

Proper 19, Year A  
September 13, 2020  
St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson  
Exodus 14:19-31

### “The Waters”

When we celebrate the sacrament of baptism in our church, there is a specific prayer that is prayed before the baptism. It is called the Prayer of Thanksgiving Over the Water. The long version of this prayer details God’s saving acts throughout the scriptures involving the element of water. Beginning with creation, the Spirit, the Breath, the Wind of God moved over the waters of chaos, separated the waters and created dry land that became the earth. In waters of the flood, God cleansed the earth and worked for the salvation of the people through Noah and his family, and during the Exodus the Israelites escaped from their captivity in Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea. We recall how Jesus was baptized by John in the waters of the river Jordan where the Holy Spirit pronounced him blessed and beloved.

In our text today we see how the waters of the Red Sea became a tool of deliverance for the people in the final and definitive clash between Pharaoh and all his forces and the power of God. As we read last week the 10<sup>th</sup> plague, the death of all the firstborn of Egypt resulted in Pharaoh’s own son becoming a causality in this conflict resigning Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt. Pharaoh’s resolve in his decision did not last long, because he quickly changed his mind and dispatched his armies, including all his horses, chariots and chariot riders to give chase to the fleeing Hebrews. We pick up the story in our passage today with God acting as a pillar of fire and a cloud of smoke, who had been guiding the people out of Egypt and now moved behind them protecting the vulnerable and exposed masses from Pharaoh’s oncoming

armies and certain annihilation. The people were trapped though, caught between an immovable sea and the pursuing Pharaoh.

At first glance it's easy for us to boil this story down to what we often see depicted in movies and on television, an "us vs. them, tribalistic, the good guys against the bad guys" kind of conflict, but what is going on here is actually much bigger. What is at stake is no less than cosmic order of creation – all that sustains life and provides for its flourishing, against the forces of chaos. From the beginning Pharaoh's policies of enslavement, exploitation, domination, and violence have stood in direct conflict and contrast with the good and beautiful creation of God and of God's covenantal promises to Israel and its descendants. And so now, just like in the waters of chaos at creation, God has chosen to act, to give life a chance once again, to give the forces of creation the chance to thrive out from under the chokehold of oppression. As the people walk safely on that dry land created by the parted seas they move not only from enslavement to liberation, but from death to life, into a new creation. Their new future is sealed with the utter decimation of Pharaoh's armies, demonstrating that even those who benefit from Pharaoh's system of oppression and get caught up in its power are not immune to its chaotic destruction, and these forces cannot survive if God's creation is to truly prosper.<sup>1</sup>

Now I wish I could say from this day forward the people, having seen God's great works on their behalf and for their salvation, truly believed and trusted in the Lord. That they became the people that God had created and covenanted with them to be – a light to all other nations. That the community the cultivated between them and God established a new Eden, a full

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<sup>1</sup> Chan, Michael. "Commentary on Exodus 14:19-31." *Working Preacher*.  
[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4572](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4572)

realization of God's new creation and God's reign on earth. But alas, that is not the story of Israelites, that is not the story of humanity. It doesn't take too many more verses in the scripture text before the people are back to complaining and grumbling and eventually worshipping new gods, forgetting how God saved them. The story repeats itself again and again in scripture and human history, and then God acts in a new way for the people's salvation – becoming enfleshed in all our human frailties in Jesus Christ.

In our baptism the waters once again become a vehicle for God's saving action. Through the waters of baptism we are delivered from slavery to sin and death, all the same forces of evil and chaos that captivated the Israelites, to new life, new creation, in Christ. And while we believe that this promise of new life is for those of all ages and understanding, we continually return to this font of deliverance, and as we remember our baptism we remember who we are – God's beloved people, forgiven and freed, marked as Christ's very own and sealed in the covenant by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are humbled by this gift of unmerited grace, as we acknowledge our utter and complete dependence upon God's goodness in the face of the sin we alone cannot conquer.

There is a river in Alabama, called well the Alabama River, that starts just north of Montgomery and runs to Mobile where it meets with the Mobile and Tensaw rivers before being discharged in Mobile Bay. Crossing the Alabama River is a particular bridge, the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma. On March 7, 1965, a group of 600 people, led by two young black men, John Lewis and Hosea Williams, peacefully marched from Selma to Montgomery in a protest against the barriers that black voters faced in trying to register to vote and exercise their right to participate in the public and political life of their country. As they crossed the Edmond Pettus

Bridge they were met with violent force from state troopers. 17 people were hospitalized and dozens more were injured in the day that became known as “Bloody Sunday.” The footage of the violence spread all across the country and around the world. Ordinary Americans became horrified and outraged at these images, and many people and leaders of faith, both black and white, representing many different traditions joined Martin Luther King Jr. and others just two days later in a march that would take them from Selma all the way to Montgomery. Many historians consider this day as a turning point in the civil rights struggle as the aftermath galvanized a new level of support from the public, congress, and President Lydon Johnson, who a few months later signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Many people thought that John Lewis would be a pastor and a preacher, until God called him into a different kind of pulpit and ministry, first as one of the youngest Civil Rights leaders and then as a US Congressman. When he died just a couple months ago, one refrain I kept hearing over and over again, as folks recalled his dedication and service to his country and his motivations for being an agent of change and good, was his belief in the power of the gospel – to change not only individual lives, but this world as a whole, leading us all from oppression to liberation.

The face of Pharaoh may change from generation to generation, we may even at times catch glimpses of that face in our own reflection, but know – this the chaotic anti-creation forces of violence, hatred, and domination, have never conquered, never overcome the power of God’s emancipating, creative, all-encompassing love. Wherever we see Pharaoh’s armies show up, we can also be assured that God is already at work for the liberation of the oppressed. In the face of God’s work there are two responses: The Egyptians chose death as they

relentlessly pursued the opposite of God's plan. The Israelites chose faith and trust as they walked into the unknown on the dry ground God had set before them, coming out on the other side alive. We who have been washed by the waters of baptism, who have been touched by the grace of God, and have been changed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, must also make our choices to step out in faith and trust, to go where God leads us on the path to new life, participating along way in the creative workings of God for the flourishing of all life.