

Passed Through the Waters

By
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from the pulpit of
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Exodus 14:15-31

¹⁵Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷Then 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. ¹⁸And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.” ¹⁹The 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. ²⁰It 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.

²¹Then 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. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At 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. ²⁵He 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.”

²⁶Then 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.” ²⁷So 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. ²⁸The 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. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel 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.

In the days following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Arthur Waskow was walking home from his work on Capitol Hill as an activist against the war in Vietnam to prepare for the celebration of the Passover seder with his family. He writes of that seder, that the words of the Hagadda that he had been reciting for his entire life about the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt into the Promised Land suddenly had a relevancy in his life in a way that they never had before.

He recalled Dr. King's final speech just a few days before his death that echoed the story of Moses, "I've been to the mountaintop... And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

Waskow reflects - "On that night, the Haggadah itself, the Telling of our slavery and our freedom, became the real conversation about our real life. The ritual foods, the bitterness of the bitter herb, the pressed-down bread of everyone's oppression, the wine of joy in struggle, became the real meal.

For the first time, we paused in the midst of the Telling itself, to connect the streets with the seder. Every year since I had learned to read, I had recited the passage that says, "In every generation, every human being is obligated to say, 'We ourselves, not our forebears only, go forth from slavery to freedom.'"¹

Wasko would go on the next year to write and host what he called the Freedom Seder which included 800 people gathered in the basement of Lincoln Temple, a black church in Washington, D.C. There, Jews and Christians, rabbis, and ministers, black and white. They used his newly written Haggadah - the liturgy for the Passover - that intentionally and explicitly connected the ancient story of the Exodus to contemporary life and the struggles of the civil rights movement, permanently shifting how most American Jews approach the seder meal even today.

Our text for this morning is just one scene out of the epic story of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery. It is the miraculous moment after

¹ <https://religiondispatches.org/take-history-into-your-own-hands-why-i-wrote-the-freedom-seder-and-why-its-still-necessary/>

generations of hard labor, after small but mighty acts of defiance, after the raising up of leaders, after countless negotiations with a hard-hearted Pharaoh, and after ten devastating plagues, that the people finally pass through the water from slavery to freedom.

It is in this very moment when the people walked on dry land, with walls of water to their left and right, that God himself declares that it is this act of liberation, this display of strength, this making of a literal way where there was no way that should always remind all people of the power of God.

Memory plays a significant role in the meaning of the Exodus. The two chapters prior to the crossing of the sea are dedicated to the command to remember: the establishment of the Passover feast and the festival of the unleavened bread. A liturgy, a curriculum even, for teaching generation after generation what happened in those days. Memory is essential to the liberation. And it is that memory that will shape them and that still shapes us as a people of faith.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann describes the significance of the preservation of this memory and the consequence for forgetting:

“We may imagine the chain of witnesses from father to son, mother to daughter, from parent to child, remembering, recalling and reperforming the ancient “signs” of God’s power that were enacted in the midst of history for the sake of shalom in the community of God’s people. Israel, a community evoked and sustained by narrative, always understood that retelling is a life-or-death matter. If not retold in compelling ways, Israel would fall out of the plot and away from the reality of God. To fall out of the plot would permit and evoke the embrace of false Gods who could not save, or the embrace of autonomy that would leave the community without accountability and eventually without hope.”²

It is not just the case that Israel was instructed to remember their liberation in the annual festival of the Passover, but embedded within the laws of

² Walter Brueggemann, *Delivered Out of Empire*. 2021.

Deuteronomy are consistent reminders that their identity as liberated people should shape the ethics of their community.

We hear strong words of remembrance and humility in Deuteronomy 8:

“When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness...But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.”

In Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments, the requirement for observing the Sabbath is rooted in their identity as formerly enslaved people. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” (Deut 5:15) The laws governing the protection of the vulnerable - the widow, the orphan, and the resident alien - are all shaped by their command to remember that they were once themselves vulnerable and enslaved. Even the laws commanding them to leave a portion of their harvest in the fields for the poor to glean is rooted in their memory of their own enslavement in Egypt.

The community is commanded to remember, because the memory shapes who they are, the memory shapes what they do, and the memory shapes what they believe.

Arthur Wasko was obviously not the first person to ever make the connection between the stories of the Exodus and the experience of African Americans. Deeply rooted in the religious and cultural experience of enslaved people in the US is the telling and retelling of the story of the Exodus. Even this morning we will sing the traditional spiritual - *Go Down Moses* - which for someone like me was just a song I learned to sing at church camp, but in the African American tradition provided both an act of rebellion and movement

towards freedom as well as now a preservation of the memory of moving through the waters from slavery to liberation.

Legendary conductor on the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman herself was given the nickname of Moses because of her seemingly miraculous ability to make a way when there was no way, through rivers, marshes, and woods leading men, women, and children to freedom to places like Philadelphia where she would deliver them to folks like William Still, Presbyterian Elder who recorded hundreds of stories of those who escaped slavery in the south. In one portion of his memoirs Still wrote of Tubman - “She had faithfully gone down into Egypt. Harriet was a woman of no pretensions; indeed, a more ordinary specimen of humanity could hardly be found. Yet, in point of courage, shrewdness and by making personal visits to Maryland among the enslaved, she was without her equal.”³

This past spring a group of women from our congregation, Bethel AME Church of Ardmore, Overbrook Presbyterian Church, and Salt and Light Church in Southwest Philadelphia traveled the over 100 miles that Tubman would have waded to visit the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historic Park in Maryland in an act of preserving her memory thereby allowing the memory of her faith, her courage and her actions to shape who we are, what we do, and what we believe in our ongoing work of Anti-Racism as a congregation.

On that trip I had the opportunity to sit in the front seat with the driver of our van - Jack, a 40 something African American man who it turned out grew up on the east side of Pittsburgh at the same time that I did. We spent a significant portion of the drive reminiscing about home, and the very specific magic that was Pittsburgh for teenagers in the 1990s. But the closer we got to the national park, located halfway between where Tubman was born and where she was enslaved, Jack kept pointing out the water. Not just the water of the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays, but the water that we could see rising up in the front lawns of people’s homes, a clear indicator that the boundary between the dry land and the waters to the left and to the right was incredibly

³ <https://www.biography.com/activists/harriet-tubman-william-still-helped-slaves-escape-underground-railroad>

permeable. He said, “I just can’t imagine how she moved all of those people through all this water. It seems impossible.”

When author Ta-Nehisi Coates was writing his novel about the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman he read one biography in which the biographer admitted that historians aren't quite sure how she managed to lead so many people to freedom. Coates said - “Whenever I hear, 'We don't know how this happens,' my mind starts turning, you know? I start imagining things.”⁴ He went on to write the novel *Water Dancer*, where he infuses Tubman with the magical power called conduction - a power fueled by memory.

In the novel Tubman describes the power of memory to the main character Hiram, also a conductor on the railroad who was renowned as a child for his photographic memory. When she explains to him how it is they each have come to have this magical power of conduction she tells him this:

“We forget nothing, you and I. To forget is to truly slave. To forget is to die. Remember, friend. For memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to the boon of freedom.”⁵

This weekend the nation and many people of faith have set aside time to honor the power of memory to shape who we are, what we do, and what we believe. The memory of Juneteenth was one that had been neglected among our collective consciousness. To be honest all of us were at risk of falling out of the plot as Brueggmann says. It is the story of those men and women in Galveston, Texas who were finally told in 1865, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, that they were free from slavery. It was following that day that more than 250,00 enslaved people in Texas moved through the metaphorical waters from slavery to freedom.

When we preserve this memory of Juneteenth, a memory of not just enslavement, which is an indelible part of our national identity regardless of any of our individual connections to it, but a memory rooted in liberation, we

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/24/763477150/ta-nehisi-coates-on-magic-memory-and-the-underground-railroad>

⁵ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer: A Novel*, 2019.

place ourselves within the ancient and holy tradition of remembering that it is possible to create a way where it appears that there is no way through; that it is possible because of the strength of our God to do things that are impossible; that even though oppression and struggle can last for generations, freedom is achievable in real moments in time, and even in our own lifetime.

As the Haggadah reminds us, “In every generation, every human being is obligated to say, ‘We ourselves, not our forebears only, go forth from slavery to freedom.’”

We as a church are a people shaped by these memories: shaped in who we are - a people who work against injustice and celebrate liberation and freedom; shaped in what we do - speaking and acting in support of those, who continue to live in oppression, those who have been forgotten and neglected, working to build a community of welcome and inclusion; shaped in what we believe - that our God brought us through the waters so that we might be a vehicle for freedom in our generation and in our community.

Each of us as followers of Jesus Christ have passed through and been redeemed by the miraculous waters of our baptism. It is water that shapes who we are, what we do, and what we believe. Even the Apostle Paul in his curriculum of faith, repeats the refrain of liberation: that there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, because we have passed through these waters all are one in Jesus Christ.

It is one of the most beloved parts of our Presbyterian baptismal liturgy that each time we witness another of our tribe pass through these holy waters that we are commanded to remember that we have passed this way as well.

Fueled by the memory of our ancestors in faith who passed through the waters from slavery to liberation, by the memories of the courageous ones who led people through the waters and created change in our shared national story, and by the memory of our own baptism, may we be a people who speak, who act, and who believe that God has brought us this far that we might make waves in the name of liberation as well.

Amen.