

A Way Where There Is No Way

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
September 13, 2020

- Exodus 14:19-31 (Common English Bible)¹⁹ The angel of God, who had been in front of the army of Israel, moved and went to the rear. The pillar of cloud also moved until it was ²⁰ between the Egyptians and the Israelites. The cloud made it dark for the Egyptians, but gave light to the people of Israel, and so the armies could not come near each other all night.
²¹ Moses held out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind. It blew all night and turned the sea into dry land. The water was divided, ²² and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with walls of water on both sides. ²³ The Egyptians pursued them and went after them into the sea with all their horses, chariots, and drivers. ²⁴ Just before dawn the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw them into a panic. ²⁵ He made the wheels of their chariots get stuck, so that they moved with great difficulty. The Egyptians said, "The Lord is fighting for the Israelites against us. Let's get out of here!"
²⁶ The Lord said to Moses, "Hold out your hand over the sea, and the water will come back over the Egyptians and their chariots and drivers." ²⁷ So Moses held out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the water returned to its normal level. The Egyptians tried to escape from the water, but the Lord threw them into the sea. ²⁸ The water returned and covered the chariots, the drivers, and all the Egyptian army that had followed the Israelites into the sea; not one of them was left. ²⁹ But the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground, with walls of water on both sides.
³⁰ On that day the Lord saved the people of Israel from the Egyptians, and the Israelites saw them lying dead on the seashore. ³¹ When the Israelites saw the great power with which the Lord had defeated the Egyptians, they stood in awe of the Lord; and they had faith in the Lord and in his servant Moses.
- Matthew 28:5-7 Good News Translation⁵ The angel spoke to the women. "You must not be afraid," he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has been raised, just as he said. Come here and see the place where he was lying. ⁷ Go quickly now, and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from death, and now he is going to Galilee ahead of you; there you will see him!' Remember what I have told you."

What a powerful mental image is created by this week's episode of the story of Moses – when God empowers Moses to be able to part the waters. Surely you've seen this episode created with dramatic cinematic visual effects: a body of water defies nature's laws of gravity. As if by invisible walls the water withdraws to create a corridor for the Israelites to pass through as if on dry ground.

- Perhaps you have vivid memories of the scene of the animated film from the 1990s "The Prince of Egypt."
- Or maybe the version you're most familiar with is Cecil B. DeMille's blockbuster from 1956 "The Ten Commandments" starring Charlton Heston.
- Or maybe you recall the scene in the 2003 comedy called "Bruce Almighty" in which Jim Carry's character is temporarily bestowed with godly powers. Testing his powers while seated in a diner, he "goes Moses" on a bowl of tomato soup, raising his hands to cause the soup to move to opposite sides of the bowl.

The story as told in the Bible is absolutely supernatural – it is above and beyond the laws of nature. We want to ask, "How is it possible?" Did God reach beyond the

laws of nature to make it happen? Can we apply science and reason to explain the phenomenon?

A good place to start with this story is with the location where the miracle occurred. Tradition says the body of water that separated was the Red Sea, but the Red Sea is not in the right place to have been involved in the Israelites' escape from where they lived in Egypt. The Hebrew words usually translated as "Red Sea" actually mean "Sea of Reeds" ... and the Red Sea doesn't support the growth of reeds.

A "Sea of Reeds" sounds more like a lagoon or marsh. Until the building of the Suez Canal in the 1860s there was a reedy marsh in the right location for the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt to the Sinai Peninsula. If this former Sea of Reeds was the location, is it possible for a natural wind to have blown so strongly and steadily that it could have created a path through the marshland for the people to cross through to dry land on the other side? Yes, scientists say that it's possible.

But is "how" it happened what's most important about this story? No.

Recall the closing verse of this biblical drama. It announces the effect that this experience had on the collection of Israelite refugees escaping Egyptian enslavement. Verse 31 declares, "When the Israelites saw the great power with which the Lord had defeated the Egyptians, they stood in awe of the Lord; and they had faith in the Lord and in his servant Moses."

The people of Israel came to have faith in the Lord. Why? Because God made a way for them where there was no way. They had faced the chaos of waters before them and the vengeance of pursuing armies behind them. Then God enabled Moses to direct the people through waters that parted before them. God led them to safety, leading them to the next step on what would become a long, challenging pilgrimage – literally a pilgrimage of faith.

Our faith is built upon such a deliverance, too. We hear it in what amounts to an epilogue to the gospel accounts of the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. One would imagine that when the gospel story presents the crucifixion of the man from Nazareth, that that's the end. As the Apostles' Creed summarizes it, "he was crucified, died and was buried." Graves have one-way traffic patterns: "in" only.

But our God is a God who makes a way where there is no way. That's what astonished the women who went early on what would become Easter morning to look at the tomb of their teacher and friend. There they encountered a messenger of God telling them that the one who was dead is now alive. The tomb was empty. Death was certain but it was not the final word. Ours is a God of eternal life. God makes a way where there seems to be no way.

There's a popular Christian song that's built on a chorus declaring:

God will make a way
Where there seems to be no way
He works in ways we cannot see
He will make a way for me¹

¹ "God Will Make a Way." Words & music by Don Moen, © 1990 Hosanna Music c/o Integrity Music at <https://www.musicnotes.com/sheetmusic/mtd.asp?ppn=MN0047477> accessed 9/8/2020

That is our reason for hope in this life. Our reality is that each of us encounters those scary, overwhelming moments in our lives when we don't know how we'll be able to go forward.

- Employment that we thought was unshakable suddenly goes away. How will I pay the bills? Who am I without the work I was known for?
- The anxiety about the upcoming election has us tied up in knots, worried about how our nation will find the way forward.
- A scary diagnosis comes to us out of the blue. What will treatment be like? Will it succeed? How will I manage everything else?
- The grief of loss overwhelms because of the death of a spouse or child, parent or partner or friend – and yes, sometimes a beloved pet. The long history we enjoyed, the dreams of what should have been ahead – all that seems to evaporate in an instant.

But the good news of the gospel – news with roots we discovered in the Old Testament – the good news is that in our lives God makes a way where there is no way. We hear that message expressed frequently in various ways throughout the Bible.

- God spoke to Jeremiah, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”² God will make a way.
- Isaiah heard the word of the Lord say to him, “Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now! I will make a road through the wilderness and give you streams of water there.”³ God will make a way.
- And Paul, in Romans Chapter 8, “In view of all this, what can we say? If God is for us, who can be against us?”⁴ God will make a way.

We don't always know the answer. At a particular point in time we might not be able to see the way forward. But like the Israelites as they gathered themselves on the far shore of the waters, we have faith in God because we have beheld God's awesomeness: we are in awe of God's power, in awe of God's constant care, in awe of God's commitment to make a way when we can't see the way.

[sermons: se20200913; © 2020 Jon M. Fancher]

² Jeremiah 29:11 New Revised Standard Version

³ Isaiah 43:19 Today's English Version

⁴ Romans 8:31 Today's English Version