

Keep Still, Then Move Forward!

A sermon by John Strommen on Exodus 14 September 30, 2018

One of God's greatest miracles, probably the most dramatic, was the parting of the Red Sea. Now, that would be a pretty cool power to have. Admit it, if you had that power, wouldn't you part Lake Superior, just so your friends could walk through it? Or maybe a bowl of tomato soup? In the movie, "Bruce Almighty," Bruce has been given the power of God for a week and he's trying out his new powers. When the real God shows up, played by Morgan Freeman, he is not impressed with Bruce's little trick.

(Bruce Almighty clip)

Indeed, the real God has far better reasons for doing miracles than just to entertain himself and his friends. In epic fashion, the movie "The Ten Commandments" captures the grandeur and relevancy of such a miracle – even if the special effects are a bit dated.

(Ten Commandments clip)

God's power on full display! What is easily lost in this visual is just how confusing this all was for the Israelites as God led them to this point. Here's where they are in this story: with Moses as his proxy, God freed the Israelites from slavery to the Egyptians. Moses said to Pharaoh, "let my people go!" over and over again, *and* 10 plagues later - including a river turning blood red and frogs and locusts and even a dark cloud that took the firstborn of every Egyptian home - Pharaoh finally said, "OK, your God is too great, Moses. I will let your people go."

And so, thousands and thousands of Hebrew slaves - descendants of Abraham and of Joseph and his brothers - began their exodus from Egypt to the north, towards the Red Sea. They also had been given many parting gifts as a way of saying, "OK, you won! To the winner go the spoils. Your God is too great."

But now is where the plot thickens. After the Israelites left, Pharaoh says, "What have we done? We let our slave labor get away! How are we going to get the work done now? Oh, no! We have to do it! We can't let this happen!" And so, temptation was at hand for Pharaoh because although the Israelites were many, and they were now rich with Egyptian treasure, they were also unarmed, and the Pharaoh had an army with chariots.

That said, don't you wish you could intervene at this point and say, "But Pharaoh, has it worked to this point to resist the Israelite God? Remember the plagues?" Seems pretty foolish that Pharaoh would actually pursue the Israelites at this point, but here we go!

One important nuance in this story is this: Pharaoh didn't make this decision on his own. It says in Exodus (but not in our lesson today) that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, repeatedly. And he did so here as well. God was orchestrating a showdown between Godself and the most powerful ruler in the world – in order to make a point about what real power is *and is not*. And boy, does the point get made.

In whom do *you* place your trust? The power of God or the power of rulers, riches, military might?

Back to the Israelites. They don't know where this is all headed just yet. What they do know is that suddenly on their flanks an army is chasing them down, over 600 chariots strong.

So now, the Israelites panic and sarcastically turn on Moses: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”

But Moses says, “Don’t be afraid. Stand firm and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.”

In truth, it wasn’t like they were completely sitting ducks. Do you remember what led the Israelites by day and night in the wilderness after they left Egypt? A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This was a sign of God’s presence and all they had to do was follow.

These pillars had led them to the shores of the Red Sea, but, alas, there were no ships waiting for them. So the pillars suddenly re-purpose: both pillars relocate behind the Israelites, between them and the oncoming chariots, and they form a wall of fire and cloud to hold back the Egyptians – at least temporarily.

So, they can’t go forward or backward. Now what?

Well, Moses says, in so many words, “be still, trust God, and *move forward*.”

This is kind of a reminder that you don’t know how it’s going to work out, but you don’t have to. You’re in God’s hands.

For the Israelites, there were so many confusing reversals in the process of being freed. An ancient Jewish commentary compares the rescue at sea to a man walking alone with his son in a dark night. It was a narrow road, so they walked single-file. When the man sensed a thief ahead, he moved his son behind him to protect him. When the man sensed a wolf behind them, he moved his son in front of him. When both a thief and a wolf approached at the same time, the man put his son on his shoulders to protect him from both threats. The son, no doubt, felt confused at being jostled back and forth by his father, though he trusted his father to keep him safe on the dark path.

Moses was saying, I think, get on the Lord’s shoulders. We’re moving forward. This is what you call faith.

Moses held up his hand over the sea and winds came that blew all night, driving the water back. Then the waters parted and they moved forward across the sea floor until they had a big distance between them and the soldiers. Then the pillars of cloud and fire dispersed, allowing the soldiers to move forward and pursue once again. But once they were on the Red Sea floor, things got difficult. God caused their wheels to get clogged, they panicked, and God closed the waters on them. End of story.

How are we to read a story like this? Did this really happen? It is fruitless to seek an explanation for how this all happened. Historically, we know the Israelites were slaves of Egypt and they were liberated. But this story is mainly a theological one that asserts the power of God to free those who are in bondage – whether literal bondage or spiritual. This story proclaims that God breaks chains and calls every one of us to freedom from sin, death and enslavement.

And yet, as we walk along the uncertain path of this life, God’s leading can be deeply confusing, just like it was with the Israelites and with the father and son. It’s deeply confusing because we can’t always see what’s coming up on from us behind or what lies ahead, but God can. And when we think we see clearly, God might say, “No, you don’t. But I do.” Move forward, never mind the Red Sea.

What’s chasing you in your life? What looms ahead of you like the Red Sea, causing you to lose hope?

As Moses said to the Israelites, “Do not be afraid. The Lord will fight for you. You only have to keep still.”

Stillness is important, isn't it? When we are not still, like most of the day, we tend to put our trust in other things, or in ourselves. But when we are still, we might be open to God who is leading us. We might let go of our false gods. And then we might be ready to move forward in faith, even with a Red Sea of uncertainties ahead.

Psalm 23 reminds us that “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”

Luther famously wrote in his Small Catechism: “God protects me against all danger and shields me from all evil.”

Where are you in all this? You probably don't have anything as pressing as Pharaoh's armies on one side and the Red Sea on the other. But whatever you face in your life is real enough. Keep still, trust in the Lord, then move forward! Amen.