

Israelites Go Into The Sea (Exodus 14:10-22; Acts 20:15-23; Matthew 14:22-33)

The great philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once described a familiar childhood experience. He was being taught to swim by his father. Splashing wildly with both arms and kicking with one leg, he called to his father, "Look at me, look at me. I'm swimming!" But, says Kierkegaard, all the time he was holding onto the bottom of the swimming pool with his big toe. Many of us are like that in our faith. "I have faith!" we declare, but it is an untested faith. It is a tentative faith. One toe remains on the bottom! It is an enormous step for some of us to abandon our fears and trust God.

And so, just think of those Israelites in today's front page story. They've grown up slaves in Egypt. After all, their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, all the way back for 400 years, were slaves. And as slaves, they've never really had to think for themselves. All their decisions were made for them by their masters. And they really haven't even had anything much to do with the freedom with which they now find themselves. God and Moses made all those decisions that have led them to this point.

Pharaoh's army is in hot pursuit of them. And now they've gone as far as they can. They've come to the sea. They're trapped--sitting ducks! In anguish, they turn on 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?...it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (Exodus 14:11-12).

Moses answers, "Do not be afraid...see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today...." (Exodus 14:13). And so Moses lifts up his staff, and the waters of the sea, divide. If you ever saw Cecil B. DeMille's movie entitled *The Ten Commandments*, you have the image in your head. If you haven't seen that movie, just imagine standing on the shore of the widest, deepest part of the Missouri River and seeing the waters part, opening up a pathway for you to walk through. There's a tall, tall wall of water on each side though, fast-moving, current-filled water, somehow miraculously held in place. But will it stay in place long enough for you to get across? Will you walk ahead, into the Missouri River, or will you turn back?

This is the choice that faces the Israelites. They're at the water's edge. They look back and see the danger. They look forward and see the danger.

It's a scary time. It's decision time. What to do? Trust or run? Choose slavery or risk freedom? Choose the misery they know or the possibility of something better? As our headline tells us, the "Israelites Go Into the Sea!"

Does today's story have meaning for you? Can you identify with those Israelites? Are you facing a major decision? Do you find yourself questioning yourself? "Do I take this risk? Do I make this move? Do I trust this person? Do I trust God to take care of me? Do I step into the water?" Do you right now feel as if you're at the water's edge, trying to decide if you should stay in the misery or discontent you've been living in or dare to put your foot in the water and cross over to you're not sure but what seems to be, what might be, a promised land for you?

The fear and the risk are real and must be considered. What if you make a mistake? What if what's on the other side is just an illusion? What if I'm abandoned? What if I don't make it? What if I drown in the water? And yet, you'll never make it to the promised land without going into the water and crossing over.

There is indeed in today's scripture a word for all of us. There's an old rabbinic story on today's passage that goes like this: *Moses tried to part the waters, and the waters refused. The sea said to Moses, "you mean I'm supposed to divide in two just because you want me to? I am more important than you are. After all, I was created on the third day of creation, and you didn't come along until the sixth."* So then Moses complains to God about the sea's refusal. *God places his hand on Moses' hand, and the waters part.*¹

The Prophet Isaiah recorded these words of God: "Do not fear; for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." (Isaiah 43:1-5). Sometimes we need to be reminded of these words from God: if you go forward in faith, you won't be alone; I'll be with you. I'll be with you to bring good out of whatever happens when you step into the water.

¹ Carter, Kenneth H. Jr., "Crossing Over," Biblical Preaching Journal, Summer 2008.

Throughout scripture, God keeps repeating this truth. Thus, even in the New Testament, we find Jesus, God's Son, reassuring us, saying, "Lo, I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

But it's not unless we trust God and set foot in the water that we know the truth of this promise from God. It's not until we've taken such a risk in faith that we can join the Psalmist in praising God by saying, "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there, your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me fast!"

The good news that God is with us has tremendous implications for us in our personal lives. It gives us comfort, encouragement, courage, joy, peace. And the more we step out in faith, the more comfort, encouragement, courage, joy, and peace we will have, for each time we step out in faith, we find that God is indeed with us, and thus our faith in God's presence is strengthened.

But the good news that God is with us also has tremendous implications for us in how we live our public lives. In fact, this past week, when I was working on this sermon at Starbuck's, I was reminded of this when a woman came up to me and began talking with me. Isn't it wondrous--the people God brings into our lives? This woman's sons, one in college and the other a high school senior, were obviously weighing heavily on her heart. We spoke for almost an hour, and she shared how she always tried to teach her sons to have a social conscience. One thing she said especially made an impression on me. She said that she told her boys, "If you're going to get arrested, don't ever let it be for something stupid like drinking or wrong behavior. If you're going to get arrested, make it for something important, like righting some social wrong or helping someone in need."

At first, I was shocked. What mother would ever want to see her son arrested? But then, I realized what faith in God this Jewish mother was showing. She wanted her sons to know that she expected them, when standing on the water's edge, when the safe thing would be to turn back to slavery, the status quo, to trust God and move away from oppression, move toward a better promised land, not only for themselves, but for others.

Isn't that what Martin Luther King Jr. did? He stepped out in faith. The safe thing for him would have been to continue living in the slavery of his own time, to have continued focusing on his own church and his own family. But he stepped into the water, not knowing if he would drown in the water or

not, but confident that God would be with him whatever happened in the process of heading for the promised land. As he himself put it, "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land....So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

When Rosa Parks refused to move on that bus, she too boldly stepped into the water, taking a risk to move forward, trusting that God was with her.

When Albert Schweitzer, medical degree in hand, headed to Africa, he too boldly stepped into the water, taking a risk to move forward, trusting that God was with him.

As did Mahatma Ghandi when he took a step toward nonviolence....and Mother Teresa when she took her first step toward the poor in India.

Today's good news is that God is with us. And this is good news for us not only in our personal lives and in our public lives. It's also good news for us to remember in our social lives. It's important, in other words, for us to remember this good news so that we can be encouraging to others.

Late one night a fellow decided to take a short cut home by cutting through the cemetery. But as he was walking along, all of a sudden he fell into a freshly dug grave. And so the fellow desperately tried to climb out, but he just couldn't do it. The grave was too deep. He called for help, but it was so late, that there was no one around. And so the fellow decided to make the best of a bad situation and went over into a corner of the grave and went to sleep. About an hour later, another man came along, who apparently had the same idea about taking a short cut through the cemetery. And he fell into the same grave. And immediately he frantically tried to climb out, but he wasn't successful. Just as he was giving up, though, from the dark corner of the grave, he heard a voice: "You're never going to get out of here." But he did. When he heard that voice, he was up and out of the grave in an instant. Sometimes all we humans need is a little encouragement. Sometimes we need

to encourage others to step into the water by reminding them of the good news that God is with them.

Today's Valentine's Day. Could we receive a better Valentine from our God than the gift of his presence with us? Thanks be to God for loving us so faithfully. Good news indeed. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; February 14, 2010