

Sermon – October 6, 2024
“Lift up your staff and stretch out your hand”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Exodus 14:10-18

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 hearts open to you, and anoint the sharing of your word. Bless those with ears to hear, and through them fan the flames of continuing transformation into Christ's image, and inspire us to fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! “I was glad when they said to me.” “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” Great job. I think we might be ready for a new scripture to learn. Let’s work on a new one. If I say, “The grass withers and the flowers fail,” what would your response be? “but the word of our God endures forever.”

The first Passover has occurred. The blood of a slain lamb has been painted on the doorposts and lintels of God’s people’s homes, and their first born has been passed over and lives, while in every Egyptian household from Pharaoh to the lowest servant, the first born has died. In response, the people of Israel are not just released from slavery, they are hurried out of Egypt, and they take with them gifts of jewels, gold, and clothing. Egypt has not only lost her Hebrew slaves but has been willingly ransacked also. The wealth of Egypt leaves with the Hebrews. God leads Israel into the wilderness to a place by the sea, a small neck that sticks out

into the Red Sea. After three days, Pharaoh is told that the Hebrews are still wandering in the wilderness and are not coming back, as Moses implied they would during the first meeting he had with Pharaoh. At this news, Pharaoh awakes from his confused shock from the death of the first born of Egypt. Again, his heart is hardened, and he sends out all of his chariots and army to engage and bring back the Hebrews. It is as if the warriors are going not only to bring back the Hebrews as slaves but to take vengeance on them for the death of the Egyptian first-born children. Imagine the scene as the chariots of Pharaoh stream out of the cities, driven on by anger and a desire for vengeance, and head into the wilderness to find the Hebrews.

From the place along the sea where God has led the Hebrews with a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day, the Hebrews see the coming of the forces of Pharaoh riding full speed towards them, bent on their destruction and enslavement. The Hebrews on foot would not be able to stand against the greatest army in the world and would quickly fall, being either killed or captured. They cry out to the Lord. They are trapped and defenseless with nowhere to flee or hide. The only place that is open is upward and it is to God they cry for salvation. It looks like the end of their freedom. It looks as if God has brought them out of Egypt to let them be killed or recaptured in the wilderness.

God's response to their cry is not to send a deliverer. Instead, He tells Moses to use what he has already been given. God tells Moses to raise the worthless wooden staff of a shepherd that he holds in his hand and to stretch out his hand over the sea. God has already given what is needed for salvation. Moses has it in his hand. He has faith in his heart, and he obeys the word of God. Moses raises his staff and stretches out his hand. God is present with the Israelites, waiting for them to act so that He might move through their obedience. Moses is God's agent. He has already been given all that is needed for God to work through him to free Israel, the people of God, from the coming chaos of Egypt's army.

When Moses lifts up his staff and stretches out his hand, God begins to act. We as followers of Jesus have this same agency. We have Christ in us, and he is present with us, waiting for us to obey as his Holy Spirit-empowered agents. Think about raising up our hands over our neighborhoods, communities, and country and praying for Jesus to act. Let me challenge us not to be those filled with fear at the unfolding chaos around us in the world, but to stand up, lift up our hands, and cry out to God for the salvation of His people, the lost all around us. Let me challenge us to step out of our homes, church, and all the places we go and stretch out

our hands over those places, praying for God's people and asking Jesus to move in the darkness and chaos that is consuming people in those places.

When Moses raises his staff and stretches out his hand, God is able to move. The cloud and pillar of fire move from in front of the people to behind them to guard the rear and separate Israel from Egypt. In response to Moses' lifted staff and outstretched hand, God moves back the waters of the sea and brings forth dry land. We should see the creational aspect of dry land coming out of the waters as God creates something new. God makes a way to save His people through the waters of the Red Sea. In all of the plagues against Egypt, God uses creation against Egypt, and now God brings forth dry land out of the chaos of the sea for Israel to escape the coming chaos of the army of Egypt, leaving them behind and entering into a new relationship with God.

The Hebrews do not need to have God lead them through the sea; the path forward is clear. They go through the waters of the sea and come out on the other side. When Egypt's army enters this same path, the waters return and destroy the army of Egypt. The Egyptians, whom God's people feared so greatly, are seen no more. God saves His people. God has brought Israel through the waters and into a new life with Him, one that will lead His people to the Promised Land. This is a defining moment for Israel, the people of God. Their God, the only true God, has saved them from enslavement and death by making a way for salvation where there was no way and destroying their enemy, bringing them out of the waters of the sea to begin a new relationship with Him.

Yet the cruelest enemies of humanity remain, sin and death. Just as God acted through Moses' raised staff and outstretched hand to save His people, so also God makes a way for us to be saved from these cruelest of foes. Jesus will be raised up on the cross with his hands stretched out and make a way for our salvation from sin and death. Jesus is God's agent who acts on our behalf to free us from the cruel, eternal bondage of our sins and their consequence, death. Jesus dies in our place and pays the price that we might move through the waters of our baptism, freeing us from the darkest of foes and a chaotic end to instead enter into new life with God in the perfectly ordered splendor of the heavenly city, a place of no more sadness, no more pain, no more sickness, and no more tears. No darkness is there. No sea is there. There is no chaos in the kingdom of God; all is perfectly ordered and filled with the glory of God and the Lamb.

When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are moved through the waters of our baptism into a new life through Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit to resurrected life with God the Father. We each have the opportunity for a personal exodus from the forces of darkness that seek to end our lives in torturous slavery and instead enter into new life with God, because Jesus was lifted up and he spread out his hands, defeating the mightiest of foes, sin and death. Moses lifted up a worthless staff and God worked through his obedience and action to bring salvation for God's people. Jesus was lifted up on a cross, a worthless implement of torture and death, and through Jesus' suffering and death, God opens the way for all of His people to find freedom. As the Israelites needed no one to lead them into the divided sea on the dry land in order to enter into a new relationship with God, so also we are able, through belief in Jesus, to move through the waters of our baptism and into a new and eternal relationship with God.

On the night before Jesus was crucified, he took the common elements of bread and wine and transformed them into a reminder of what he will do as his broken body is lifted up and his blood poured out for us so that our cries for salvation might be answered and we might move through the waters of baptism into new life in Christ. Let us prepare our hearts this morning to remember what Jesus has done for us. Let us come to Jesus' table and join with all of the body of Christ on earth all across the world on this day of World Communion, as we as one body remember that Jesus was lifted up for us and spread his hands out that God could make a way for His people to walk through the waters and see no more the Egyptians and the sin and death we fear, as we emerge out of the waters of faith into new life in Christ.

Pray with me: Lord Jesus, we thank you that you spread out your hands from where you were lifted up on a cross and made a way for God to bring salvation to us. Jesus, hear our cries as we lift up our hands and spread them out, praying over our families, church, community, and nation for salvation for all who are lost in the eternal, deadly chaos of sin and death. Let these we cry out for see the dry land you have made through the waters that leads them into the kingdom of God and step onto the path to eternal life. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus, we lift up our hands and spread them out as we cry out for salvation for your people in this place. Go forth into Jesus' mission. Amen