

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
2-13-22  
Exodus 14:10-23, 30-31  
Living Stories: Drawn to Freedom

“Let my people go.” This was the refrain we heard last week as the Lord through Moses challenged the authority of Pharaoh. And when Pharaoh’s hardened heart did not relent, plagues beset Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. After the death of the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the human firstborn to the firstborn of animals, Pharaoh relented and the Hebrew people were freed to go the promised land to worship God.

Now God did not lead the Israelites on the direct path to the Promised Land, which would have been through the land of the Philistines, for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people by a roundabout way through the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Lord guided them on this journey - going in front of them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.

While the Hebrews were wandering in the wilderness, approaching the Red Sea, Pharaoh had a change of heart. “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?”, he cried out to his officials. So he took his chariot and his army of officers in chariots and on horseback and went in hot pursuit of the Israelites, who were taking their leave on foot. The Egyptians eventually met up with the Israelites, who were camped by the sea.

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Imagine the scene with me...a story told in Exodus chapter 14, a story about how the Israelites and each one of us is drawn to freedom. You have finally been released from the oppressive hand of Pharaoh after the Lord inflicted horrific plagues on the land and people of Egypt. You have seen the incredible power of the Lord first hand and you have seen with your own eyes and heard with your own ears and smelled and tasted and felt with your hands and your heart. You have believed and followed Moses, the leader God has chosen, into the wilderness. And even though the path you were taking didn’t seem the most direct, it was ok, because even better than a GPS or the Waze app, you knew the Lord was guiding you - going in front of you in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, allowing you to travel day and night.

You knew you would get to that promised land...it would happen... just keep putting one foot in front of the other – you were being drawn to the promised land to freedom. You were enjoying the company – singing and sharing stories as you walked the dusty paths. And then one night the unthinkable happened. You were taking a break from the hard travel of mile after mile of desert hiking, camped out by the sea - enjoying a s’more or two around the campfire, when you heard the unmistakable clamor of chariots. Pharaoh must have decided to come after you, to bring you back into slavery, and maybe worse.

Your heart begins beating fast, your mouth gets dry and the murmuring begins and then the panic sets in. The worst case scenarios start going through your mind and you and your fellow travelers cry out to the Lord, full of anxiety and alarm, in great fear and terror, saying to 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?”

The panic escalates and you start making accusations, and the “I told you so” remarks start flying fast and furious. You say, “Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” How fast we go from trust and allegiance to fear and mistrust, in a blink of an eye the neurons in our fear centers start firing and we spiral into a cycle from which it can be hard to find release. Moses attempted to reassure you, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

This last sentence was as hard for you to process as it for people today. “The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” The Hebrew phrase that is translated “keep still” can also be translated as to hold one’s peace, to make no moves, and to be patient. Harder said than done when one is in a panicked state. And apparently that strategy did not work so well, for in the next breath the Lord hears the cries of the Hebrew people and tells Moses to hold out his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. The Lord says, “Tell the Israelites to go forward – they will be safe, for I will take care of the Egyptians.”

Now your heart is still beating fast, but you see the pillar of cloud that has been leading you move from the front to back and the waters divide. You can’t believe it, you are walking on dry ground, with the waters forming a wall on your right side and on your left side. The cloud of God is almost pushing you forward as the Egyptians are just on your heels. But then you make it safely to the other side and the wall of water closes in and all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers end up in the water. You can breathe now – the whole time you were crossing you were holding your breath – you didn’t even realize it. You shake your head in amazement. You know the story of this miracle will be told over and over again. Someday someone will even write it down and the story will end with these words “Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel 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.”

And this story – your story – our story – the story of how we are drawn to freedom has been told over and over again. Over and over again people who were enslaved and oppressed have heard the words of how the Lord led the people from bondage into freedom. How the

people were drawn to freedom – following the Lord who appeared to them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Over and over again this story has given hope. It has been told in words, in art, and it has been told in song. So many spirituals and so much gospel music is based on this narrative – the quest to be free; the quest for deliverance; the quest to heal the breach, unite the schisms, repair the ruptures and the holes in the fabric of the community and in our lives.

At the end of this morning's bulletin, Marlene has included music notes. She quotes African American theologian James Cone, who says in part, "The spirituals are historical songs which speak about the rupture of black lives; they tell us about a people in the land of bondage, and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back.....The spiritual, then, is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is their religion, their source of strength in a time of trouble. And if one does not know what trouble is, then the spiritual cannot be understood."

And if one does not know what trouble is, then the spiritual cannot be understood. The counter to that is that spirituals speak to us because at one time or another all of us have known trouble and trials. Marlene explains that the prelude for this morning is an arrangement of the spiritual "I Want Jesus to Walk With Me." The song is a statement of assurance that Jesus walks with us through the trials of life. The verses are a plea – an appeal for a companion on the journey, "In my trial, Lord, walk with me; In my sorrow, Lord walk with me; In my troubles, Lord walk with me; When the shades of life are falling; When my heart is aching; When my life becomes a burden, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me."<sup>1</sup>

That walk with Jesus, we sometimes call that prayer. The spirituals recognize that we need prayer, especially when life is difficult. Following the sermon, we will hear the handbells play "Standing in the Need of Prayer." The words of the spiritual remind us that it is

Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord,  
Standin' in the need of prayer;  
It's me, it's me, O Lord, Standin' in the need of prayer;  
Not the preacher, not the deacon, but it's me, O Lord,  
Not my father, not my mother, but it's me, O Lord,  
Not the stranger, not my neighbor, but it's me, O Lord,  
Standin' in the need of prayer.<sup>2</sup>

The spirituals speak to us on multiple levels, from the societal to the personal. As Marlene noted, "through songs they built new structures for existence in an alien land. The spirituals enabled blacks to retain a measure of African identity while living in the midst of American slavery, providing both the substance and the rhythm to cope with human servitude."

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<sup>1</sup> *Glory to God Hymnal* #775

<sup>2</sup> Words can be found at Hymnary.org [https://hymnary.org/text/not\\_my\\_brother\\_nor\\_my\\_sister\\_but\\_its\\_me](https://hymnary.org/text/not_my_brother_nor_my_sister_but_its_me)

On the societal level, the spirituals help enslaved people have hope that freedom is coming – freedom from servitude, from separation from family members, from the dehumanizing conditions that considered them property to be bought and sold. On a personal level, the spirituals help all of us have hope that we can be freed from all of those things that bind us and keep us from true communion with God and each other; that we can be freed from greed and envy; a focus on money or power; addictions and loneliness, fear and worry and hatred and anger that threaten to cut off the oxygen we need to breathe.

“Deliverance is liberation. And liberation is deliverance... not of the soul from the body, not of an immortal seed from its grubby time-bound shell, and also not of a single, better individual out of a lost-mass. Deliverance is unbinding of the bound who cannot unbind themselves from their entanglement.” These are the words of contemporary reformed theologian Eberhard Busch from his book on the Heidelberg Catechism titled *Drawn to Freedom*.<sup>3</sup>

The Hebrew people were told to keep silent, to remain patient and to let the Lord lead them from slavery to freedom. They could not unbind themselves from their entanglement. That was the Lord’s work. When we pray in the Lord’s Prayer to deliver us from temptation, we recognize that liberating move also comes from God. We can not unbind ourselves from sin. We acknowledge that each Sunday in our prayer of confession and in the promise of the Gospel. It is through Jesus Christ that we are freed.

This is truly a living story – we are invited to live as a people who have been freed from all that binds us and keeps us separated from God. What does it mean to live as a people who are “drawn to freedom?” Our scripture this morning ends with Israel seeing the great work that the Lord did in freeing them from the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in the Lord’s servant Moses.

Theologian Busch says, “We cannot speak of what God does for us without speaking of what God wants with us and from us. We cannot believe in God without confessing God in the action of lives.”<sup>4</sup> We see in the stories of the Israelites just how hard it is to make our actions match our belief. We see in our own living stories just how hard it can be for us to confess the deliverance and liberation – the grace – we have received with the actions of our lives. We have to give up control – or the illusion of control – and be willing to follow the pillar of fire into the unknown darkness, to trust God and follow the pillar of fire into the churning sea; holding hands with each other in mutual support. The Lord is calling us to follow – to be drawn into the freedom that comes with the grace given through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Let the actions of our lives reflect the answer to that call. Join me in prayer...

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<sup>3</sup> Eberhard Busch *Drawn to Freedom. Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism*. Translated by William H. Rader. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2010. p95

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* pxii