

Sermon – August 22, 2021
“Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Exodus 14:10-31

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill us gathered here and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! I wanted to take a few moments before we look at our scripture this morning and focus our attention on a few of the events in the life of our church that have occurred this past week. Some excitement has been generated with improvements in the grounds here at Fairfields as Fred and Jerry teamed up to remodel the bridge to the activities building. It looks great. We also now will have light in the parking lot this fall as the oak tree has been trimmed back to let the light shine into the parking lot. This will be greatly appreciated by all who leave the building after late night meetings. Our congregation has enabled a ramp to be built in the coming week at a home in Horsehead, and you have supported rent payment for two families in need in our community. We had another opportunity to work at Lewisetta on Saturday where the clean up of tree damage is drawing to an end. God is at work in this community in many ways through the body of Christ found in this congregation.

Let me provide some background for this morning's scripture. The first Passover has occurred in Egypt and the firstborn of Egypt are dead. Israel has gone out from the midst of Egypt in response to Pharaoh's command and is now being led by God through a column of fire by night and a cloud by day into the wilderness to meet with God. After three days of being led by God, Israel has not arrived in the land of Philistia as would be expected but is in the wilderness of Egypt beside the sea. And after the third day of their journeying in the wilderness, Pharaoh has been told that Israel is not coming back to Egypt, as Pharaoh may have thought they would return after three days. When Pharaoh hears this news, he replies, "They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them." Pharaoh then has a change of heart from letting Israel go to worship God to going and getting them back to serve him and Egypt. Pharaoh calls for all of Egypt's chariots and horses as well as his entire army and sets out with speed to where the people of Israel are camped beside the sea. Given this large number of fighting personnel and the haste with which they pursue Israel, it could be that Pharaoh's latest heart change is not just to bring back Israel but to seek vengeance on them for the death of the first born of Egypt. Egypt and Pharaoh, in spite of the ten plagues they have experienced, still do not know the LORD.

Israel is not wandering aimlessly in the wilderness as Pharaoh assesses, but is following God's guidance given through the presence of a cloud by day and a column of fire by night. While their journey over these three days may look to Pharaoh as aimless wandering, God has been directing their path that He might claim glory over Pharaoh. It is difficult for us to identify the exact location where Israel has been led, but we do understand that they are beside the sea with a mountain on one side and a possible Egyptian outpost on the other. The only path in or out is by the road they have come to the sea. If the road they followed into this area is blocked, they will be trapped against a sea they have no means to cross. It is from this place of stopping by the sea that the people of Israel look back and see the forces of Egypt closing off their escape route. I am not sure we can fully grasp the fear that fills their hearts as they see the rapidly advancing chariot forces from Egypt coming down the valley that is their only way out of this place. We have been watching the people of Afghanistan demonstrate similar fear as the forces of the Taliban take over their country. This is the fear that causes a mother and father to hand their infant child to a United States soldier that the child might escape the vengeance of the Taliban. When the people of Israel see Pharaoh coming, they fear they will be slaughtered by Egypt's

forces and they begin to respond in fear, blaming Moses for their situation and yearning for the good old days of slavery in Egypt. They are filled with fear and see no way to escape as all exits are blocked except for going up. And it is from above their deliverance will come. God has brought them to this place and has brought Pharaoh here as well so that God might have glory over Egypt. God's plan is for Pharaoh to at last know that the God of Israel is the one true God. It is at this point Israel cries to God. God hears their cry again. Israel is not able to trust God and instead lets their fear overcome their hope. They do not yet understand that it is God who has brought them to this situation for His purposes and, in spite of Israel's limited faith, God will again act on their behalf to bring salvation.

God first moves the symbol of his presence, the column of fire and cloud, from leading Israel to being a rear guard for them, separating them from the Egyptians and halting Egypt's rapid advance. The column of fire brings light to the people of Israel trapped against the sea and it brings darkness, perhaps like the felt darkness of the ninth plague, to the Egyptians.

God then tells Israel through Moses, "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. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." Notice God's first words to Israel through Moses, "Do not be afraid!" These are the words so often given to people who witness an appearance of God or one of His messengers. They are the words that release people from fear and allow them to interact and react to God's words. In this case, "Do not fear" assures Israel they do not have to fear this mighty army of Egypt that is seeking to fall upon them. These words will be heard among Israel many times as they journey with God to and then settle in the promised land. These are also the words spoken to shepherds on a hill outside of Bethlehem as they watched over their flocks. These are the words that we long for in the midst of our own struggles, words that let us know God is with us and at work on our behalf. Israel need not be afraid of this mighty force, and we also need not be afraid in the midst of our struggles as God is with us, a very present help in our time of need.

God then tells Israel to "stand firm." Israel is not to run from Egypt. They are not to fight and they are not to pick up armaments in preparation for a military encounter with Egypt. Instead, they are to stand firm to witness the salvation that God will bring for them out of what appears to Israel as a hopeless situation.

Israel is also to “keep still.” This is not God telling Israel to stand in one place in light of the arrival of Egypt’s forces. Nor is it a command for them to passively wait. The “keep still” from God is a command to be quiet and not call out in fear, lament, or grumbling. They are to not speak but listen for God’s direction. God has brought this situation into being for His purposes and He will act on the behalf of Israel.

Let us try to put ourselves in Moses’ place as he hears God’s next command, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground”. Did we catch God’s words? Moses is to stretch out his hand and divide the waters of the sea. This is not a thought that has come to the minds of anyone in Israel nor to Moses. None present has cried out to God to open a way through the sea for their escape. Yet Moses does not question God at this command, but stretches out his hand and God divides the waters. Moses is told by God to send his hand and divide the sea so that Israel may have a way of escape and God may have glory over Egypt. Moses then tells Israel to go into the divided waters and pass through the sea on dry land. Perhaps they look back at the chariots of Egypt and then look at the divided waters and then Israel goes into the divided waters. The sea is divided all night and Israel passes through the waters which are heaped up like walls on their left and right to safety on the other side of the sea. We should not miss the connection in this action to God’s creation of the earth where the dry land is brought out of the chaos of the waters. God’s hand again creates dry land and Israel is reborn as they come out of the waters of the sea. Israel is now out of Egypt and free from Pharaoh and his people to be new creations who follow God. Israel is recreated, but God is not yet done with Pharaoh.

The dawn of a new day comes. Israel is safe on the other side of the sea and Moses has told them they will see this army and chariots of Pharaoh no more. The cloud lifts, darkness gives way to a divided sea and a path that Israel must have taken, and Egypt’s finest military force, the mightiest force in the world, pours into the same dry land passage through the walls of water to finally catch up to Israel. As they attempt to cross through the divided sea, the Egyptians for the first time in all of the plagues and conflict with God, realize God is fighting for Israel and they are not engaged with the people of Israel in conflict. Their chariot wheels will not turn for the mud of the sea bed and the hand of God is against Egypt. They become confused in the midst of the divided waters, and then Moses extends his hand for the second time and the water returns

to the normal level and as it does, it tosses the Egyptians into the sea as they once had Israel toss the sons of Israel into the Nile. The confused Egyptian army actually charges into the collapsing walls of water and are drowned. The people of Israel will only see the dead bodies of this mightiest of armies washed up on the shore of the sea. Egypt is defeated, and God is honored and known by the army of Egypt and all of Egypt as the mighty protector of Israel, God's people.

It is not clear to me if Pharaoh is among those who are tossed into the sea or if he has waited on the far shore for the victorious return of his army. Either way, when the waters of the sea return to normal, Pharaoh finally knows the power of God and the reality of his own weak, limited human nature. If he is in the divide as the water returns, he is powerless before God's hand. If he is safe on the shore, he is a witness to the total destruction of the mightiest army in the world without Israel fighting at all. Either way, Pharaoh now knows the God of the Hebrews. Moses is fearless because he knows the power of God. It is amazing to us to read the scripture account of the plagues and Israel's exodus from Egypt and wonder how Pharaoh and Israel could forget the wonders they have witnessed and still struggle to trust or fear God. Israel is now free from Egypt, having been saved by God to be new creations who are seeking to follow Him through the wilderness and into the promised land.

We might wonder if in the struggles of our lives God will hear our cries and come and make a way for us to pass through our circumstances to safety on a distant shore. We should notice that the Exodus is not for a single person but for a people, the people of God. And as we shall see as we continue our journey through Exodus, this new creation of God's people will struggle to follow God. Moses will not be able to lead them into the promised land but will need Joshua to stand up and lead them into the land flowing with milk and honey. The Exodus points to something more, something else yet to come. It points to Jesus Christ who was sent by God to die for our sins and to open a divide in the sea of sin and death for the church to pass through into a new relationship with God.

When we believe in Jesus and are baptized, it is through the waters of baptism that we emerge as a new creation. As the water of baptism flows over our heads, we are reminded that we are leaving behind a life of sin and death and are being recreated into a new creation in Jesus. We are brought under the leadership of Christ and leave behind the old self that is held captive to sin and death emerging from the waters of our baptism a new creation in Christ. Paul in his letter to the Romans (6:3-4) states this idea as we are baptized into the death of Christ and are buried,

but then are raised into a new life. This is an image that is certainly more vivid in baptism by immersion where we are plunged under the water and then raised up as a new creation in Christ. We are able to see a reminder of burial and raising of a new creation in a physical sense. As Israel came out of bondage in Egypt, the place of death, into the presence of God, so we come out of sin and death through the waters of baptism into the kingdom of God. The significance of Exodus has the same importance today as it has had for over 2000 plus years. The waters through which the church passes have remained divided since the coming of Christ and will remain divided until the end of the age. Exodus happens as the lost come to believe in Jesus Christ as their savior. Exodus happens in a Christian family as children are raised in the fear of the Lord and they come to make the faith they find in their parents their own. Exodus still happens today one life at a time as the people of God so order their lives to respond in love to the lost of the world and disciple them into the kingdom of God. We have heard the words, “do not fear I am with you till the end of the age,” assuring us that God in Christ is for us. We are also to “stand firm” in our faith that Jesus Christ will mediate for us. And we are also to “be still” and to know that Jesus Christ is Lord and goes before us, calling us into the still divided waters of salvation.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, come and guide us into the wilderness that we also may trust you with our lives and dare to pass through the waters that you divided with your death and resurrection. Come, Holy Spirit, and guide us into the world that we might be Christ for those who are lost. Lord, use this church to continue to bring Exodus to the lost in this place, right here, right now. Amen