

Exodus 14:19-31 “Hopelessly Trapped”

This is a great story. Definitely the highlight of any movie about Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. But what’s frustrating about this story and many others in the Old Testament that involve big defy-the-laws-of-physics miracles, is that we often miss the point because we’re so busy obsessing about the miracle. Specifically the *probability* of the miracle. In this story, for example, apologists for a strict literal interpretation of the Bible come up with all sorts of crazy theories as to *how* God parted the sea. Strangely enough, they’re looking for the most plausible, low-maintenance-on-God’s-part explanation. “Oh, see ... maybe it was this shallow, marshy part of the Red Sea right here on this map” (and they’ll show you an actual map with a little dotted line over the most likely place of the crossing.) “And high winds *conceivably* could have made a place where the people could cross, but then when Pharaoh’s army came in the wind stopped! Then the land got saturated again, and all the horses and chariots got bogged down in the mud and drowned!” And sometimes they back this up with data about what the wind speed would have to be to create enough pounds per square inch to push aside a body of water that is (x) number of feet deep and so on. Then there are other literalists who are in the “*big miracle*” camp who have to weigh in and say, “Oh, are you saying that God *couldn’t* part a big, deep place in the Red Sea like in *The Ten Commandments* or the *Prince of Egypt*? Clearly you aren’t a *real* Christian if you don’t think God is capable of that!” And *that* becomes the focus. Notice I didn’t say, “Clearly you aren’t a real *Jew*” because they don’t get hung up on literal interpretations! The truth, for *them*, is in the *point* of the story.

So what *is* the point of this story? Last week I said, “Let’s set aside the plagues God sent to Egypt for a second and focus on how this story leads to the point of Passover.” I got a little pushback on that. Why ignore the plagues? You *have* to deal with them because they don’t paint a very good picture of an all-loving God!” I’m not saying ignore them, I’m saying set them aside *for now* because they’re not the *point* of the story. We can deal with “terror passages” in the Old Testament

another day and talk about how they fit into the Hebrew people's evolving understanding of God. But today I want to ask you to set aside (but not ignore) the meteorological probability of God parting the Red Sea. Let's focus on *what this story is about*.

First of all, let me tell you what goes through an ancient Hebrew person's mind when they hear the word, "sea" or "the waters." "The waters" represent chaos and the unknown. In the first creation story in Genesis, the writers tell us that what God had to work with in the beginning was an earth that was described as "a formless void" where darkness covered "the deep" or "the waters." And it was only when God's spirit swept across the waters that there was something to work with. In other words, the only reason we're here and that we have the earth that we live on is that God calmed the chaos. God took control of "the waters" and calmed them enough to separate them into sea and sky so that everything else could be put in place.

Deep water is *frightening* to the Hebrew people. It represents the chaos that was present before God's creative activity. That's why the story of Noah and the flood was such a big deal. God released that water from above and below and it brought chaos again. When you read Job, you get a good picture of the "terror of the deep" because that's where Leviathan lives! And while some Christians are busy debating about whether Leviathan was a giant squid, a whale, a shark or some kind of a sea-faring dinosaur, Jewish people are thinking, "Who cares! All we know is that it lives in the realm of chaos and it's the scariest thing we can imagine!" In the New Testament the story of Jesus calming the sea and being able to walk on water is another testament to this idea that God is able to bring order to chaos. So all you need to know for now is that deep water represents terrifying chaos.

So here the Hebrew people are. They lived for generations as slaves to the Egyptians. But God heard their cries for help and caused Moses to lead them out of slavery and into a promised land. God even provided a pillar of fire to guide them along the way at night. But now they're

facing their first road block. Behind them is an army of Egyptian soldiers led by an angry Pharaoh bearing down on them. If the army reaches them, they're either going to die, or they're going to be taken back into slavery and treated even worse than before because of this escape attempt. In front of them, they have a body of water. They have primordial chaos. For the Hebrew people, this is a worst case scenario. Be swallowed up in chaos or be killed or captured by Egyptian soldiers who are taking orders from a Pharaoh that they believe is a god. In modern English vernacular, we'd say they were in a Catch 22 situation. We'd say they were between a rock and a hard place. Hopelessly trapped. Nowhere to move. Checkmate.

Ever been there before? I mean, not in between an army of Egyptian soldiers and a large body of water. I mean in a place where you feel trapped. Where it seems that no matter what you do, you're going to be crushed in some way. Your head is spinning. "How did I get here?" Then you start thinking, "Had I made a different choice or if I would have acted differently or anticipated being in this place, I coulda-shoulda-woulda done something." Then we start wishing, "Oh if only I could go back in time," or praying, "God, if you really love me," or bargaining, "God if you get me out of this, I'll be the best most faithful little servant you could imagine." You feel trapped. You want an escape route, but you can feel that army charging up behind you threatening to drag you back into the captivity of your past. And in front of you is this angry, churning sea of unknown chaos and peril. And there's nowhere to go.

Been there? Yeah. Me too. This story is one of the foundational stories of both the Jewish and Christian faiths because we all live it in one way or another. All of us at some time find ourselves standing alongside our forbearers on the banks of the Red Sea crying out in terror. But ... as people who confess faith in Christ, we commit ourselves to nourishing the voice of hope in each of us. But we who confess faith in Christ are not expected to shut out the voice of despair. That voice of despair is part of the story too. It's that voice of despair that prompts God to say "I

have heard their cry and I have come to set them free.” Jesus stood on his own Red Sea shore on the night he was betrayed. As he prayed to God in the Garden of Gethsemane he said, “Father, if there is some other way for this to play out ... let it be so. Not my will but yours be done.” And there was God, ready to act again to ensure that although Jesus was about to plunge into the sea of death, a way would open up to the promised land of resurrection on the other side.

I know I’m speculating here, but I wonder what might have happened if on that night, Jesus *shut out* his despair and *not* given it voice in his prayer. I think that the danger for him, as it so often is for us, would have been to start attempting to engineer a solution for himself instead of looking for a way that God could open up a way in front of him. See, when we shut out that voice and try to pretend that everything is on track and under control, we start trying to *prove* it by asserting *our own* control which rarely works out very well. For the Hebrew people on the shores of the Red Sea, they figured there were only two options when it came to facing the army behind them: Either surrender and return to slavery and endure worse suffering ... or fight the armies and at least die as martyrs in some kind of heroic freedom fight. The odds behind them were overwhelming. But the sea in front of them? *Impossible*. Here’s something to think about though ... had they turned to engage the armies, either to surrender or fight, they may not have noticed the opening of a way through the impossible.

The God who hears our cry of despair *will act to save us*. There’s the point of the story. “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. The Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.” God’s desire is to save us. God’s desire is to open a way through the sea of impossibilities and allow us to walk through. And if we notice the opening, we’ll take the path that God opens before us. And we’ll see that the same sea that saves us will sweep away and destroy the forces that seek to drag us back and hold us down. The challenge, of course, is to be able to wait

and trust and to resist the urge to hastily manufacture some half-baked solution on our own that would cause us to miss the sign of the waters parting in front of us. God's not going to push us into the path that has opened. God asks us to trust that there is a way and to follow. And just as those towering walls of angry water looked as horrible as the armies that the Hebrews were fleeing from, a path opened up. The same goes for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. No matter how you look at the situation, it doesn't seem possible that God could help Jesus. And it continued to look that way all the way up to Jesus' death and burial too. Again, on the cross, Jesus cried out in despair to God. "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" But the door to resurrection was now open. And these paths that open before us aren't always going to look like a walk in the park. But God hears our despair. And God responds and comes to save. And the promised land of life in the wide open spaces of God's love lies on the other side of that opening sea. And blessed are those who put their trust in God and step forward when the way opens up.