

Out of Egypt Sermon Series
“Escape Through the Sea”
Exodus 14:19-31
By Rev. Joy W. Laughridge

In today’s installment of the story that we’ve been telling for the last 4 weeks about the Israelite’s journey from slavery to freedom, we find the Israelites caught in a terrifying moment. After the 10th plague, Pharaoh had finally relented and told Moses to take his people and they were on their way. God was leading them in a pillar of cloud that went ahead of them by day and a pillar of fire that led them by night. Finally, they could taste freedom, but before they had gotten very far, Pharaoh got to thinking about it, and one more time he changed his mind. He did *not* want to let the slaves go so he got his chariot, and all of the chariots in Egypt, and he got his army together, and he went after the Israelites. When we get to our text for this morning, the Israelites were trapped. There was no way forward because there was a body of water stretched out in front of them, and they couldn’t turn back because the Egyptians were closing in on them from behind. There was nothing they could do to get themselves out of the trap, and they were scared. They cried out to Moses, and we begin reading today at 14:13 where Moses tells them that the Lord will fight for them. I’ll start at 14:13 and read through the end of the chapter.

¹³ But Moses said 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. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ But you lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so, I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.” ¹⁹ The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰ It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so, the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and

turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴ At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵ He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." ²⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹ But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So, the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Biblical stories are told by their authors with intentionality. They aren't just concerned with relaying a flat description of events. Instead, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they include details that help uncover truth and the reasons why they are telling the story in the first place. In this story, for example, it's not for no reason that we hear about the Egyptians and their chariots. Pharaoh's chariots and chariot drivers are mentioned 9 times in Exodus 14 and 15 and this underscores the point that in contrast to the defenseless Hebrews who were fleeing on foot, the Egyptians were the ones with the strength, and the power, and the advantage.

If you didn't know how the story ends and you were going to make a bet on who the winner would be in the scenario at the Red Sea, you would probably bet on the Egyptians. If you did a man on the street poll most of the people you polled would probably predict a win for the Egyptians, too, and that's because we know that strength beats weakness. The team with the bigger, stronger, more-skilled players wins. The stronger arm wins the arm-wrestling match. It's common sense, and because we know that strength beats weakness it's strength that people value and pursue. Can you imagine the coach of whoever your favorite football team is getting all of his players together at camp saying, "This year, we aren't really going to have practices, and there won't be any conditioning workouts, no lifting

schedule. Our strategy for winning the championship this year is to be the weakest, most out-of-shape team out there.” If he likes his job, that would never be any coach’s strategy! It’s the same for those who seek leadership positions. The men and women who are running for office right now in this country want to show us that they are strong and capable so that we will feel confident voting for them. They know that people want leaders who won’t crumble under the pressures of leadership and who have the strength to do hard things, and they are striving to show us that they have that kind of strength. We pursue and value our own personal strength, too. I think most people try as hard as we can to be strong and self-sufficient so that if some challenge comes along we expect that our odds of overcoming the challenge, whatever it is, will be much better if we are facing it from a position of strength.

There’s no doubt that strength is important and beneficial, and if you happen to be the one with all of the chariots, the odds are in your favor, but...when we look back at the story we just read, we can’t overlook the fact that something surprising and unexpected happened. The Egyptians, with the big army and all of those threatening chariots, did not win after all. Instead, the Israelites who had no way out and no real way to defend themselves made it out alive and the strong and powerful Egyptians who had all of the advantages were defeated. It’s a twist in the story that challenges our ordinary expectations.

The Israelites found themselves in a position in which they had no real power to change or affect their situation. There was no way through or around the water that they could see, and they didn’t have the resources to resist or overpower the Egyptians. There was nothing to do but worry and complain, and that’s what they did. They complained to Moses saying, “why did you even bring us here?” and then Moses told them what to do. He didn’t tell them to do the thing that they might have felt was the right or the only thing to do which would have been “try your best to save yourselves.” He didn’t give one of those inspiring locker room pep talks about digging deep and finding the resources within yourself that will make you victorious. Instead, Moses told them to stand still and watch what the Lord would do for them. The Lord will fight for you, he said.

To some ears, Moses’s speech might sound a lot like that imaginary coach I referred to earlier saying to his team, “this year, we’re just going to accept our weakness and hope for the best.” It sounds like terrible instruction for anyone who feels compelled or obligated to fight their own battles and for those who are unwavering in their belief that “the Lord helps those who help themselves,” but Moses was not saying, “the Lord will help you if you help yourselves.” Moses was

saying, “You have no hope of saving yourselves so let the Lord handle this.” And the Lord did.

I want to point out that the story does not undo or contradict the commonsense truth that strength defeats weakness. The storyteller makes it very clear that the strongest player was the winner. It just so happened that the Egyptians who *seemed* to have all the power going in, were no match against the power of the Lord. So, the story does not undo that truth that strength beats weakness, but there are two important things that the story brings to our attention. The first is that God *is* the strongest. In Psalm 33:16-18, the Psalmist declares, **“A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.¹⁷ The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.¹⁸ Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love.”** The truth of this declaration is clearly illustrated in God’s victory over the Egyptians. Then, a second important thing that the story brings to our attention is that what we may ordinarily perceive as weakness is not weakness at all.

When Moses told the Israelites to stand firm and wait for the Lord to fight for them, as crazy or as foolish as it may have seemed, they didn’t resist that instruction. They trusted what Moses said and they moved forward, but they weren’t trying to fight their own battle as they moved. They simply moved forward through the way the Lord opened up for them and they watched as the Lord took on the Egyptians and fought the battle for them. The strength that the Israelites showed wasn’t the expected or typical display of strength. The strength that they showed was in actively trusting in *God* and *God’s power* to save them.

To admit your own weakness and to put your trust in another, is not the way that we are ordinarily taught to “be strong.” Plenty of people would probably come right out and say that admitting weakness is like handing your power over. Others might not come out and say it, but they would also never admit to weakness because somewhere inside they believe what they haven’t said out loud. Even though admitting weakness and placing your trust in One stronger than you may not ordinarily be described as a show of strength, our Scripture this morning indicates that it is and Jesus himself says as much. The image of the powerless Israelites trusting in God’s power to save them brings to mind the image that Jesus offered up as an image of strength and power. Jesus’s image wasn’t a powerful official or some other person of importance. Jesus pointed to a helpless, defenseless child and said we ought to be like that. He was even clearer on this point when the Apostle Paul complained to him about some personal weakness

and he begged Jesus to take it from him. In 2 Corinthians 12:9ff, he says that Jesus responded to his request saying, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So,”** Paul concluded, **“I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”**

To admit then, that we have limits or that we are powerless to save ourselves, and to put our trust in the One who is able to save us and help us, is not a weak or pathetic move. We are taught instead that it is a strong and faithful response.

There is nothing wrong with pursuing strength. There is wisdom in it, but the reality is that as much as we try to pursue and maintain a position of strength in our lives, those times come when we aren't unlike the Israelites trapped in a situation that we can't control and that we can't make our way out of. There are just sometimes when we are confronted with our limitations, and all the power that we do have is not enough to overcome the challenge or make a situation or a threat go away. The good news that we can take with us today is that if and when we find ourselves in that position, all hope is not lost if we don't have the power to change things. We belong to the One who has the power to make a way where we don't see a way and who is strong enough to fight for us in any kind of battle. To admit that we need God's help and then to actually rely on it, is not an expression of weakness but an expression of real strength.

I can think of members of this congregation and friends who are currently dealing with things in life that they have no power to control or change. There are things in my own life that are out of my control and battles that I am trusting God to fight for me. We all have those things. If you listen to the story of how God came through for the Israelites and you struggle to believe that God could or would rescue or deliver you, the truth is God has already come to your rescue. This story of the escape through the sea points to the story of how Jesus, who is likened to Moses, came to rescue us when we were powerless to escape from spiritual slavery to sin. In the same way that God defeated the Egyptians, God crushed the power of sin and evil through death and resurrection of Jesus so that we could be free. We did not have the power to win that battle in our own strength, so Jesus won it for us. If was willing to do that, he is both willing and able to help us in all of those situations that bring us to the end of our own resources. This is the assurance that God gives that we can take with us today. Isaiah confirms it when he says, **“...Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:**

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (Isaiah 43:1-3). Amen.