

“God’s Messenger”
Exodus 14:19-31
Pollocksville Presbyterian Church
Sermon #70
15th Sunday After Pentecost
27th Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic
9.13.20

Exodus 14:19-31 CEB

19 God’s messenger, who had been in front of Israel’s camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them. **20** It stood between Egypt’s camp and Israel’s camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn’t come near each other all night.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land. The waters were split into two. **22** The Israelites

walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left. **23** The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and cavalry. **24** As morning approached, the Lord looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. **25** The Lord jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn't turn easily. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites, because the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt!"

26 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry." **27** So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. At daybreak, the sea returned to its normal depth. The Egyptians were driving toward it, and the Lord tossed the

Egyptians into the sea. **28** The waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry, Pharaoh's entire army that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them remained. **29** The Israelites, however, walked on dry ground through the sea. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.

30 The Lord rescued Israel from the Egyptians that day. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. **31** Israel saw the amazing power of the Lord against the Egyptians. The people were in awe of the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Hebrews have escaped. The firstborn of every human and animal that did not show the sign of the lamb's blood on their doorpost have been struck down. It seems Egypt has been brought to its knees after 11 displays of God's awesome power.

After they have partaken of the first Passover meal in Exodus 12-13, God instructs the Israelites to dedicate their firstborn males to the LORD right before today's passage. Again, as is the theme of Exodus, the dedication of the firstborn males is for the Hebrews

to remember God's mighty acts of deliverance from captivity to freedom. Death to life.

And now Pharaoh has let the people go and they're off to the Promised Land. Joseph's bones in tow, God has an indirect route for the Hebrew children to follow so that they are not forced to fight the other powerful empire, the Philistines, and then the Israelites would be tempted to go back to Egypt. But, guess what.....Pharaoh changes his mind and chases the Hebrews with 600 chariots!

And guess what else happens. The Israelites have already forgotten the dramatic displays of God's power in Egypt that set

them free in the first place! Pharaoh is coming closer and closer and closer and closer! The Israelites are terrified, they place blame on Moses, and demand to go back to Egypt. Back to the “good ole days”, which, if you have been paying attention to Exodus so far, the “good ole days” weren’t good. The Hebrews demand to Moses:

Weren't there enough graves in Egypt that you took us away to die in the desert? Let us work for the Egyptians!

Moses then pleads with the people. “Don’t be afraid”, he says! “The LORD will rescue you today!”

And now, after more crying out, God’s getting annoyed with the Hebrews. But, God tells Moses to get the people moving and for

him to lift his rod over the sea so that it will split in two and the Israelites can safely cross!

It's important to know the context because so much has been skipped before today's verses. The Hebrews haven't been gone long, but already people are forgetting what God did in Egypt. God's chosen people are in crisis. They are trapped between the sea, the desert, and Pharaoh's army. There seems to be no escape.

William Johnstone in his commentary on Exodus 14 describes this scene in Exodus as "a lively and accurate psychological depiction of human response to crisis."¹ The Hebrews think they are done.

¹ William Johnstone. *Exodus 1-19*. Smyth & Helwys: Macon, 2014, p.286.

Maybe they can persuade the Egyptians to take them back as slaves. Of course people “free” themselves of any blame by saying to Moses: “WE TOLD YOU SO! EGYPT WOULD’VE BEEN BETTER! BUT YOU MADE IT WORSE!”

If I were a betting man, I bet some of the people were turning toward Pharaoh and away from Moses to plead their case to be enslaved again instead of facing death. I bet some of these people were ready to forsake God and go back to the gods of Egypt.

But, what does God do? Well, in Exodus 13:17-18, God already planned an indirect route for the Hebrews to travel so they would avoid the powerful Philistines. This time, God is up to something

else to protect the Hebrews. God blocks the way between the Israelites and the Egyptians by sending God's messenger, who had been in front of the Hebrews leading them forward, to move to the back to protect them. And if you think about it, yes, God is protecting the Israelites from the Egyptians, but also God is protecting the Israelites from themselves. To protect them from fleeing toward Egypt.

We can be our own worst adversaries. Sabotage doesn't have to happen from outside, it can happen from within us. And for a people who had just witnessed the awesome power of the LORD God in Egypt, they were quick to turn back to their former lives. They turned on Moses quicker than a pack of animals. They had forgotten how God acted and protected them through every plague

in Egypt. They had forgotten how God had safely brought them out of Egypt. And now it's just a bit too tough for our ancestors and they're ready to give up *because* it's human nature.

I'm not placing blame solely on our ancestors. This passage forces us to look at ourselves in the mirror, too. Sometimes, God's messenger has to go from the front to the back to keep us from harming ourselves. Sometimes, God's messenger moves from the front to the back so we do not get tempted to flee to chaos of bondage and death and away from the order of freedom and life. At this moment, even though God had already planned for the Hebrews to avoid the Philistines by planning this indirect route to cross the sea, the cloud that had led the Israelites stood between the camps of Egypt and Israel so that neither would come near

each other. Yes, God was protecting the Israelites from Pharaoh AND God was protecting the Israelites from themselves.

While we read of the crises the Israelites faced in Exodus 14, it may stir up feelings of 2020. We may be in a desert. We may be facing a tumultuous sea. We may be hearing Pharaoh's army from behind chasing us. All at the same time! We may want to give in to the chaos. We may be tempted to forget what God has already done.

And then, that cloud we follow by day and that fire we follow by night to guide us through the desert known as 2020 goes behind us to protect us from Pharaoh's army known as the people who seek to harm and divide us so that we can move through the sea known

as a global pandemic. The cloud, the fire, God's messenger takes a few steps behind us to keep us from going back to a way of life that is harmful.

This won't be the last time our ancestors forget about the LORD's mighty acts of deliverance. All you need to do is read ahead to later in chapter 15 and into 16. It's human nature. And we, like our ancestors, are prone to corporate amnesia. Yet, through the LORD's power, we can journey on in this desert, across the sea, fleeing an army remembering what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. The journey for the Israelites from bondage to freedom is exactly that: A journey. The journey we are on today takes time. But, praise God, we're not doing this alone nor by our own doing. God is covering all sides to keep us moving.

Beloved in Christ, believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.