

Narrative Lectionary: Rescue at Sea

September 30, 2018

Most of you know this already, but sometimes life throws you a twist. Everything is going ok, and then something comes out of left field. Last Saturday I just wanted to see how heavy a treadmill was in our bedroom, and now I will have an MRI on this arm tomorrow to see what kind of damage I did.

I am left-handed. So I've been brushing my teeth and eating my cereal with my off-hand. Guitar playing is difficult. Honestly, it really is a minor inconvenience. But it is a lesson in how quickly life can change. I think of the people on our prayer list. At some point, life changed. They got the test results back, and life changed. Life has changed for the spouses of eight people I've had funerals for this year.

And sometimes a death brings not only the grief that comes from loss, but then financial hardships, or conflict among families. Life can be confusing and challenging.

It was for the people of Israel. They had been living in Egypt for 400 years, and they had been prospering there. How did they get there? Well, last week we heard the story of Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. He ended up in Egypt, and through a long series of events that had God's name written all over them, he came to be second-in-command there. He invited his brothers and their families down to Egypt during a famine, and they stayed.

Everything was going swimmingly. The clan grew and now four hundred years later there are at least a million Hebrews in Egypt. But a new pharaoh rises to power who doesn't remember Joseph, and he gets worried that there are now all these foreigners in his country (we aren't the first country with disagreements about the place of immigrants among us) and he places the people in slavery.

He tells the Hebrew midwives to kill all the male children born to Hebrew women. They refuse. And a Hebrew baby named Moses is placed in a basket and rescued by the pharaoh's daughter. You remember that story. Moses grows up in the pharaoh's household.

Meanwhile, the Hebrews groan under their oppression, making bricks to fuel the Egyptian building spree. And God remembers the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and calls Moses to do something about it. It takes a series of plagues to get the pharaoh's attention. After the pharaoh's first born is killed when the last plague strikes, the pharaoh says, I've had enough. And he tells the Hebrew people to leave.

The Hebrews eat their last meal, what we now call the Passover meal. God tells them to ask their Egyptian neighbors for gold and silver, maybe as reparations, and they are given goods to take with them. So they are feeling great: they have their freedom after generations of slavery. They are wealthy, and they head out to claim their own land.

That's where we begin in today's story. Everything is going great, until the pharaoh changes his mind, again. He says to his advisors, What have we done, letting Israel leave our service? So he has his men get his chariot ready, and he radios for six hundred of his special chariots. This is the most modern warfare of the day. This is like a convoy of tanks.

Let me pick up with what the writer of Exodus says: "As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them."

Remember, the Hebrews are walking, with all their possessions and their senior citizens and their children. "In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord, "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? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

I don't know if you noticed the sarcasm here: Oh, Moses, I suppose there weren't enough graves for us in Egypt? That's why you brought us out here to die! There's more room for a cemetery in the sand dunes... This will not be the last time the people question Moses' leadership.

So notice how life has thrown them a curve: they've gone from freedom and wealth to, We're about to be killed by the Egyptian Army. They don't know that Pharaoh wants to capture them and bring them back. That's not a good fate either.

So Moses has to decide quickly what to do. He's got the Red Sea in front of them, and the Egyptian Army pursuing them. Now, he has already seen God's power at work. He has witnessed ten plagues. He knows that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is on his side. So he says to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

Moses says to the people, Keep still, and let God do the fighting. Sounds like wise advise, right? I am reminded of the words of the psalmist from Psalm 46: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult....He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire."

So in the middle of all this tumult and danger, what are we supposed to do? The psalmist says, "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

So Moses is right on the same page with the psalmist: Be still. Moses says, I know you see the danger back there. But don't be afraid! Stand firm- the Lord will fight for you; you have only to keep still. Sounds good, right? And Moses says to God, That's the plan, right?

Well, not quite. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.'

And I can just hear Moses say, OK, I thought I was doing the right thing. I was trusting you. I gave you the glory. I told them not to worry, that you would take care of things.

And God says, I have a different plan. Here's what I want you to do- "Tell the Israelites to go forward." I don't need you to stand still right now. I need you to go forward.

There have been a number of times in my life when I thought I knew what God's plan was for me. And then God said, I have a different plan. When Susan and I were struggling in Southern California in my first call, I interviewed in Vancouver, right across the river. Good interview, I liked the lead pastor I would be working with, everything seemed click. This must be God's will.

That call process went on for nine months. And I prayed and hoped and really thought that was the call I was meant to have. I never got it. We were so disappointed. And three months later I received a call from the bishop's assistant in Oregon who asked if I would be interested in a call to be an assistant pastor in Eugene. I interviewed on the night of the Civil War in basketball. The UO's Terrell Brandon versus the Beaver's Gary Payton. I think the Beavers won in a close game that night.

And as I met with that interview committee, I thought, *This* is where I belong. As I met with the senior pastor, we clicked, we saw eye to eye in a different way than that first pastor. I received that call, and stayed ten years. Sometimes we think we know what way God is calling us, and God says, No, I have something else in mind. Moses thought they were supposed to stand still. God said, Move forward!

Here is another twist in the story. You might remember that until now God had been leading the people with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. It was a sign of God's presence. It was always in front of them. In a part of the story we didn't read, God moved the cloud to *their rear guard*. The cloud was now behind them, protecting them from the Egyptian army.

Now God says, Don't just stand there, move forward. But the cloud isn't there in front of them! It's now behind them. Now they are being asked to start moving without a visible sign of God's presence. God is saying, Move forward into an unknown future. Maybe you can think of a time your life felt like this: an obstacle in front of you, a challenge behind you, wondering where God was. Maybe you're in that situation now.

But God's got an answer. God says, Moses, lift up your staff, and raise it over the sea, and the sea will divide. And that's what happens. The sea divides; the people of Israel walk through on dry ground. And when the Egyptian army pursues them,

Moses raises his arm again, the seawalls collapse, and the Egyptian army is drowned.

By the way, there are several natural explanations for this miracle. Moses had been living in the wilderness, and he knew the tides in that area. The Red Sea was also shallower 3500 years ago. There was a full moon that would have drawn the water back. And in the morning the tide came back in and covered the Egyptian army unexpectedly. There is another theory that sustained winds of 67 miles per hour could drive the waters back. This has happened in various harbors around the world. Whatever happened, the Israelites were delivered from their enemies.

As we walk along the path of life, God's leading can be confusing. God doesn't always protect us from the things that can find us on the path, but God promises to be with us and to work all things together for good (Romans 8:28)

Some months ago I heard an interview with the baseball pitcher RA Dickey, who has successfully pitched for six major league teams. He signed a contract with the Texas Rangers when he was just out of high school, for more money than he'd ever dreamed, over \$800,000. They had him complete a physical, of course. And everything was fine, until he walked into the manager's office, and the GM had tears in his eyes. He said, You didn't pass your physical. There is a ligament missing in your arm. We don't even know how you are able to pitch, and we don't want to take that big a chance on you. They cut the contract down to \$75,000.

They sent him to the minors. He worked his way up to Triple A, but then his velocity began to sink. He wasn't doing very well. Orel Hershiser said to him, Why don't you try the knuckleball; it puts a lot less stress on your arm. The knuckleball has no rotation on it when it leaves your hand, and it's really hard to hit. RA Dickey began to perfect it. He got a call up to the major leagues. His first start with Texas, he was incredibly excited, but they hit six home runs off him that night, tying a major league record.

He got sent down to Triple A again. One day, his teammates and he were out at the Missouri River, and he thought it would be macho to swim across the river. He didn't realize the current would be so strong. He was getting tired. He started to go under, and thought he was going to drown and never see his wife and three children again. But he hit the bottom of the river, bounced up, and was able to

dogpaddle back to shore. He ended up going 11-2 that year in the minors, and then got a call up to the major leagues. He was still pitching for the Atlanta Braves last year at 43 years of age. He happens to be a follower of Jesus, by the way.

Listen to what he says about almost drowning—"I look at it as almost a baptism of sorts. I went into the Missouri River, I was hanging on by a thread professionally...I think when I came out of the river, I was so consumed with just wanting to live in the present well — wanting to enjoy every second — that I think that carried over directly into my pitching, and I just cared about each pitch singularly. ... And I decided that that's how I wanted to live my life."

"There's something divine about that. I began throwing the knuckleball exactly when I started working on my life and trying to become who God had authentically created me to be. And I think those things parallel each other and continue to do so."

For RA Dickey, the sea was in front of him, the enemy was behind him, and God found a way. Our story might not be as dramatic as RA Dickey's, but when we are hemmed in on all sides, God will find a way. Amen.