

Exodus 14:10-14; 21-29 (Stand, See, Keep Still)

The theme for this week's story is **trust**. Last week's scenes from the Joseph story showed God at work quietly, delivering God's people in subversive ways. God enabled Joseph to interpret dreams, rise quickly through Pharaoh's palace ranks of prime minister, and use human systems in all their brokenness to bring about safety, prosperity, reunification, and reconciliation for Jacob's family.

So we continue with family stories and relationships. Jacob became known as Israel, and the father of the Israelites. After Joseph saved Egypt and his family from a famine, how long did it take for this seemingly friendly relationship between the Israelites and Egyptians to sour? – about four hundred years and several pharaohs. Joseph had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Manasseh eventually evolved into 7 tribal families with 32,200 able-bodied men under him. Four decades later the census showed Manasseh's tribes had 52,700 men and Ephraim's tribal families had 32,500. Then there was Joseph's brother Benjamin and their ten half-brothers and their tribal families. Half-brother Levi was the forefather of Moses. The genealogy is not exact or clear, but we do know that there was more than a four-hundred-year gap between Levi and Moses. The Israelites had prospered in Egypt and their numbers exploded. According to Exodus, there were 600,000 Israelite men by the time of Moses – certainly enough to form a nation.

Our Exodus story once again shows God delivering God's people, but there is nothing quiet about it this time. Horses' hooves pound the dirt, the Israelites cry out in fear, the Egyptians scream in panic, the wind howls, and the waters churn in their great vertical walls. Add to that the pyrotechnics of the pillar of fire and cloud, and what is described is a huge chaotic mess.

Given this chaos, Moses' instructions to the terrified Israelites are all the more remarkable: *stand, see, keep still*: "Do not fear! Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord that he will provide for you today; for the Egyptians that you see today you will never, ever see again. The Lord will fight for you, and

you can be still.” As they were being chased down by the most technologically equipped fighting force anywhere around, the Israelites were surely inclined toward fight or flight: resist or run, sure, but keep still? What good would that do?

Their mandate from here is neither fight nor flee, but to witness: to observe God’s power and might. God will do all the fighting for them. This detail underscores the fact that all the agency in this story belongs to God. This is God’s victory alone. Through this victory, the people of Israel as well as the Egyptians see that God’s glories far surpass any of Pharaoh’s claims— either to military prowess or to the status of deity. The contest between God and pharaoh has been building throughout Exodus to this showdown at the sea, and God has won.

If the Joseph story showed us everyday miracles, the Exodus story shows us a once-in-a-lifetime or once-in-a-millennium, or even once-in-a-Testament miracle. In many ways it is *the* miracle; this might just be the most important chapter in the entire Old Testament. The story of God’s deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh’s army at the Red or Sea of Reeds is the bedrock of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the two parties continually remind each other of this particular saving act. In the opening lines of the Ten Commandments, God declares: “I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” The people of Israel have been freed in order to worship and serve God by keeping God’s commandments.

At the conclusion of the description of the Jubilee laws, Leviticus reiterates that the people now serve God instead of Pharaoh: “because the Israelites are my own servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

The prophets, Amos and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah, use the exodus as an analogy for later periods of suffering in Israel as evidence for the kind of

deliverance of which God is capable. The exodus has pride of place in any recitation of the story of God's relationship with Israel. The exodus is a favourite topic for the psalms, and its remembrance forms a centrepiece of ancient Israel's liturgical life. Some psalms list the exodus as the first in a litany of God's "mighty acts," while others retell the story of the exodus in poetic ways.

People today have a hard time accepting the Exodus story as true, as factual. For those operating out of a secular worldview, it couldn't possibly have happened. For someone operating out of a Christian worldview, at least in its classical sense, it HAD to have happened. The biblical writers clearly thought that it did. Is the Exodus account historical or merely mythology?

One hundred years of recent archaeological research hasn't turned up any evidence. The supposed chronology seems more religious than historical. The wider biblical story is that God worked to save a particular nation, Israel, not so that God could favour them over other nations, but to set the stage for an Israelite to come, one who would save every nation on earth.

We should not let the secular bias evident here stand unchallenged. We too easily and too often capitulate to the naturalistic worldview from which this kind of thinking stems without even realizing it, and as Monty Python was fond of saying, "And now for something completely different."

The Hebrews, who built their very lives on the certain conviction that their God, YHWH, had, because of unbreakable love for them as a people, led them out of the horrors of Egyptian slavery, through the forbidding Sinai wilderness, into and out of the terrible Sea of Reeds, and at last into the land of promise. They proclaimed in story and song that on the west bank of that sea they were the hopeless captives of the cruel pharaohs, while on the east bank of the sea they were the people of YHWH. This is precisely the resurrection story of Israel.

Certain facts surrounding this story should be noted. Despite three millennia of searching, probing, digging, exegeting, and speculating, not a single

historical clue has been discovered that could pinpoint where any of these things actually happened. This is, of course, actually as it should be. This is not, plainly not, any sort of historical event. If one visits the Sinai today, trekking through what is actually a fairly small and sparsely populated desert area, any biblical clues are completely vague and might be located in any number of spots on a middle-eastern map.

And there is the location of the sea itself. Despite the long tradition of naming it the Red Sea, the Hebrew says “Sea of Reeds,” a marshy place somewhere east of the slave pits of Egypt. Since reed marshes mark many square miles of northern Sinai territory, the search for *the* Sea of Reeds is hopeless. But that is precisely the point. No Hebrew, no later Israelite wants any of us to don our archaeologist’s garb, and Indiana Jones-like grab a long and lethal whip, and head off to the Sinai searching for the Sea or the mountain or the trails of the ancients.

This is a story of resurrection, for Israelites – and for later Jews *the* story of resurrection, and the focus is squarely on YHWH. When the grumbling and then terrified Israelites find themselves trapped between the forces of Pharaoh and the angry waves of the sea, they scream at Moses that their freedom has turned to imminent death. Plenty of graves in Egypt, Moses, they shout; why bring us into this place where death is even more certain and even more horrendous?

Moses’ response makes the central point of this resurrection tale. “Do not be afraid! Stand still and see the salvation that YHWH will work for you today. The Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you must only stand still.

And with that grand oration echoing in Israelite ears, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea and two very separate distinct events occur. We are most familiar with the “walls of water on their right and on their left, stamped indelibly on our minds by the Cecil DeMille epic of six decades ago – done using Jello, resulting in the only Oscar the film won. But that is only one of the stories told in this complex account.

There is another: “Moses stretched out his hand toward the sea, and the Lord drove the sea apart by a strong east wind all that night, and he made the sea into dry land, and the water was divided.” Here we witness some sort of long tidal event, rather than the instantaneous piling up of divided water walls. An event as magical and grand as this can hardly be confined to one telling! There are two accounts of creation, and most famously, four very different accounts of the resurrection of Jesus.

Again we are not asked to choose the “right” story ... is the tidal account more “believable,” hence more possibly “historical,” than the walls of water story? This is again not the point. *Both* stories have YHWH at the centre; *both* stories announce that YHWH is the God of life, ever active against the forces of death. This ancient resurrection story mirrors and echoes all other stories of dying and rising gods from the ancient near east. It is not more or less historical than they; its power is not found in its historical plausibility. It has power because it is our story; it is the story that we choose, the story that has lured us into its potent orbit, the story that affirms our conviction that God is always seeking and creating life in a world too often overcome with death.

It is always valuable, even necessary, to read again the Israelite resurrection story, that story that has sustained Judaism now for three Millennia through horrific persecutions and hatred and rejection throughout the centuries and in nearly all lands of the world. The history of the thing is beside the point. It is the story itself that counts. And so for us Christians, we are not helped by demands to suspend the laws of physics in order to accept the unacceptable, to believe the unbelievable.

A famous rabbi told his best student: you must keep the tradition alive, my son, by going to a certain place in the forest, lighting a special candle, singing the correct psalm, and telling the story. The old rabbi died, and his student became himself a famous rabbi. Unfortunately, he could no longer remember the exact forest spot he was to go to, so he told his student to light the candle, sing the psalm, and tell the story wherever he thought right. After that rabbi’s death, his student, also a rabbi, had forgotten about the candle when he told his student about keeping the traditions alive, but urged him to

sing the psalm and then tell the story. The rabbi died, and his student knew nothing of the forest spot, nor the candle, and forgot about the psalm. He trained his student to tell the story. And it was enough. It is enough. The story of the Sea of Reeds and the story of the resurrection of Jesus are more than enough to change the way we think about God and the way we think about the living of our days.

Both Jews and Christians know this story above all the stories of the Hebrew Bible. For Jews it is the central claim of their faith: on the west bank of the Sea of Reeds (wherever that may be) the Israelites were the slaves of the pharaoh, while on the east bank of the sea, they are the people of YHWH. This unforgettable tale is nothing less than the Jewish resurrection story. Out of hopeless slavery and death appeared life and a future with God.

For Christians this story has a different impact. It has become one of the accounts of the power of God over the forces of nature, beginning with the creation itself and culminating with Jesus' calming of the wind and the waves of the Sea of Galilee as a sign of his unique power as son of God. It could well be said that for both traditions, the great account of the Sea illustrates the control that God exerts over the natural forces and places that God has created.

God promises to stand with us, urging us, luring us to move in the divine way of unity and wholeness and the oneness of creation. That is the lesson of the event at the Sea of Reeds. It is not that we need to discover the exact location of this Sea in order to prove that the Bible is in fact historically true, as if that were somehow crucial information for us. It is not. Even if we could find the actual Sea, what difference would its precise location make for us as we reflect about God and God's desire for the world? Nor do we need to ferret out what exactly happened at the Sea.

Any careful reader of the exodus story can easily see that there are two stories of the event now intertwined. One of the tales speaks of a tide moving back all night and in the morning returning to its usual flow, while the other, speaks of "walls of water" through which the Israelites pass and which

collapse on the pursuing Egyptian armies, pharaoh, horsemen, chariots, and chariot drivers. Now that we know that, what in fact do we know? We know, as our Jewish brothers and sisters proclaim, that God has saved the Israelites from certain defeat at the Sea of Reeds, and we know that despite not knowing either where or how it “happened” – categories that are finally not helpful at all.

The story of the exodus testifies to Christians today about the power God has to defeat oppressors and deliver the oppressed, and about the special love God has for Israel. When we read about God’s redemption of humanity in the New Testament – we need to remember that God has been delivering God’s people all along: from the water of the flood, from famine, from slavery in Egypt, from exile in Babylon. As readers of this sacred story, we are called to join the Israelites in their witness to God’s victory: Stand, see, keep still, and believe.

In the twenty-first century, many Christians struggle to maintain their faith. If Luther worried about finding a righteous and forgiving God, we worry about finding God at all. What made the Israelites believe in the Book of Exodus? Was it really the three trick signs that Moses was able to pull off? Was it the supernatural power of the Exodus experience itself? Perhaps.

But chances are it was the fact that God had heard their groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and took notice of them. God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew. God knew what they needed. God knew what they were going through, and then God came up with good news for their bad situation. God knew.

As we struggle to live out the life of faith, we have a God who knows us, knows our problems, knows our failings, knows our needs. We have a God who provides good news for whatever bad situations we are going through: unemployment, family discord, depression, serious illness, doubt, fear, loneliness, and whatever else that makes life difficult.

We are all in the process of being saved by God. God is working on us at this very moment to turn us toward the healing of all. The victory of God at the ancient Sea of Reeds is a foretaste of that victory that God has had in mind from the very start of things – from the time of creation – of us and the world we live in.

Amen.

PENTECOST 17 PRAYERS October 2, 2022

God, just as You rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, setting them free to worship and serve You, so You have also rescued us, setting us free from slavery to sin and selfishness, and inviting us into relationship with You and with one another. We praise You for the love and mercy You have shown toward us.

You call us to love and serve You by loving and serving our neighbour, and our siblings in Christ, near and far; to put their needs and interests ahead of our own, and in so doing fulfilling Your law of love. And so we offer our prayers for the world You created, and all in need. In Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who do not have what they need in order to survive, let alone thrive; those without food security and clean water, access to medical care, secure, affordable housing and shelter, or personal or financial security. Open our hearts to see the many needs in our world, and to respond with Your love. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are living with serious illness or injury, who face each day with uncertainty or pain, who find themselves wondering what the future holds. Open our hearts to see the needs of those around us, and to respond with Your love. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who have no work, who are struggling to provide for their families, and who despair of ever finding employment again. Open our hearts to see the needs of the unemployed, and to respond with Your love. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the people of the Atlantic provinces and the eastern coast of the United States for the loss of life and property. Help them repair and rebuild their homes, businesses and sources of livelihood, and communities devastated by hurricanes. We pray for the people of Pakistan whose land is also devastated by recent flooding. Give them faith and hope as they mourn their losses. Provide them with the necessary resources to recover and rebuild their lives and communities. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for peace as the world struggles with wars, especially in Ukraine, protests in Iran, injustice and prejudice in so many countries and parts of the world. We pray for the millions of refugees who are living in limbo in refugee camps, travelling away from home to find a safer future, or awaiting approval to be allowed to immigrate to safer countries such as Canada. Protect all those escaping violence and living in fear just as you supported the Israelites. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We also pray for Your church, the Body of Christ on earth. We pray that we would be a living example of Your love in our world, treating one another with compassion and respect, settling differences with love and integrity, remaining committed to the ongoing work of reconciliation, bound together by our common allegiance to You. Open our hearts to see one another, and to respond with Your love. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God, maker of all living creatures. You called forth fish in the sea, birds in the air and animals on the land. You inspired St. Francis to call all of them his brothers and sisters. By the power of your love, enable us to live according to your plan. Help us to be good stewards of your creation, protecting, preserving and restoring the lands and waters you have created. May we always praise you for all your beauty in creation. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer**

We praise You for the way of love modelled for us by Jesus Christ. Open our hearts and lives to your ongoing presence among us, so that we would grow in faithfulness and love, and bring honour to Your name. **Amen.**