

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”

Exodus 14:19-31

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most dramatic stories in the Old Testament. It was the theme of one of the most popular movies produced in the 20th century, “The Ten Commandments,” starring Charlton Heston, Anne Baxter and Yule Brynner. This 1956 classic is still aired on television several times each year, especially in the spring during Passover. Let me share some of the details of the Exodus described in our text.

In these verses, the Israelites find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They are standing on the edge of the Red Sea, but hear the sounds of Pharaoh’s army fast approaching.

What are the Israelites doing in Egypt, and how long have they been there? Four hundred thirty years earlier, the Hebrew people migrated to Egypt during a famine. They were welcomed with open arms by Pharaoh and the Egyptians because Joseph, Jacob’s son, lived there and had become one of Pharaoh’s most trusted advisors and administrators.

As time passed, though, Pharaoh died and the new king of Egypt had nothing to do with Joseph. Previous privileges granted to Jacob’s family were revoked, and they were turned into slaves.

While the new king was happy to have cheap labor, he grew increasingly concerned about the growing number of Israelites. The king lived in constant fear of the Hebrew people aligning with one of Egypt’s enemies to overthrow him.

As a result, Pharaoh increased the Israelites’ work load to an unrealistic level. His goal was to make them too tired to even think about revolting.

The straw that broke the camel’s back actually was straw. Pharaoh instructed his foremen to discontinue supplying the straw needed for making bricks. The Israelites were to secure their own straw while at the same time making the same number of bricks each day. If they did not meet their quota, they were beaten.

Moses knew his people were at the breaking point and appealed to God for help. God heard his request and helped the Israelites leave Egypt to begin a new life.

Ten plagues were thrust upon the Egyptians, which finally convinced Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt. Today's text picks up this journey somewhere near the edge of the Red Sea.

All seems to have gone well the first few days of this epic journey to freedom, but that quickly changed when the Israelites heard the sounds of Pharaoh's army approaching. It appears Pharaoh changed his mind after thinking about the cheap labor he would be losing, and he sent his army to bring the Israelites back to Egypt. In Pharaoh's mind, this would not be a difficult task since the Israelites would be stalled on the western edge of the Red Sea.

According to our text, something happened which caught Pharaoh by surprise. The water of the Red Sea parted, allowing the Israelites to cross safely to the other side so they could continue their freedom march. When Pharaoh's army chased them, however, the water flowed again, drowning Pharaoh's army.

The Israelites were safe, at least for the time being. They could continue their journey of faith toward freedom.

How does this story speak to us today? I must be candid with you and tell you I have conflicting emotions. I rejoice when I read about the liberation of the Hebrew people from oppression. At all times and places, freedom from oppression is to be celebrated.

On the other hand, I grieve over the loss of so many Egyptians in the process. The loss of life for any reason is painful, especially when the person dies a violent death. We are all God's children, and death by violence for any reason is never to be celebrated. Every measure to prevent it should be taken.

Perhaps we can talk about these conflicting emotions Wednesday evening in Prayer Meeting. For now, however, I want to focus upon one of the most powerful lessons I glean from this story.

This passage teaches valuable lessons about making changes, especially the need to leave a bad situation in pursuit of a better life. Change is never easy. Anytime a person decides

to leave bondage, he or she will face resistance from **without** and **within**. Be prepared for this resistance and learn how to deal with it.

Are you in a bad place today from which you need to be liberated? Are you in an abusive relationship or struggling with a crippling addiction to drugs, alcohol, gambling, pornography, ego or possessions? Are you running with the wrong crowd and headed down some dangerous roads? Are you in bondage to a faulty way of thinking that is contributing to low self-esteem, inferiority or depression? Are you in an unhealthy religious environment that does not lift you up and empower you to achieve your potential, but holds you down and tells you what you cannot do? Are you experiencing burnout on your job, or are you trapped in the prison of poverty?

Must you stay where you are forever? Is change possible, and if so, how can you head in a new direction?

Our text bears testimony to the fact change is possible, even radical change. None of us has to stay in a bad place, and **the first step to leaving bondage is to admit where you are**. Quit living in denial. Be honest about what is going on around you, and its impact upon you.

Talk to someone about your situation and get their advice and support. If you could have left your present circumstances by yourself, I suspect you already would have.

Leaving your Egypt will require human and divine help, just as it did for the Israelites. This is one journey you cannot make alone. You need family, friends and faith, just as the Hebrew people did.

Most of all, today's text teaches us when you leave a place of bondage in pursuit of a new and better life, more than likely two things will happen. People from your old life will come and try to drag you back, and demons inside you will do their best to convince you that you do not have what it takes to pull this off. Both of these happened to the Israelites. Pharaoh's soldiers came to retrieve them, and fear of the future threatened to paralyze them.

Why would people from your old life try to get you to return? Perhaps they are dependent upon you or want to control you. They could be jealous because you are doing something constructive with your life and want to undermine your efforts. There is no shortage of reasons why others try to drag you back to hell, but you can be sure it is not for your good.

Is this happening to you now? Are people from a previous life trying to pull you back? How well are you handling their pressure?

The resistance to pursuing a new and better life does not come just from those around you. Demons inside you will do their best to convince you that you will not succeed. Fear, uncertainty, doubt, insecurity, inferiority, despair, cynicism, hopelessness and even complacency will attack you, and all of us know how powerful and persuasive they are.

What do you do when this happens? You must make the decision to go forward and not look back or go back and not look forward. You cannot ride the fence; you must decide.

If you choose to move forward to pursue a better life, it will require a strong commitment on your part. You must break free from those who want to pull you back and refuse to listen to the negative voices that attack you from within.

When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea that day, they did more than move from one shore to another. They moved to a new level of commitment to the God who led them on this freedom march. They decided to trust God more than Pharaoh and listen to Moses more than their fears. This was a life-changing decision for them. It can be for us, too, when we stand on a similar shore and face a comparable choice.

Are you there now? Have you started on your freedom march and come to a point where you are between a rock and a hard place? Are you trying to decide between returning to Egypt and crossing that river to a new and better life? Which will you choose?

Do you want to move forward and continue your journey? How do you do it when you are facing so many intimidating challenges? I believe you must have the help your family, friends and faith offer. All three can help you move to a new and better life. In them you will find wisdom, courage, strength, confidence, determination and patience.

Never forget the Israelites' journey was a communal one, too. They did not travel alone. They needed support and encouragement from family, friends and God, and they knew it. No doubt this was one reason they survived and thrived.

On what shore do you stand today? What dreams for a new and better life beckon you? Who or what is trying to pull you back from your journey toward wholeness? What are the biggest challenges you face? Whose help do you need?

On behalf of our supportive and encouraging church, I offer you a circle of friends who will walk with you and pray for you. Come and join us on this faith journey.