

I do want to talk with you today about these verses we heard from the fourteenth chapter of the Book of Exodus. But before we get there, I want us to step back and take a wider-angled view, and specifically I want us to notice how this reading we heard today of this great triumph and miracle at the Red Sea is framed by bookends of complaining.

The eighteen verses immediately preceding today's reading are about coming to grips with the point of no-return. The Israelites have fled from Egypt and they now have the Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh's army behind them. They are between a rock and a hard place and obviously they are scared to death; you don't need to be a history professor to know what happens to escaped slaves if they get caught. In that moment of desperation, with the anxiety level high, the finger-pointing begins. It *has* to be someone's fault, and whether or not it is fair, Moses becomes the primary target. "Why did you bring us out here to die?" they say. "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt? We told you this would happen, why didn't you leave us alone to serve the Egyptians? Slavery is, like, *way* better than being dead!"

Amazingly, Moses doesn't get defensive or go on the attack. Instead he basically tells them that they have nothing to fear but fear itself. "Do not be afraid; stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. The Lord is going to work this out; so just chill." (Exodus 14:13-14) Now you've heard the story already and today probably wasn't the first time, either. We have the distinct advantage of knowing that it is all going to work out. But pause for just a moment to consider that they didn't know that. And ask yourself whether or not you would be able to "just chill" feeling trapped as an escaped slave, with the world's most powerful army behind you and the sea in front of you.

So on the other end of this passage, right after this great miracle when they do cross to safety, they sing that little canticle we sang today. Then they bring out the tambourines and they do a little liturgical dance. God is great; God is amazing; thanks be to God we've been saved. Praise the Lord!

And then they look up. And now the waters of the Red Sea are behind them, and the Sinai Desert is in front of them—a wilderness where they are about to spend the next forty years. Of course they don't know that part yet either. But it probably does dawn on them finally that the move from slavery to freedom is not over, but has only just begun—and that it will be a long and arduous journey. So once again, try to imagine yourself in their shoes: feeling scared, hot, tired, hungry, thirsty and cranky. And so the complaining and blaming and arguing all start up again.

Now we'll explore that text in chapter sixteen next weekend. But for today let it simply suffice to say that I don't think we get the full impact of what this fourteenth chapter of Exodus is about if we don't remember how scared they really must have been both before and after that crossing. In Israel's memory, as parents told their children and those children grew up and told their children and grandchildren what happened that day, the message of this text is really quite profound and quite clear: God was with us. We simply would not and could not have made it without God. We made it because God had a plan for us, and because God cared about our plight, and because God keeps God's promises. Sandwiched as that message is between the realities of what fear can do to us, I think that is good news.

These people survive and begin that journey from slavery to freedom because God can do infinitely more than they can ask or imagine. So this story is about God, the great liberator who has taken the side of this band of slaves in search of a better life. God is working things out. It is also worth noting, though, that as wonderful as this moment is, the narrator is pretty realistic that the journey from slavery to freedom is one that is wrought with danger and that it is a journey that will take decades not minutes. There is no such thing as instant freedom. This is only the beginning of that long journey, so stay tuned...there is much more to come this fall as the Exodus narrative continues to unfold.

For today I just want to add this: while this reading today is clearly about God, sandwiched as it is between those two passages about fear, it also suggests something of what is required of God's people in tough times. The text says that Moses stretched his hand out over the sea, and *the Lord* drove the sea back. Moses has no super-hero powers; he is merely God's agent. Whatever he is able to do is because of God working through him. *But Moses does have to trust that when he stretches his hand out, he won't end up looking like a fool.* Think about it: what if nothing happens? Before he can stretch out his arm, before he can tell everyone else to "just chill"—he has to believe it. He has to be able to imagine freedom. He has to trust God. So he stretches his arm out, hoping that that whole thing at the burning bush wasn't just a dream, hoping he doesn't look like a fool—or worse still, like a *dead* fool.

I love Jewish interpretation of Scripture because there is a built-in resistance to settling the story into one simple meaning. *Midrash* is about reading the story in ways that generate new stories and new questions. So somebody says, "there we were and the waters parted..." And the rabbis say, "that reminds me of a story..."

There are two midrashes on this story that I find particularly compelling. One story the rabbis tell is that while the Israelites are doing all their singing and dancing and playing of tambourines that God is weeping. When the angel asks God why, God says: "because the Egyptians are my children too." God is liberator—make no mistake about that. God takes on injustice. But there are nevertheless real costs to freedom, as every soldier knows. People die when injustice is confronted. So God cannot join the singing and dancing in the midst of all that carnage. For Israel this is a great day, a day of celebration: God rescued them from slavery and they are on the road to freedom. And let's be clear: Pharaoh's government *was* oppressive, and the Egyptians really did have this coming. But that doesn't necessarily mean that God is ready to sing and dance when those chariots are tossed into the sea.

The other story I love about this event at the Red Sea says that the waters didn't immediately part when Moses lifted up his staff, but only after the first Israelite steps out and puts her foot into the water. I like that because it adds another dimension to this story: insisting that Moses' trust in God isn't enough. What it does, though, is inspire the trust of others and *together* they take a leap of faith and put their trust in God. The leader can inspire hope but true freedom is a community event, not hero worship.

Whatever you make of these two midrashic stories, the larger point of today's reading is clear and it's a truth reiterated again and again in both Testaments: fear paralyzes us, fear leads to blame, fear leads to death. The way forward in such moments of danger is to remember to breathe. That is why Moses says: "don't be afraid; stand firm...keep still." Let go, and let God. *Just chill!*

*This is timeless advice.* While it is always wise to prepare for the worst and hope for the best (to do otherwise may well be a form of denial) it is never helpful to panic. Fear can paralyze us and it makes things worse. And if we only prepare for the worst and forget to hope, we will find ourselves traveling down the road to despair very quickly. So I think that Jesus is a kind of second-Moses when he tells his disciples to “consider the lilies of the field.” He is saying, I think, “don’t be afraid...stand firm...keep still.” *Just chill!* I think the “Serenity Prayer” of Reinhold Niebuhr stands in this same great wisdom tradition.

Fear and the discipleship simply don’t go together. Faith casts out fear; *love* casts out fear. And we will never move from slavery to freedom if we let our fears win out over our faith. Breathe in and breathe out. Do not be afraid. Stand firm. Keep still. Let go and let God! *Just chill!*

Now I already know what some of you are going to say to me at the door. This seems too passive. We are *Americans* after all. We can *fix* anything. I’m sure some of you have seen that bumper sticker that says, “God is coming: look busy!?” We think our busy-ness impresses God, and maybe we even think it makes us look like we are in control. “Letting go” is not perceived by most of us as a strength because it sounds too passive. It sounds a bit like we are shirking our responsibility. And maybe sometimes that does happen: maybe sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of problems of our own making. We were not proactive enough and we should have seen it coming. But that’s not the point in *this* text. We may like to think we are in control but the truth is that there is much about our lives that is simply beyond our control. This text is about whether we can find the wisdom to let go and trust God. This text is about true serenity.

Something happens to our brains when we are anxious and fearful: the normal functions that lead us to clear thinking get short-circuited. We start thinking like reptiles, and if you haven’t noticed lately, reptiles aren’t very smart. The best we can do when we are scared is to fight or flee. So what I am saying is simply this: in those moments when the options are panic or trust, we can work at choosing trust. To do so sometimes requires an act of tremendous courage. It may sound passive, but in fact it re-connects us to our creativity, to the divine source of our being and to one another. When we stop and breathe in and breathe out, or take a sabbatical, or a Sabbath day, or consider the lilies of the field or plant vinca with a parish family we give ourselves a chance to pause and consider, and we can find within ourselves the alternative to fear, which is faith. “*Stand firm and keep still,*” Moses tells people who have the Egyptian army coming at them full force and no place to hide. *Just chill!*

But when we stop like that, it gives us a chance to remember that we are not reptiles. But we aren’t God either; that job is taken. And while there is much we can do, the fact remains that there are still some things—*many* things—that are simply beyond our control. And while that is in itself initially scary, it is also quite liberating—and I choose that word with great care. When we are feeling out of control, our first instinct may well be to do *something*, to do anything. But what if the right approach is simply to acknowledge our dependence on God and our interdependence with one another, rather than pretending we are on our own and have to fix it? In acknowledging our humanity—our finitude: well, perhaps that is the first step required on the long journey from slavery to freedom.