

## Going Forward Faithfully

**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 freedom story of God liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt is one of the most repeated and passed on passages in the whole Bible. It has been told and retold for many centuries. It is one of a handful of foundational stories for our Jewish brothers and sisters, recited at the Seder meal each year during the celebration of Passover. When the Lord called forth Moses to be the leader of God's people and to lead them away from Pharaoh's deadly grip, through the waters of the Red Sea, it is the mightiest act of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, (which of course would have been Jesus' Bible). From that point forward, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob becomes known as the God who brought the Hebrew people out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (That line, you remember, is the preface to the ten commandments)

Eugene Peterson—pastor, scholar, and person of faith put it so well when he wrote:

“The most comprehensive term for what God is doing to get us out of the mess we're in is salvation. Salvation is God doing what we cannot do for ourselves...The Exodus is the powerful and dramatic and true story of God working salvation” (*The Message*, pg.82)

As a way of entering the story, I want you to imagine what it must have been like: Moses has led the great escape and now all the Israelites are standing on the edge of the water. If they look behind them, they see that Pharaoh's army is getting closer all the time. He wasn't going to let them go after all. On the other hand, the direction in which Moses is leading them looks perilous! For they are facing the treacherous waters of the Red Sea, and the terrifying prospect of the Sinai wilderness. Imagine what must be going through their minds.

Bruce Feiler, author of the book, “Walking the Bible”, as he stood on the shore close to where the Exodus most likely happened expressed his thoughts about what they might have been thinking and feeling like this:

“I began to see the Exodus in a different light. No matter how oppressive the pharaoh must have seen to the residents of Goshen, for the Israelites, crossing this body of water would have

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been a profoundly frightening experience, akin to what religious refugees must have felt like boarding boats in Europe in the 1600s, sailing for the New World....In the case of the Israelites, this meant...they were going forth from a world they knew to a world that didn't yet exist based solely on the word of a god they'd never actually seen. Perhaps no one since Abraham could understand the depth of faith that required." (pg.194)

For the Hebrew children, the past was not an option. The misery of slavery could no longer be endured. Yet the thought of leaving everything behind and stepping into an unknown future – that's enough to make your heart sink. Did Moses know what he was doing? Was there any hope? What they needed was a miracle. What they needed was God.

Author and church consultant, Tony Robinson, shares some wisdom he learned about this from Rev. Jim Forbes, a former Pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. About 25 years ago, Tony asked Rev.Forbes, who is African American, if he could help him understand the difference between predominately white and predominately black congregations. Jim thought for a while, and then had this to say: "in predominately white congregations, people believe God needs them; in predominantly black churches, people understand they need God"!

The legacy of Moses was entirely amazing, but what the Exodus story reveals is a mighty act of God. As the people proclaim in Psalm 118:

"This the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes!

What is required of God's people, what is required of us is faith- faith in the sense of trust; faith in the sense of courage; and faith in the sense of a new way of seeing. Our lesson actually begins with a crisis of faith. Having dared to pack up their bags and move so quickly they couldn't let their bread rise, the sound of the Pharaoh's army must have caused them to tremble. Caught between a rock and a hard place, so to speak, they are immobilized by fear and confusion. So what do they do? At first they did cry out to God, but before long they

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began to berate Moses with complaints. Listen again to these verses. They are dripping with sarcasm. The Israelites said to Moses:

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt. “Let us alone, and let us serve the Egyptians”. (This grumbling will become a common theme of Exodus.)

What can we say about the people’s angry words to Moses? Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggeman, has made the helpful comment that in the cries of the Israelites there is no mention of God.

And yet they refer to Egypt five times! How often do we get so wrapped up in our worries and problems that we forget God?

Moses wisely heeds God’s word to them: “Tell the Israelites to go forward”

Moses offers a sermon of his own which says it all.

In verse 13 it reads, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance the Lord will accomplish for you today”.

All of this is to say that in this instance, “Faith means to move forward one step at a time, in spite of our fears and shortcomings, regardless of obstacles before us, trusting that God will lead the way”

The Exodus is not just a freedom story. It is also a faith story. According to an old Jewish legend, when Moses raised his staff at the Red Sea and commanded the waves to part, the waters did not immediately obey. In the distance the Egyptian army advanced with murder in their eyes.

Again, Moses commanded the sea to part. Still nothing happened. The children of Israel crowded at the shore were caught between a watery grave or death on the blade of an Egyptian sword. But this time, a man quietly jumped in knee deep into the water and started to walk forward. Then the waters finally divided. They were unable to resist such faith!

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I think it's safe to say that all of us would like a faith like that, wouldn't we? And yet, speaking from experience, I can remember times I have felt impossibly stuck. As if my life was like an Egyptian chariot, spinning its wheels in the muck, unable to go forward or turn back! Some failure, discouragement, or setback, or some opposition, caused me to doubt myself and question the reality of God in my life personally. And yet, looking back, I can now see that those were often times when God showed up in my life in the form of an unexpected blessing or caring gesture, or in an act of loving kindness(

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman, in his commentary on this passage states that the story of the Exodus is first of all a witness to a mighty act of God, experienced by the Hebrew people. Yet, beyond that, it is a summons to faith! ( NIB, Vol.1, pg.796)12

Walking by faith means relying on God, not just periodically, but day by day. It means to walk humbly with our God each step of the way. It's interesting to me how in this passage before us today, the way it is written, makes one wonder who is actually leading the people. Is God leading them or is Moses leading them? The answer is "Yes" to both. God is leading through the faithful leadership of Moses.

You, the saints of Blue Hill Congregational Church, UCC, have been on a journey for over a year now. It has been a true trust walk! I'm talking about the Search Process for a new Pastor.

And along with the regular trials and challenges of this kind of journey, you, along with every other congregation, have had to face a major obstacle that comes along about once every 100 years-the pestilence we call 'the novel coronavirus'. (Let me tell you, the novelty has worn off!). Yet, as a congregation, you have risen to the challenge with flying colors, by grace alone! It is grace that has taught our hearts to fear this virus, but it is also grace that can relieve those same fears and give us the strength and the resolve to push through it and move forward faithfully (and safely), in spite of it all!

In this journey we call faith, God continues to lead us forward, now and forevermore!

Amen.

