

From Known to Unknown

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Exodus 14:10-14, 19-29 (NRSVUE)

¹⁰As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. ¹¹They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” ¹³But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

¹⁹The 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. ²⁰It 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.

²¹Then 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. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At the morning watch the LORD, in the pillar of fire and cloud, looked down on the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into a panic. ²⁵He 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.”

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

The Israelites have begun their wilderness journey. They will be in the wilderness for a very long time before they reach the Promised Land. But now they face a terrible threat. They are trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. How did they come to be in this predicament?

For many generations, the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. They originally came to be in Egypt when the family of Joseph went there during a famine. They had been welcomed and treated as honored guests. But as their numbers grew, they became both a threat to the established order of Egypt and a source of free labor. Yet God saw their suffering and called Moses as a messenger to confront Pharaoh and lead the people to freedom.

Pharaoh, of course, resisted Moses’s call to set the Israelites free. In response to Pharaoh’s obstinance, God subjected Egypt to a series of plagues to force his hand. After the

final plague killed the firstborn of every Egyptian household, Pharaoh relented and let the people go. God led them by an unexpected route, bypassing the warriors of Philistia and the potential of war before they were strong enough to fight back. But Pharaoh, realizing how much more difficult life would be without tens of thousands of people providing free labor, changed his mind and set off with a massive armed force in pursuit of the Israelites. They caught up with the Israelites as they were camped along the shore of the Red Sea.

The Israelites were terrified. Of course they were. Wouldn't we be afraid if we were there? They did not know if or how God would deliver them. What they did know was that they were trapped, unable to advance or to retreat, and that one of the most advanced armies in the world was bearing down on them, intent on killing them or forcing them into slavery again.

When they saw the disaster about to occur, they cried out to Moses, "Why did you lead us out of Egypt just so we could be killed in the wilderness? What have you done to us? We should never have followed you. Better off alive in slavery than free but dead."

Their fear is understandable, and their logic makes sense. Better to live than to die. Yet so many of the resistance stories that have shaped our identity throughout history have used just the opposite reasoning. The American Revolution. Slaves in the antebellum South. Uprisings by indigenous people. People who held firm to the conviction, "I would rather die free than live as a slave." Today, we would point to examples in Ukraine, Iran, and Gaza.

But people who are trapped in abusive situations are often more afraid of change than they are of their abusers. Trapped in a cycle of violence, confrontation, and empty apologies, victims may only see the life they have known. They may be fearful of being alone or unwanted if they leave. So they stay, accepting abuse rather than risk going it alone.

Those who struggle with mental or emotional health needs also sometimes choose to remain where they are rather than taking their chances with change. They may have a desire to heal, but also fear a loss of their identity. Having to face life on their own without a diagnosis or with increased expectations may be overwhelming. Choosing to hope also brings with it a risk that those hopes will be disappointed. Most often, it isn't change that people fear, but loss.

The Israelites' complaint to Moses is understandable. In Egypt, they were held captive, forced to do backbreaking work for long hours, survived on meager provisions, and had little or no autonomy. But at least there they knew what to expect. They weren't thriving, but they were surviving. Now here they were, trapped and facing what looked like certain death; if they survived, they would serve overlords who would be even harsher than they had been before.

Then Moses speaks. He does not panic. He maintains a steady, clear-headed presence. He gives four specific instructions:

Do not be afraid. This is a common theme throughout scripture. "Do not be afraid" or some variation of that statement appears more than 175 times in the Bible, most often in situations that are *clearly* frightening. But when we are afraid, we are not at our best. We do not think clearly. We forget things that we have learned. We are reactive, not responsive. Moses conveys a posture of calmness; his words and his presence give the people courage.

Stand firm. Their instinct is to run, to try to escape. But there is nowhere to go. If they panic, it will create chaos, which will make it impossible for Moses to lead them where God wants them to go. If they scatter, the chariots will run them down. Their best chance is to hold their ground, to stick together.

See the deliverance God is about to accomplish for you. God had called them out of Egypt. God set them free from bondage. God promised them a land of their own and a future filled with promise. But all they can see is a dead end and an advancing army they cannot defeat. Moses tells them to look not at what is behind them, but the vision God has for them.

Be still. This is the hardest one, because it feels so counterintuitive. But there is nothing they can do to save themselves. Only God can save them. What is called for now is not bravado, but faith. Later, the psalmist would write, “Be still and know that I am God.” Nowhere is that guidance more needed than on the banks of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army in pursuit.

You know the rest. God does what God always does – God makes a way out of no way. God’s presence stands between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Moses stretches out his hand and God parts the water. The Israelites cross over. But when the Egyptian army tries to follow, the waters return and wash over them. God’s people are saved. They have made it out of Egypt, but their journey has just begun.

We are on a journey this Lent, just like in life. Journeys take us from the known to the unknown. You might be experiencing changes in your family: kids growing older, children getting married, having children or grandchildren, a death of a loved one, the loss of a generation and passing the mantle to the next. You might experience changes in your work: a new role, a new employer, new pressures, or retirement. You might experience changes in your health: changes in your body or your ability to do what you once did, an unexpected diagnosis, an uncertain path of treatment, or just the realities of aging. You might experience changes in your environment: literal environmental changes from storm damage or climate change, relocating or downsizing your home, or coming to terms with no longer being able to stay in the house that you have known and that holds so many memories. You might experience changes in your social or economic reality: political turmoil that keeps us always on edge, unplanned changes to your income or your expenses, loss of friends in any of the ways that can happen.

We know the present reality; what comes next is uncertain. Not knowing can be a source of anxiety, doubt, or fear. But change also brings a chance to grow, to learn, to hope. A boat in the harbor is safe, but a boat that stays in harbor doesn’t do what boats are made to do.

Moses’s guidance to the Israelites is good counsel to us today. The reason these stories have been handed down is not simply to teach us about the past, but to instruct us for the present. The stories of God’s faithfulness remind us that the God who was our help in ages past is still our hope for years to come. So, *don’t be afraid*. No matter what we face, we need not fear; God can be trusted. *Stand firm*...in your identity, in faith, in hope. *Look what God is doing*. God can do things we can’t. We miss God’s movement if we don’t make an intentional effort to keep watch. Miracles happen every day. And if you want to know where God is, look for the people who help others in need; that’s where you’ll find God. Finally, *be still*. Don’t be reactive. You don’t have to have an answer to everything. God is God. We are not. There is wisdom in waiting on God, waiting for clarity, then going where God calls us to go.

Life is a journey. We are constantly moving from the known to the unknown. Let each moment be an invitation to grow in trust that God will lead us – from fear to faith to freedom. May it be so. Amen.



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