

Foundational Stories Series
“So...What's Your Story?”
Sermon on Exodus 14:10-31 (9/27 and 9/28/14)
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A while back, a friend of mine told me about an art show her church had put on several years ago that was filled with different kinds of art from people of all ages within her church.

My friend told me that one student in their congregation had created a panorama depicting a fairly complete picture of the great flood in Genesis chapters 6 through 9.

This artistic depiction included the ark, of course, with Noah and the other people and animals *on* the ark...but there were also dead bodies floating in the water. My friend talked about how “accurate” this depiction was – but she also talked about how she was glad she'd left her young daughter at home. Because the story of Noah and the great flood is really not a very lovely story. And today's story, too...not so lovely.

Were you to create an artistic panorama of today's Bible story – the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea – if you wanted to be authentic, you'd have to include the waters crashing in on the Egyptian army...which would have created its own mass of floating bodies.

It's a story of powerful deliverance for the Israelites...but it's also a story of incredible devastation for Egypt.

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The Holy Bible is truly a gift to us from God – and that's why we give copies of it to the children of our congregations, like we are doing this weekend here at McCabe. In the stories of the Bible, we come to learn about God's relationship with God's people – a relationship that has brought both blessing and devastation. //

The Holy Bible *is* a gift. But it isn't all nice and rosy all of the time. There are some truly terrible stories in this holy book – stories that should make us all a little nervous about God's power...and stories that help to teach us about how we humans have behaved toward one another since the beginning of time.

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Since I arrived here in late June, we've been in this *Foundational Stories* sermon series. Each week of this series, we've learned about members of the Israelite people – God's chosen people.

Back in Genesis chapter 12, God invited a man named Abraham – along with his wife, Sarah – to follow. Abraham said “yes” to God, and then God promised Abraham three things: the land we now call Israel, many descendants, and blessing – not only that this people would *be* blessed, but that the world would be blessed *through* them.

As we've journeyed through Genesis and Exodus, we've met Abraham's children and grandchildren: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph...all the way to Moses, who is now a central figure in the book of Exodus. These people are called the Israelites, or the Hebrew people.

So far in this series, we've experienced them struggle to get along with each other, and, now, over the last couple of weeks, we have experienced them struggling as foreigners in the land of Egypt.

The Israelites had gotten so numerous during their years in Egypt the king of Egypt – the Pharaoh – got nervous that they might take over. So he made the Hebrew people slaves. And then he just made things harder and harder for them over the years.

Eventually, things got so tough that the Israelites began to cry out to God for help. God heard their cry and God called Moses to help lead the Israelite people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom in their promised land.

But, up to the point of today's story from Exodus 14, the process of leaving Egypt hadn't been easy.

The Pharaoh wasn't real excited about letting his slave labor go free, so God sent plague after plague upon the Egyptians in an attempt to show Pharaoh just how powerful the God of the Israelites really was... and to show Pharaoh and the Egyptians that their God would do just about anything to get them out of slavery.

After the tenth and final plague that God sent upon the Egyptians, the Israelites began to make their way out of Egypt...but, early on, they encountered a major obstacle: the Red Sea. They were all on foot and the Egyptian army was following not too far behind them in chariots and on horseback.

(Though the Pharaoh had officially freed the Israelites, it didn't take him long to rethink that decision. So he sent his army to go get them back.)

As the story goes, “Moses stretched his arm over the sea, and the Lord sent a strong east wind that blew all night until there was dry land where the water had been. The sea opened up, and the Israelites walked through on dry land with a wall of water on each side. The Egyptian chariots and cavalry went after them.”

God helped the Israelites cross the sea safely...yet the Egyptian army was not far behind. So, when the Israelites all made it safely across, God told Moses to move his hand across the sea again; Moses did this...the walls of water came crashing down over the Egyptian army...and not one of them survived the deluge.

Again, this is a story of powerful deliverance for the Israelites...but it's also a story of incredible devastation for Egypt. And, in all honesty, I never know quite what to make of it.

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At the very beginning of the Bible, when God created the heavens and the earth, God created humankind and called us good – *all* of us. That was before there was a chosen people, before there were nations at war against each other. God loved us all and called all of us good.

So there is biblical evidence of God's care for *all* people – not just for the Israelites. Yet here is one of these stories where God clearly favors the Israelites over another nation – and that favor amounted to the death of many, many Egyptian soldiers. In my mind, this is a problematic story and, again, I never quite know what to make of it.

Yet, whatever this story is – as problematic as it might be, as many questions as it can create for us – *it is* a powerful story of God's deliverance, a reminder of God's amazing presence with the Israelites.

And, because of that, it is a story that they continue to go back to time and time again as a reminder of who and whose they are – that they are God's people and that they belong first to the God who delivered them from slavery in Egypt so many generations ago.

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In preparing this sermon, I hunted around online for some imagery, hoping for inspiration on this challenging text. There were *lots* of images depicting this story. Of course, I came across images that were sort of “classic, Sunday School-portrait” kinds of images with Moses larger-than life, controlling the movement of the sea with his arms and his staff. In one of those images I found, if you looked closely enough at it, the Israelites in the picture look quite nervous about crossing the Sea.

And, really, who wouldn't be a bit nervous about this? It would have been a LOT of water – and it was being held back by who-knows-what...by a God they can't see. It would have taken a LOT of trust to make the trek between those walls of water – a lot of trust in God and a lot of trust in Moses, their seemingly fearless leader.

So I found classic, Sunday School images – and they were fine. But I found a few that caught my attention a bit more...one of which was a chocolate cake with blue frosting and little fish sprinkled on top of the frosting.

Of course, the cake was split in half...and there were little, plastic people figurines “walking” between the halves of the cake.

Now, I'm not exactly sure what kind of person makes a cake that depicts the story of the crossing of the Red Sea...I'm also not exactly sure whether such a cake is creative or disturbing. (I think it's probably somewhere in between.)

So I found images depicting the Israelites *before* they crossed the sea, I found the cake image of the Israelites in the *midst* of crossing the sea, and I found an image I really appreciated depicting the Israelites *after* they had crossed the sea:

That was an image from Cecille B. DeMille's classic movie *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston and Yule Brynner. That image actually looked a bit like the first images I found – the Sunday School-type pictures of a larger-than-life Moses parting the Red Sea and the Israelites preparing to cross. Except the image I found from *The Ten Commandments* is on the other side of the Red Sea.

In that image the Israelites have made it across the sea – and in the nick of time, too...because the Egyptian army had started to cross the Red Sea. In fact, some of them were getting quite close to where the Israelites were.

But, if you look toward the top of the picture, you can see that the walls of the Red Sea have begun to crash in on the Egyptians. God's chosen people have made it safely across and God is holding back the waters no more.

What I appreciate so much about the *Ten Commandments* image I found is that, in it, many of the Israelites are hiding their faces from what was happening.

I appreciate the fact that, though they surely would have been thrilled that God helped them cross the Red Sea safely, they seemed to be very troubled by the fact that many Egyptians would now lose their lives as the water consumed them.

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This is the kind of biblical story that reminds me just how powerful water is. I think I remember experiencing that for real for the first time when I was a junior in high school and my choir took a trip to Hawaii.

On one of our free afternoons we all went to Waikiki Beach and many of us swam out further than we should have. I'm a pretty strong swimmer, so I wasn't terribly concerned for myself, but I was swimming out and back with a friend who was *not* a very strong swimmer.

While we were swimming back to shore, the current kicked-up and it got a lot harder to move forward: we'd take three strokes forward and two backward, it seemed.

It felt like the shore wasn't getting any closer and my friend was complaining that he didn't think he could make it.

Though I knew I could make it back just fine on my own, what scared me was that I knew I probably could *not* make it back if I ended up having to physically pull my friend along. I also knew that it would not help matters if I was honest with my friend about how scared I was becoming.

So, I did what I could to be encouraging and, after what seemed like hours, we finally made it back to shore...shaky with nerves and extremely grateful to be on dry ground.

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Water is extremely powerful. My experience in the Pacific Ocean at Waikiki Beach was nothing compared to what our story in Exodus depicts. Yet my experience at Waikiki taught me without a doubt that a big batch of water is far more powerful than I am...and that it is worth being careful when we small human beings encounter something as big as the Pacific Ocean.

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In the Bible, water is often used to represent chaos. And not only that, but biblical stories of chaotic water also tend to be stories of God's power over it.

In the story of creation in Genesis chapter one, God's spirit moves over the chaotic waters and creates order: the unformed mass of water becomes oceans and seas on the earth as well as precipitation in the heavens. This creating-order-out-of-chaos is meant to teach us about God's power and glory.

In today's story, too, God's control over the chaotic waters of the Red Sea – and God's deliverance of the Israelites through that water – is meant to teach us just how powerful and just how glorious God is.

My favorite image of the Red Sea Crossing images I found was a modern take on the story:

It depicts two walls of tall, turbulent water. In between the walls of water is a dry, three-lane highway with cars and trucks transporting God's people across to the other side. And, at the far end of this particular image – the fully dry side of the crossing – there is glorious sunlight, symbolizing the new day, the new *hope*, dawning for the Israelites.

This image made me think about all the ways in which God delivers *us* from chaos and trouble here and now – in our lives today. My story of “deliverance” in the waters of the Pacific Ocean is one such story from my life...but there are so many more.

God has helped deliver me from financial messes...God has helped deliver me from chaotic and unhealthy relationships...God has helped me find forgiveness in the midst of significant pain...God has given me the right words at the right time on so many occasions. And even though none of those things compares to the scale of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the idea of God's deliverance is the same.

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Yes...today's story about the crossing of the Red Sea is a story of both deliverance *and* devastation.

And, for us Christians, we have to acknowledge that this theme of deliverance and devastation extends into our faith as well...for, while we acknowledge salvation and deliverance from sin through Jesus Christ, we must also acknowledge that *that* salvation and deliverance came at a devastating price – for God, and for God's only Son.

For salvation and deliverance through Jesus Christ came at the devastating price of Christ's horrible death by crucifixion. Yet. Yet, out of that devastation, God brought glorious resurrection. And Christ's resurrection from the dead is our ultimate sign of hope in the midst of chaos.

It's like the glorious sunshine at the top of this image: despite the chaotic waters, threatening to crash in around the travelers, God's light shines...just down the road.

And sometimes that's all we need – just a little bit of light...or even hope that the light will come eventually, leading us *out* of our chaos and devastation, *into* freedom.

That's deliverance. And God has continued to bring it into our lives for thousands and thousands of years.

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So...what's *your* story of deliverance? When have you been reminded without a doubt of God's presence in the midst of chaos?

When has God brought *you* out of devastation into freedom?

Maybe it was years ago. Maybe it was yesterday. Maybe you're still waiting. But it will come.

For the God who delivered the Israelites through the Red Sea, and the God who delivered Jesus Christ from crucifixion to resurrection, is at work here in this place – in your life – today, tomorrow, forevermore.

Thanks be to God. Amen.