**September 20, 2020 Exodus 14:19-31**

 ***Get Your Feet Wet***

**Scripture:** Exodus 14:19-31 NRSV

 *(19)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. (20)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. (21)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. (22)The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (23)The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. (24)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. (25)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." (26)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." (27)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. (28)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. (29)But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (30)Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. (31)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.*

**Notes:**

1. The final plague was enough to ***convince*** Pharaoh to finally let the people go, and Pharaoh did.
	1. Pharaoh realizes his mistake and set out in hot ***pursuit***.
	2. The text explains the ***terror***: the water of the sea out in front and the Egyptians closing in behind.
	3. The people began to ***complain***.
2. The ***fear*** of their freedom seems too much for them.
	1. Moses ***didn’t*** ***know*** what was ahead either.
	2. He ***didn’t*** ***know*** how they’d get out of the situation but he did know that they could never return to Egypt.
	3. Moses ***raised*** his hand and the water of the sea began gently lapping outward.
	4. With every step you know it must have taken ***courage*** and ***faith*** like they’d never before,
3. ***Faithful*** living is not easy.
	1. In the hardest moments of our lives there are ***decisions*** that need to be made,
	2. The essence of faith is the ***assurance*** of things hoped for; the ***conviction*** of things unseen.
	3. ***Move*** into the ***promise*** of everything our lives can be.
4. God makes a ***way*;**
	1. God asks us to act in ***faith***; and God is with us.
	2. When we step out in ***faith***, facing our fear, we will be able to recount the miraculous ***presence*** of God.
	3. God is ***faithful***. But it took fear-filled steps to get their feet wet and see the true ***power*** of God.
	4. Roll up our pant legs, wade into the unknown, get your feet wet, and ***believe*** in the ***power*** of God.

**Script:**

Are you searching for direction? The other week as Jan and I traveled, she said, I do not want you asking me which direction I want to go. She said this in response to the habit I have as I ask her if we want to turn to the right or left when we come to an intersection during our travels. We had set of on an adventure on the motorcycle, we had no set destination, just going on a ride; but I am so indecisive, that often I ask her which direction.

Many of us live our lives like this, we want to go someplace, but where exactly we are not sure; we want to get someplace in particular but how we get there we do not know. Many of us want to live a prosperous life, but how we achieve this we are not sure. Some of us want to get to heaven, but we do not seem to know what we are to do to get there.

The Hebrews, wanted to be freed from their slavery. How would they achieve this, they did not know? Where would they go, they were not sure. Who would lead them, I wondered if they looked to each other and said, “NOT ME!!!”

But in our message over the past few weeks, we find that God had a plan. Moses would be the one to secure their freedom and lead them to where they were to go. God sent Moses to Pharaoh, to negotiate the freedom. But remember Moses resisted, so Aaron was sent with him. Pharaoh refused to release them, and the Egyptian people suffered 10 plagues. And the last was enough to get Pharaoh to permit their freedom. At least for a brief period of time, long enough for the Hebrews to get a head start. But Pharaoh changes his mind and sends all of his armies and chariots after them. And that is where we find ourselves this morning, the Hebrews being pursued by Pharaoh. Stand with me as we share in the reading of our sermon passage from Exodus14:19-31

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I am betting that today’s story is one of the more familiar bible stories that you know. Today we’re telling the epic story of the Hebrew people, who have packed up everything they own, their whole lives, and followed Moses out of Egypt. Finally. They couldn’t go across land toward Canaan; while it would have been faster, it would have involved passing through six Egyptian military outposts. And, let’s face it, even with all of Moses’ attempts to intimidate the Pharaoh, this little band of Hebrew slaves was no match for the Egyptian military might.

The Hebrews found themselves hauling all that they possessed toward the Reed Sea. No one knows the route they took exactly; some think they went through the Red Sea; some think they went through more northern areas of the Red Sea, filled with reeds. And so that is why we have confusion in the name. What we do know is the whole band of the Hebrews did not go over land toward Canaan. Instead of taking the land route that was well known and traveled; they went, toward a large body of water. Going the land route may have seemed impossible, but marching toward the sea was ridiculous. Yet, you know the story . . . on they marched, bravely following Moses, the Egyptian army in hot pursuit; the lapping waves of the sea spreading out in the deep, dark blue before them.

That’s the story we know, right? The story of how Moses stretched out his hand and the sea parted, how the entire band of the Hebrews marched triumphantly through the sea on dry land, and how Pharaoh’s army was thwarted once and for all? Yes, that’s the story we know, the story Hollywood has taught us.

But our task today is to tell the biblical story, the story recorded in the Hebrew text in Exodus, and I have to tell you, if you read that story carefully there is no word to better describe it than … terrifying. Justlook.

Starting in chapter 13 and continuing into chapter 14 we hear what happened after last week. Remember, the final plague that descended on Egypt resulted in the deaths of the firstborn of every living thing all over Egypt, and those Hebrews who followed God’s direction those who painted their doorposts with the blood of a lamb were spared. It was enough to convince Pharaoh to finally let the people go, and he did. He told them to just go—get out of the land of Egypt and never come back. Pharaoh had had enough. But, just as he saw the dust of the Hebrews’ carts disappearing into the Egyptian sun, he realized: *what was he doing letting them go?* The Hebrew slaves were the backbone of the Egyptian economy. What would they do without their labor? And so, as the vast power of the Egyptian economy wandered off toward the desert, Pharaoh was . . . concerned, to say the least.

Once he realized he’d made a mistake, Pharaoh gathered together the full force of his army horses and chariots and soldiers and set out in hot pursuit of the Hebrews. And there the people found themselves, their lives stacked on the backs of their donkeys, their children asking “are we there yet?” plodding toward, well, they had no idea. The text explains the terror; the water of the sea out in front and the quickly-approaching army of the Egyptians closing in behind.

It was right then that the people began to complain. Look at verse 10: the people looked ahead of them and saw the seashore, and behind them and saw Pharaoh approaching, then they started complaining to Moses. *Why did you have to bring us all the way out here to die? What, the graves in Egypt weren’t good enough for you? We told you to leave us alone, but no and here we are, about to be slaughtered by the Pharaoh’s army!*

The fear of their freedom seems to much for them. The very thing they longed for, for years, to be free from Pharaoh’s task masters was a reality that seemed too much for them to bear. When you are enslaved and held captive you do what they tell you. But when you are free you are responsible for your actions, you have nobody to blame for your misery, nobody to blame for your pain.

There they were, out in the middle of nowhere, stuck right in between the Pharaoh; his army; and the big, blue sea. The thing that was keeping them from moving forward was fear, it was so big and intimidating that even after years and years of backbreaking work; misery; violence; oppression, they were actually suggesting a return to Egypt. Because the fear of what was ahead was so overwhelming, it seemed much easier to head back to what was familiar, even if that familiarity was slavery, of all things.

Moses was a good leader, there is a reason why God chose him. There he was, leading the people out into the desert, and he didn’t know what was ahead either. All he knew was that God had led them this far as a leader, he didn’t have much choice except to stand his ground. It wasn’t that he was unfamiliar with the fear they were facing; remember, for weeks Moses has been making excuses to God about how and why he wouldn’t be able to lead the people. He didn’t know how they’d get out of the situation they were in, but he did know that they could never return to Egypt.

So, I imagine with knees knocking himself, Moses told the complaining people in verse 13: “Don’t be afraid. Stand firm and trust in God. The Lord will fight for you … just be still and trust!” Here’s where the funny part of this text unfolds. Open your Bibles, look at Exodus 14:15 to see how God responds to the fear of the people.

Remember, Moses is trying to calm the peoples’ fears, telling them just to be still and wait for God to show up. It’s not an unreasonable response; God had been showing up in miraculous ways on behalf of the Hebrew people for some time. But look at what God said to Moses: “Why are you crying out to me??!? Tell the Israelites to move on!” God almost seems frustrated and impatient in his tone. *Look, I brought you out of Egypt. Haven’t I proven myself over and over again in that process? Now I am asking you to show up for the party . . . to participate in your own redemption . . . to step out in faith. It’s all there, right in front of you. So, get going.*

This is not the story we saw in the movie “The Prince of Egypt,” is it? The Hebrew people were out there in the middle of the desert with impossibility on one side and horror on the other, and God asked them to act decisively in faith, to face their fear and to move forward. As the water parted there was no music swelling in the background, the soundtrack of that moment was more like: the noise of a huge, approaching army, soldiers yelling, chariots creaking, horses’ bridles jangling and in the middle of the Hebrews’ crowd, children crying in terror, people yelling in confusion, nobody sure exactly which way to turn. Terrifying.

But God remained firm. *Why are you asking me what to do next? I’ve laid it out for you as plainly as I can. What it is going to take now is you . . . facing up to the fear, putting one foot in front of the other, and walking toward freedom.* Oh, it must have been so hard. Terrifying. They were being asking to step into the unknown, to risk everything dear to them, to follow God not just with their words but with their very lives. And they were scared.

Then it was Moses who took God seriously and decided to step out—literally—in faith. He raised his hand and the water of the sea began gently lapping outward. A wind moving toward the east began to blow over the water, and over time the water moved to the sides, before their fearful eyes, a path opened up through the very middle of the sea, ground dry enough to walk unencumbered. All they had to do was take the first step. The question isn’t, “will God save us?” but “will we have the courage to step out in faith?” And so they did.

To the eternal credit of the beleaguered Hebrew people, they swallowed their fear, lifted their feet and walked right into the middle of the sea. Sure the path was there, but the text says the water made a huge wall on their right and on their left. With every step you know it must have taken courage and faith like they’d never before, one step in front of the other, each step a signal that faith and hope were bigger than the fear holding them back. Step, step, step, one after the other, biting their lips to contain their cries of terror, they walked . . . right through the middle of the sea.

The folks in Hollywood are not the only ones to see the power of this story. Rabbis have been filling in the gaps in the Hebrew text for centuries—it’s called Midrash. Think of it like tradition surrounding the story. There is a Midrash tale about this story that suggests the waters did not part with one sweep of Moses’ hand, but the winds didn’t begin to blow the waters apart until the people started wading in. Water in front of them, the army behind, God’s invitation to move into their future and when they tied up their robes, took off their sandals and waded hip deep into the water of their fears it was then, that the waves picked up and the water receded and the path emerged.

There’s no illusion that this kind of faithful living is easy. We tell this story of the Hebrew people to illustrate with more drama than we’d ever want to experience in our own lives, that a life of faithfully following God can be paralyzingly terrifying. But in the hardest moments of our lives there are decisions that need to be made, decisions about whether or not we will lift our feet and take the next step, even though we have no idea what’s ahead, or we’re scared beyond belief or both. The letter to the Hebrews says that this is the essence of faith: the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things unseen. We trust in God to guide us, and God expects us to believe with our feet to take the next step into the fear and move into the promise of everything our lives can be.

Terrifying, for sure. But look at verses 19 and 20. The angel of the Lord, who had been out in front leading the people, moved to the back of the crowd. The angel of the Lord came between the Hebrew people and the army of Egypt. The angel of the Lord made a buffer for them. a pillar of cloud went out ahead of them, leading them forward. The text describes this as the all-encompassing presence of God on every side surrounding the people with protection and guidance once they had the courage to take that first step.

And so it is with us. God makes a way; God asks us to act in faith; and God is with us. God is with us. The Hebrew people felt it more tangibly than ever before that day; can you imagine the stories they told their children and grandchildren? And we can feel it, too. When we step out in faith, facing our fear we will be able to recount the miraculous presence of God, too. God is with us, behind and before, protecting and leading us right through the middle of the scariest parts of human living. And, then, at the end? They couldn’t believe it. They looked out over the huge expanse of water, Pharaoh’s massive army destroyed and everything they loved safe and dry on the other side of slavery, and they could not believe it.

It was true; God is faithful. But it took their fear-filled steps into the middle of the sea, they had to get their feet wet to see the true power of God; their participation in the miraculous deliverance of God, for God’s promise and possibility to unfold in their lives.

Today’s story invites you to roll up our pant legs and take that first step into the water of whatever it is you fear the most. God is before you; God is behind you; God has made a way for you. Now, you’ve got to take the first step, wade into the water, get your feet wet and believe in the power of God to see you through the works He is calling you to.

Today in closing I want you to notice the words of our Lord spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 41:13. *For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear; I will help you. Isaiah 41:13 NIV* Which can be interpreted as it is in The Message; *That's right. Because I, your GOD, have a firm grip on you and I'm not letting go. I'm telling you, 'Don't panic. I'm right here to help you.' Isaiah 41:13 MSG*. There are so many things about the future that we don’t know or seem to understand.