, and trusts God will do what He promises. Brothers and sisters, there will come a time in your professional life, your family life, your personal life, when, against all odds, in opposition to what everyone else thinks, despite every inner drive and contrary to popular belief, you do what God wants. It may cost you your job, you may lose a friendship, your family may misunderstand, but in the end, this dead end will become the pathway to the Promised Land.

Over a hundred years ago an old farmer lived on a high plain above a Japanese seashore village. One autumn evening, an earthquake rumbled through the village. This was nothing new and the shaken villagers soon returned to their work. But the old man sat on his high perch and looked out to sea. Suddenly, he jumped up and called to his grandson, "Bring me a torch! Make haste!" In the fields behind him his harvest was already piled in stacks and ready for market. It was worth a fortune. Yet once the boy appeared with the torch, the old farmer thrust it into the dry bundles. Instantly they crackled with flame. A big bell in the temple below called the people to action: Fire!

From the beaches, up the steep side of the cliff, came the people of the village. "What is this mad man doing?" they cried as they desperately tried to save the crops of their rich neighbor. As they reached the heights and began to smother the fire, the old man shouted at the top of his voice, "Look!" At the edge of the horizon they saw a long, lean, dim line. It rapidly thickened as the sea rose like a high wall bearing down on them.

¹ Martin Luther King, "Where Do We Go From Here?" (Annual Report delivered at the 11th Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1967).

Then came a shock, heavier than thunder. The great swell struck the shore with a weight that sent a shudder through the hills and tore their homes to matchsticks. It drew back, roaring. Then it struck again, and again and yet again. Once more it struck and ebbed; then it returned to its place.

No word was spoken. Then the voice of the old man was heard, saying gently, “That is why I set fire to my crops.” He stood among them almost as poor as the poorest, for his wealth was gone – but he saved 400 lives by the sacrifice.²

Waves of change are coming your way. Stop. Talk with God. Take a stand. It may cost you something but in return, you may save lives.

² Lafcadio Hearn, Christian Living.