Deliverance at the Red Sea

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 14:5-14

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Moses’ parting of the Red Sea ranks as one of the top movie moments of all time. What makes it all the more remarkable is that *The Ten Commandments* was filmed in 1956 during the early days of special effects. I can’t resist playing a clip from the movie for you.

Every year during Easter, ABC brings back this 1956 classic. Charlton Heston played the part of Moses. Heston kept his staff until presenting it to the American Film Institute in 1997. Since the AFI Showcase is located in the Disney Theme Park in Orlando, Heston presented his famous prop to none other than Mickey Mouse.

Talk about an epic moment in the Old Testament story. Moses and the Israelites are pinned against the Red Sea while an Egyptian army is advancing from the west. There is nothing to their north and south but uninhabitable desert.

You could say Moses is between a rock and a hard place. Maybe you’re in one of those no-way-out moments right now. If so, the story of Moses is written for you.

Let’s review where we are in *The Story*. Many of us are reading an abridged chronological version of the Bible called *The Story*. It’s not too late for you to join us. We’re asking you to read chapter 5 in preparation for next Sunday’s sermon.

Chapter 3, last Sunday, tells the story of Jacob, grandson to father Abraham. Jacob has 12 sons. One of the sons, as we learned last week, is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. But “the Lord is with Joseph” (Genesis 39:2). He advances through the ranks of the Egyptian government to become Secretary of Agriculture. He becomes God’s means of rescuing his family from seven years of crippling famine.

Four hundred years have now passed. The descendants of Jacob, called Israelites, now live in Egypt. The Pharaoh, who accommodated Israel, is long gone and a new regime has forced them into slavery.

In chapter 4, God hears his peoples’ lament and remembers his covenant (Exodus 2:24). God visits Moses in a burning bush one day,
“Moses, take off your sandals. You’re standing on holy ground. I want you to tell Pharaoh, ‘Let my people go.’”

So, Moses, after a considerable amount of capitulating, does what he is told. He tells Pharaoh to let his people go but Pharaoh’s heart is as hard as flint. Twice in our scripture lesson we read that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 14:4, 8). Yet, there are also times when we are told that Pharaoh hardens his own heart. So, what gives?

I noticed something this week as I read through the series of 10 plagues God sent to soften Pharaoh’s heart. After each of the first five plagues we read that Pharaoh hardens his own heart. Yet, in the last few plagues, we are told that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart. The progression is hardly accidental. Action verbs in Hebrew sometimes express permission rather than intention. In other words, God permits Pharaoh to do something he’s already predisposed to do. God grants him, as it were, his heart’s desire.

The 10th plague proves to be the nuclear option. When the eldest son in every Egyptian family dies, Pharaoh has a change of heart and begs the Israelites to go.

Moses leads his people as far as the Red Sea. Pharaoh’s spies bring back the report that Moses is wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. Pharaoh is already having second thoughts about letting Israel go. “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services” (Exodus 14:5). Lost their services, my foot! They could contract with other people for comparable goods and services. No, what Pharaoh wants back is his slave labor. He amasses a formidable army of 600 chariots to recover his lucrative slave trade.

When the Israelites see the advancing Egyptian army, they panic and take their frustration out on Moses. “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us here to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone, let us serve the Egyptians?’ It would have better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert (14:11-12). I count five references to the Egyptians and not a single reference to God.
Moses has come to his rock and hard place moment. “Don’t be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today….The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (14:13-14).

The cloud and fire that lead Moses and Israel now shifts from the front of this processional to the rear, enveloping Pharaoh’s army in a dense fog and providing cover for Israel. Moses raises his staff and the waters part. I can’t resist this next slide. It may be lighthearted but it illustrates the point. God leads His people to freedom.

What a dramatic story! Moses’ transformation is altogether striking. How does he go from fear and uncertainty at the burning bush to boldness at the Red Sea? At the outset, he’s not the least bit interested in telling Pharaoh what to do. He throws up one excuse after another. When he claims to be a poor public speaker, God provides Aaron to serve as his press secretary (4:10). When he finally runs out of excuses, Moses shows his true colors. “Please, Lord, send someone else to do it” (4:13).

What happens to turn Moses around? No doubt the ten plagues have something to do with it. So does the cloud by day and the fire by night. When Moses stands by the water’s edge, I doubt that he has any idea what God will do next. Yet, he has witnessed enough of God’s faithfulness to be confident that God will somehow deliver.

God’s deliverance doesn’t guarantee that we will be spared from all bodily harm and tragedy. Initially, I cringed when I realized Anna’s testimony fell on this Sunday. Why did God not rescue her son from a swollen stream when God plucks people from the Red Sea? I don’t know! God’s ways are not our ways. Yet, on second thought, maybe her witness is just what we need. God brings deliverance in unimaginable ways.

Let’s go back to Moses’ counsel at this Red Sea moment. First, he tells us, “Don’t be afraid.” I’m struck by how many times Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid. The antithesis of faith is not doubt. Fear is faith’s antonym. Fear is what immobilizes faith.

We face formidable pharaohs in our day. Take Moses’ word to heart. Honor God; fear no one.
Second, Moses says, “Stand firm and see the deliverance of our God. The Lord will fight for you. You need only be still.” Moses stands strong in God’s promises. He is confident God will deliver him from his enemies.

Moses’ admonition seems to fly in the face of good common sense. God isn’t going to fight all our battles for us. Some people might use Moses’ words as a cop-out. I don’t have to do anything. God will somehow get me out of this mess.

There are plenty of times in Scripture where God calls His people to action. This is not one such moment. If Moses had tried to fight the Egyptian charioteers with unarmed slaves, they would have been annihilated. The best thing Moses can do in this moment is to stand firm and be still.

There are times when it’s better for us to stand and be still. Allow me to illustrate using our human desire for revenge. Is anything really solved by our desire to get even? Martin Luther King said that the old eye-for-an-eye code leaves everybody blind.

The 19th century musical team of Gilbert and Sullivan was a dynamic duo. Sullivan wrote the music and Gilbert supplied the lyrics. They got into a feud over who should pay for carpet at the theater where their music was being performed. They went to court over it and never spoke to each other again. They wrote all subsequent musicals through intermediaries. Whenever they appeared on stage together, they would come from opposite ends to take their bows and ignore each other. They continued to write musicals together but the magic was gone.

What a shame to feud over silly carpet. Yet, I would wager some of our disputes with family and friends are no less petty. Someday others might well look upon our disputes and wonder why we never reconciled.

Paul counsels us, in Romans, not to repay evil with evil. “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’” On the contrary, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them...
something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals upon their heads” (12:19-21).

You may be thinking what an ingenious way to get back at our enemies. I’ll just dump burning coals on their heads. It’s actually a Hebrew figure of speech meaning to make our enemies ashamed of their hostility by surprising them with unconventional acts of kindness. It’s similar to our modern idiom, “Kill them with kindness.”

Jeremiah writes, “The Lord is with us like a mighty warrior. Those who persecute me will not prevail. O Lord, you who probe heart and soul, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause” (20:11-12).

There are times when fighting our own battles gets us nowhere. God is like a mighty warrior. He will fight our battles for us. Stand firm and be still.

What do we do when we are between a rock and hard place? Don’t be afraid. Honor God; fear no one. Stand firm. Let God fight your battles. Go forward in faith.