

“On Dry Land”  
 Anna Pinckney Straight  
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, WV  
 September 17, 2017

**Exodus 14: 19 – 31**

<sup>19</sup> The 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. <sup>20</sup> It 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.

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

<sup>26</sup> Then 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.” <sup>27</sup> So 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. <sup>28</sup> The 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. <sup>29</sup> But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

<sup>30</sup> Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup> 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.

**Exodus 15: 1 – 21**

**15** Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

*“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.*

<sup>2</sup> *The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation;  
 this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.*

<sup>3</sup> *The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name.*

<sup>4</sup> *“Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea;  
 his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.*

<sup>5</sup> *The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.*

<sup>6</sup> *Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power — your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy.*

<sup>7</sup> *In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;  
 you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.*

<sup>8</sup> *At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap;  
 the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.*

<sup>9</sup> *The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,  
 I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.  
 I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.’*

<sup>10</sup> *You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters.*

<sup>11</sup> *“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?  
 Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?”*

<sup>12</sup> *You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them.*

<sup>13</sup> *“In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;  
 you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.*

<sup>14</sup> *The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.*

<sup>15</sup> *Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; trembling seized the leaders of Moab;  
 all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.*

<sup>16</sup> *Terror and dread fell upon them; by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone  
 until your people, O LORD, passed by, until the people whom you acquired passed by.*

<sup>17</sup> *You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O LORD, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established.*

<sup>18</sup> *The LORD will reign forever and ever."*

<sup>19</sup> *When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.*

<sup>20</sup> *Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. <sup>21</sup> And Miriam sang to them:*

*"Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."*

There is a video making its way around the internet that if I've watched it once, I've watched it a dozen times. It is a video of men, women, and children and the moment when their cochlear implants are turned on for the first time. For the first time in their lives, these individuals go from silence to sound, but what's amazing isn't the sound, it's the expression on their faces. In their eyes. In every muscle in their face. Their whole countenance changes. Yes, there is mystery and it's clear they don't know entirely what's going on, but more than anything it's the joy. From silence to sound, there is profound, deep, abiding joy. And jubilation.

I have a friend who was not completely deaf, but I saw the same look in her eyes and her face when she told me, when they turned her implant on, she could, for the first time in her life, hear the birds sing.

From silence to sound.

When the Israelites make it through the red sea, they are traveling from silence to sound. Through the sea to dry land. From slavery to freedom. And their first reaction is joy. Jubilation. To dance. To sing. To celebrate. To give thanks to God.

The celebration is of a people who have never known freedom. NEVER known freedom. But have always known, through faith, that they were born to be free. They were born and named and known as children of God. The Israelites hadn't postponed joy, but some of their joy had been postponed for them. The joy of freedom. And when they crossed that sea there was nothing holding it back.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, calling on both current events and ancient traditions, "Free at last, Free at last, Thank God almighty we are free at last."<sup>1</sup>

It hadn't always been that way in Egypt. Once upon a time the Israelites were honored citizens. They traveled there from their homeland in a time of famine, when there was plenty to eat in Egypt. Plenty to eat, because their Ancestor Joseph had warned the Pharaoh that a famine was coming, and the Egypt had saved grain and other supplies so that they did not suffer when the weather turned against them. Joseph cared for his family, and brought them to Egypt, to make sure they would not starve. And because they were Joseph's family they were welcomed, treated as honored guests, the way the Bible tells us to treat those who come to us in need.

But generations passed, and stories were forgotten. Fear of scarcity replaced trust in God's abundance. And the Pharaoh wanted to make sure there was enough for what he now defined as "his people." "I got to do for me and mine," Washington Hogwallop says in the movie "O Brother where Art Thou" as a justification for why he turned his cousin in to the authorities.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0004833/quotes>

The Israelites travel from honor to enslavement. But they did not forget who they were and whose they were, however. They kept the faith. They celebrated God. And they flourished.

Which only made Pharaoh more fearful. So, he increased their workload. Tried to kill their children. In response, helped by midwives who risked their lives to defy Pharaoh, the Israelites did not forget who they were or whose they were, and they flourished.

At some point in this circular cycle God decides it is time to intervene in a new way. Speaking through a burning bush God calls Moses, and with the help of Aaron, they announce to Pharaoh that he must let the Israelites go.

Pharaoh, like every other ruler faced with a similar situation cannot abide by this change. Cannot envision a world without the economic advantages this enslavement has provided, and he refuses.

How might this story have been different if he had been able to give something up in the name of justice? Something that wasn't rightfully his to begin with?

We won't know, because Pharaoh refuses. And then come the plagues.

Water turned to blood.

Frogs.

Gnats.

Flies.

Livestock dying.

Boils.

Thunder and Hail.

Locusts.

Darkness.

And then the angel of death, visiting every Egyptian household without the sign of God above the doorway and taking the life of the eldest child in each home.

Pharaoh is not made of steel. And these plagues were serious. Several times in this process he considers letting the Israelites go, only to begin to let that fear creep back in his heart, described in the Bible as a hardened heart, and Pharaoh changes his mind.

Until the end. With the final plague. With those deaths, the grief. The horror. It's too much. Too, too much. And then, Pharaoh not only lets the Israelites go, he commands them to leave, saying "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD, as you said. <sup>32</sup>Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone."

Only, until a day or so passes, and he again changes his mind, and the forces begin chasing the Israelites until the events at the Red Sea, our story for today.

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*Ulysses Everett McGill:* Pete's cousin turned us in for the bounty.

*Pete:* The hell you say! Wash is kin!

*Washington Hogwallop:* Sorry, Pete, I know we're kin, but they got this depression on. I got to do for me and mine.

*Pete:* I'm gonna kill you, Judas Iscariot Hogwallop!

It's instructive I think to see just how hard it is to let something go when it gives us an economic advantage. What a strong hold our resources have on us, rather than we on them. The more things change. The more they stay the same.

This is a messy story. I'm not going to pretend otherwise. Even given what has happened, the death of the soldiers doesn't feel like something to celebrate. The Egyptians might die because of their leaders' own defiance and fear. But it is a tragedy none the less, and worthy of grief.

For what it's worth, I don't think that the Israelites are celebrating death as they are celebrating their freedom. It might be a distinction without a difference, but it feels important to say.

The Israelites themselves are far from home-free. They have a journey ahead of them that will take decades. It's going to be a hard journey, full of potholes and missed road signs. We'll be taking some of that journey with them in the weeks ahead.

Even here, in the text we read from Chapter 15. The scholars have ascertained that, originally, it was Miriam's song, that was later given to Moses, lest women have more power than men in the Biblical record.

As a consolation, Miriam is given the title Prophet, which is no little thing. She is the third person in the Bible to be called this, and the first woman.<sup>3</sup>

This is a messy story. It may speak of clear rights and wrongs, but there aren't 2-dimensional characters. Moses has flaws. Pharaoh has redeeming qualities. It is, if I may be so bold, a little bit like life.

But the point, for today, is that when times are tough, we need to take celebrations where we can find them.

And for now, for now we just need to be here, on the banks of the sea, seeing freedom with the Israelites. Through their eyes, free for the first time, and celebrate.

Don't postpone joy.<sup>4</sup>

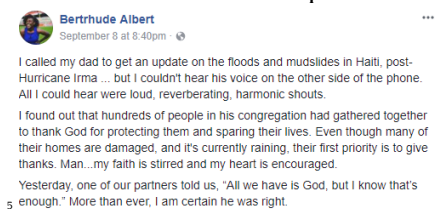
This past week, as the winds and the waters rose with Irma, I turned to Facebook for updates. To see how people were faring in the islands and in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina.

I found these words posted by a friend of our mission co-worker in Haiti, Cindy Correll. Haiti was spared the worst of Irma, but an island with mass poverty, little infrastructure or inadequate construction techniques is always more at risk.

These words were shared by Berthude Albert<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows." Bible Review 5, no. 1 (February 1989).

<sup>4</sup> While this is a common phrase, it has been particularly present in media this week with the death of Edith Windsor.



I called my dad to get an update on the floods and mudslides in Haiti, post- Hurricane Irma ... but I couldn't hear his voice on the other side of the phone. All I could hear were loud, reverberating, harmonic shouts.

I found out that hundreds of people in his congregation had gathered together to thank God for protecting them and sparing their lives. Even though many of their homes are damaged, and it's currently raining, their first priority is to give thanks. Man...my faith is stirred and my heart is encouraged. Yesterday, [someone told me], "All we have is God, but I know that's enough." More than ever, I am certain he was right.

They do this, in my experience, not in ignorance of their problems, or denial. It does not make the cry for justice any less urgent. It is that they see all of it through the eyes of faith.

Do we have to be on the side of the sea, having traveled across on dry land to know that truth? Or is it enough to witness it? Hear it?

We live in a world where there is serious work to be done. And there have been brutal days in our past. And there are no doubt difficult days ahead as we travel the road towards justice and mercy that God has declared the way. His way. As we learn to trust God's abundance and reject the fear that keeps God's kingdom at bay.

But today, we have a moment when we are reminded that joy is present, too. We neglect it at our peril. We must not neglect it. For the sake of Miriam the prophet and Moses the reluctant spokesperson. For the Israelites who had the courage to go even though they had never seen the land across the sea on which their feet now trod.

The couple who can't wait for the minister to say all of their words before jumping in with their I Dos.

The youth who find hope while cleaning up vomit.

What, for you, is a moment of pure joy in your life, for which you give thanks to God?

Take a moment. Do you have it? I want you to hold tight to it.

Take up your tambourines and celebrate it. For in this day, God is still God, and we are still who we are, God's children.

And it is that knowledge that will be one of the things that helps you make it through, in faith, when the times are tough. When parenting seems like more than you can handle. When work pressures feel unbearable. When the front pages bring despair. When your body fails you. When school is hard, and you just aren't sure it will get better. When the power goes out on your birthday.

Remember joy. Hold tight to it. And know who you are and whose you are. It won't fix everything, but it will help you keep God's kingdom in sight.

"The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him."

Amen. Amen.