

You Have Only to Keep Still

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Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Text: Exodus 14:10-14,21-29

“Why couldn’t you have just left us alone?” With the sea in front of them and Pharaoh’s army advancing behind them, the Israelites are in a panic. They turn on Moses, the leader empowered by God to bring them out of slavery and into the wilderness. “We would have been better off back in Egypt,” they say, perhaps forgetting that they were the ones whose loud cries for deliverance from oppression had carried up to heaven. When it looked as though Pharaoh had given in, when the plagues had worn down his stubborn resolve and he decreed that the Israelites should be allowed to leave, they were all too glad to make their exit. It seemed they had escaped Pharaoh and his awesome military power. But escaping Egypt, slipping through the hands of that oppressive power, is one thing; confronting the Egyptian military, with its state-of-the-art chariot technology, in the desert was something entirely different. They had signed on for an escape, not a pitched battle they were sure to lose. Why couldn’t they have been left alone? Why had God turned their escape into a confrontation?

Stories of escape are perfectly good stories. We like to tell stories about those who escape from powerful enemies. In *The Sound of Music*, we see Georg Von Trapp as someone dismayed at the *Anschluss* between his native Austria and Nazi Germany, and unwilling to fight for the Nazi-controlled German state, but he’s not in a position to resist their plans for domination and conquest. When Nazi officials come to take him by force to serve in the navy of the Third Reich, the Von Trapp family’s friends in the convent shelter them and ingeniously disable the Nazis’ cars, and we cheer the family’s escape as the camera pans over them hiking across the Alps into neutral Switzerland. Their successful escape from the Nazis gives the film a happy ending, and it’s a perfectly good story.

The Israelites would have been perfectly happy to star in an escape story, and yet that’s not the story God gave them. Why was it necessary for them to find themselves caught between the chariots and the sea? Why was it necessary for them not just to escape the Egyptians, but to see their enemies consumed by the sea? The answer has to do with God’s identification with the covenant people. God identifies with God’s people to such an extent that it’s not good enough for them to simply slip through the hands of the powers that oppress and pursue them. Those powers have to be decisively confronted and defeated. Because this isn’t a story about Moses versus Pharaoh or Israel versus Egypt, where God stays on the sidelines as a cheerleader or coach. The story of God’s covenant people is God’s story.

A couple of weeks ago we talked about a promise that God made to Abram and Sarai, to make a great nation of their descendants and to give them the land of Canaan. Over the intervening years their descendants have become more and more numerous, but rather than possessing dignity and territory of their own, they’ve become a subject people of the Egyptian empire, pressed into forced labor.

Egypt is one of the superpowers of the ancient Middle East. The Egyptian Pharaoh rules a massive empire from what is now Syria in the north all the way down the Nile into Sudan. He is able to command the labor of scores of subject peoples in his realm, and he uses it in massive building projects, some of which you can see today. Egypt is at the top of the standings relative to other nations when it comes to economic and military power and cultural influence. The chariots we hear about in today's reading are an advanced form of military technology that is absolutely terrifying to neighboring peoples. Chariots are the tanks that allow the Egyptian army to cut swaths through enemy infantry. All this is to say that Egypt is not a power you want coming after you.

And Egypt goes to great lengths to maintain its power in the face of any threats. The Israelites were originally nomads who came to Egypt to find relief from a famine, but over the years they got big enough that the Pharaoh ordered their enslavement. And what's more, in order to minimize the threat of revolt, he ordered the midwives who helped deliver Israelite babies to throw all the baby boys into the Nile to drown. Murder and enslavement are part of the diabolical logic of empire. It takes horrific cruelty to maintain domination over others. But these are cruelties that have been repeated again and again through the centuries. There's something eerily demonic about what people caught up in the machinery of domination find themselves capable of doing to other human beings.

It's not an accident that one of our best known hymns about the Exodus is an African-American spiritual. Christianity took root among slaves who were riveted by this story of a God who hears, who intervenes, who rescues those who are oppressed. Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery and returned again and again to the South to rescue others, was given the nickname "Moses," and we can see why. This is a story about a God who takes sides. God is not neutral. God does not sit on the sidelines giving moral advice. God fights for the Israelites and against the Egyptians. God fights for the downtrodden and against their oppressors.

We join the Israelites after their escape from Egypt. A series of plagues has persuaded Pharaoh to let this troublesome people leave. But he has a change of heart. Actually, the scriptures say, God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Some folks find this troubling—why would God change someone's heart to do wrong? But from the standpoint of the story the Bible is telling, there has to be a decisive confrontation between God and Pharaoh. God has to win and Pharaoh has to lose. The point of the Exodus story is not that, with God's help, some slaves can escape the grasp of empire, but that, when God intervenes, the power of empire is broken once and for all. So Pharaoh sets off after the Israelites with his army and his chariots. The terrifying might of empire is bearing down on the frightened slaves.

The Israelites feel trapped. The sea is in front of them, the world's most powerful army behind them. They don't see a way out, so they begin to panic. Why didn't you just leave us alone, Moses? they ask. Better a slave in Egypt and alive than slaughtered in the wilderness. Moses urges them not to be afraid, and he makes a promise: "The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

What happens next is an unmistakable miracle. Every so often somebody will claim that if you stand on the shores of some particular bay of the Red Sea at some particular time of year, the tides will pull back the water and you can walk across. And they may be right! But to read any kind of natural explanation into this story completely robs it of its power. The people who told this story experienced it as a miracle. God saved them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. With God's power, a way forward through the sea appeared where there had been no way. With God's power,

the fearsome military technology of the Egyptians became only so much junk at the bottom of the sea.

This is not a story about escape. This is a story about the overthrow of powers that oppress God's people. As those who live in a prosperous first-world country, it's hard for us to identify directly with the experience of slavery and captivity in the same way as African-American slaves in the old South, or modern day people who live under occupation or exploitation. There's a warning in this story, too, that economic and political systems that oppress others will run themselves into the sea, and to the extent we participate in those systems, we run after our own defeat and destruction too, because God isn't neutral. So we should care about where our clothes and food come from. We need to be interested in the welfare of the people who produce what we consume. We need to be curious about who suffers from the "collateral damage" of wars waged in our name, lest we find ourselves riding a chariot down into the waves.

But we know better than to think we're in control, don't we? Look over our prayer list from week to week, and you can see the names of those oppressed by cancer, by broken relationships, by addictions. We're all held captive or pursued by powers that harm us and keep us from realizing God's hopes and promises to us. And maybe you don't see a way past the painful reality that's facing you. Maybe you'd be content to forget, to escape, to simply leave behind the conflict with a family member. Maybe you just want to be left alone in whatever accommodation you've made with the brokenness and captivity of your body or your spirit.

But God's not interested in writing that kind of story for you. The essential fact of your story is not the things that hurt you or hold you captive. The essential fact of your story is that you, like the Israelites, are the recipient of God's promises. In your baptism, God has marked you and claimed you. In your struggle to be free from your own particular brokenness, God is not neutral. God identifies with you. God fights for you. The God who made a way through the sea will lead you forward toward abundant life. The God who defeated the mightiest empire will confound the powers that pursue you. God is on your side. God will see you through. You have only to keep still. Amen.