

## Sermon for September 17, 2017 – “Forging Ahead”

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year A – Text: Exodus 14:10-15:21

### Westwood First Presbyterian Church – Rev. Jeff Colarossi

A little boy came back from Sunday school one morning and his father asked him: “Well, what did you learn?”. The little boy replied: “I learned how the Israelites were held as slaves in Egypt by this guy called Pharaoh.” “Oh?” said the father. “Then what happened?” The little boy went on: “A guy named Moses tried all these special effects on them. It was totally wicked! He turned the river to blood, he covered the Egyptians with frogs, and bugs, and boils. He beat them down with hailstones, and locusts, and scared them with an eclipse of the sun. He killed their cattle and then finally killed their oldest kids.” “And did it work?” his Dad asked. “Well, Pharaoh lets them go after the kids were killed, but then he sent his army after them.” “And then what?” “Well, Moses calls in the Israeli air force – and they strafed the Egyptian tanks and destroyed them. They also gave cover while the engineers lay down this pontoon bridge across the Red Sea. And then the Israelites crossed over without getting their feet wet. But when the Egyptian army got on the pontoon bridge, the air force came back and bombed it away, and the Egyptians drown.” “Is that what your teacher told you?” his father asked. “Well, not exactly. But if I told it the way she did, you wouldn’t believe me!”

So, what is the real story all about? God had called Abraham, the founder of the Israelite nation in about 2,000 BC to go and settle in the land of Canaan. It became known as the Promised Land, we know it now as Israel. Of course, over time as the story goes, the Israelites left the land of Israel as a result of a famine. They went to live in Egypt. There they were eventually enslaved by the Egyptians and were held for 215 years until Moses arrived on the scene. Moses had been given a mandate by God to take the Israelites out of Egypt and bring them back to Canaan. So, Moses went to Pharaoh to ask him to release the Israelites. He told Pharaoh, following God’s instruction, that it was only for three days so they could worship their God out in the wilderness. But, nevertheless, Pharaoh refused. So, God inflicted the Egyptians with 10 plagues, culminating in the death of every Egyptian firstborn. Eventually, after the tenth plague, Pharaoh had had enough. He allowed the Israelites to go. In fact, they couldn’t leave fast enough to suit him. But like all good tyrants, once the Israelites had left Pharaoh had second thoughts. He went after them with his army and threatened to annihilate them. And so, in this morning’s reading, we find the Israelites in something of a dilemma. In front of them was the seemingly impassable Red Sea, behind them were the Egyptians; in those days, the most powerful army on the planet. What were a chosen people to do? God provided a way out of their dilemma, but it needed them to step forward in faith. But instead of walking on water, they were – in many respects – walking through it! And they had to believe that the ground over which they were going to pass over was safe. As the sea rolled back before them they had two choices. They could either

1. Stay where they were and face the Egyptians, risking being either being wiped out or, at best, going back into slavery OR
2. They could forge ahead in faith with God and being saved.

Did you ever wonder how the Israelites felt as they began walking through the parted Red Sea? Did they wonder if the ground was hard enough to walk on? Or did they think they'd sink into the mud? Did they wonder if the sea would really stay back until they got through? Did they wonder, if the sea is rolled up for us will it remain rolled up for the Egyptians? The only way to find out the answer to their questions was **to take the first step.**

Like the story a few weeks ago, where Paul tried to walk on water, that first step, getting out of the boat, is often the most difficult. We talked about keeping our eyes on Jesus, not the waves. The same is true here. Because, if we've walked with the Lord in our daily lives, if we've spent any time at all in God's presence, the less daunting the crossing of our Red Sea becomes. Why? Because the more we get to know God, the more we come to know God's character, the better we'll know how utterly dependable God really is. No matter how wide or dangerous the sea appears to be, no matter how daunting the problem(s) before us seem to be. So maybe we try not looking at the water all around us and trust that God will be God. That God will protect us. That God will fight for us. You know, being a Christian isn't a "one-and-done" thing, it's a lifetime journey. It's a day-by-day, moment-by-moment commitment.

By the way, did you catch what I said earlier about the whole business of three days? At the burning bush God told Moses to go...Go and tell the Israelites that God has heard their sufferings. Tell them God says that I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians. I will bring them up out of Egypt to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, but God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh a different story. Moses is to tell him that: **"The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness so, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God."** This is why, according to a scholarsbi, the Egyptians had only expected the Hebrews to be gone for only three days since that was the length of time Moses had requested for a religious pilgrimage. Only after the three days had passed without the Israelites returning, only then did the Egyptians realize that they were gone for good. There are some scholars, however, that offer an alternate reading. The thinking is that the three-day request has nothing to do with the Egyptian reaction. Instead, the belief is that phrasing the request as a three-day journey was specifically designed to accommodate the children of Israel. The question is, of course, so what? Well, think of it this way...You're a people who've been enslaved for several hundred years. The Israelites there in Egypt had never known freedom. Could they have possibly have imagined anything as sweeping as complete and total freedom? It was hard enough to believe that they'd have 3 days of freedom. Seriously, if you'd lived a certain way all your life, if the last ten or so generations had lived that way, how easy do you think it'd be to make even the slightest change? What if you were asked to make a change? Or try something new, even for a short period? What would you say? How would you react? Just try it for three days, would that even make a difference? At best, maybe a little. I suspect most folks wouldn't even bother. They'd probably say it wouldn't be worth it. So, when the Israelites leave Egypt they don't realize that they're leaving for good. It's only once the Israelites find themselves alone in the wilderness that they can begin to see to the next step and understand that they will be really and truly free. There in the desert they can sing exultant songs to God in celebration of their salvation. There they can begin to look forward to their future in the land promised to them by God. No transformation this dramatic, no change this extensive can happen in a matter of days. It's just human nature!

However, as we well know, the story doesn't end there. While time in the wilderness opens Israelites' future, it cannot erase their Egyptian past. By the second half of our reading the people grow tired of life in the desert. They complain...O boy, do they complain. The Israelites complain over and over and over as they wander for forty years in the desert. In the end, only their children are truly able to leave Egypt behind and make their way to the Promised Land. The take-away here is this, any kind of radical, permanent change either in thinking or perspective is hard. This kind of change is difficult and must evolve gradually, especially in anxious or fearful times. We tend to look for the quick fix. We tend to view all our problems as technical ones. That is, ones that have simple explanations and easy solutions. But, that's not how life is. Especially in churches. The problems we face are much more confusing, much more complex. They did not occur overnight. They began to take root in previous generations. They're confusing, hard to define. They don't present simple solutions. It's a situation in which the Church currently finds itself, in something of a difficult place. I'm talking in terms of both the Church as a whole, and our church. This wilderness is without doubt, a painful place to be. But where there's pain, there's also possibility. Possibility that can, with God's help, provide motivation and direction.

The Israelites can't really consider complete freedom while enslaved in Egypt. The most they can imagine is a three-day furlough. Once in the wilderness, however, something begins to happen. They began to realize their utter dependence on God. Only as their focus turns to God, only as they begin to trust God implicitly, only then does their thinking expand. Only then they can begin to envision a future of complete freedom.

Here's the thing...Like the ancient Israelites, we too will go through times of crisis, times where things get hard. We will have our own Red Sea to cross and, at these times, God will show us the way forward. Putting one foot in front of the other. We might not see the end of the tunnel but God asks us to trust Him as we set out. One step at a time. The question is this, are we prepared to forge ahead? Or will we constantly look back? Will we long to return to the past as the Israelites longed for life back in Egypt? I don't think we can do that. I also don't think anyone can stand on the sidelines and just watch. We must be willing to get into the game. We must be willing to give it our all. Because I believe that following Christ is all about our forging ahead in faith. It's about becoming the people, the church, that God calls us to be. Yes, the wilderness can be a scary place. All of us have, to one extent or another, a fear of the unknown, a fear of what lies ahead. I get that. I imagine that's why so many are so wary of change, resisting it as strongly as they do.

For some the old adage the devil that you know is great than the devil you don't, is true. Maybe things aren't like they used to be in decades' past, but then again, as sociologist Robert Nisbet said, nostalgia is the rust of memory. And I'd remind anyone who's anxious or fearful about the future of our church of something that Moses told the Israelites...**"The Lord will fight for you,"** he said... **"You have only to keep still!"** Have faith, Moses is saying, in the God that has already brought us this far. Fear God more than Pharaoh or whatever might be waiting out in the desert!

By the way, did you know that the Bible uses the word fear at least three hundred times in reference to God? But what do we mean when we say “fear” God? Should we literally be afraid of God? I don’t think so. No, I think that fearing the Lord in biblical terms is less about fearing God’s wrath and more about respecting/acknowledging God’s power/authority. Knowing just who it is that is fighting for us, being in awe of extent of the power being brought to bear and, perhaps more importantly, the love for us that is on display!

The crossing of the Red Sea is a story that transitions a people from fear to awe, from doubt to faith, from cries of despair to shouts of joy and worship. It’s because God’s heard their cries of injustice and delivered them. They now can sing and dance with joy, freed for new life and new purpose. In so many ways the story of the Exodus is our story. For that reason, it bears repeating as often as possible. What is most important is that the God who delivered the Israelites is the God who delivers us! The so-named “Song of the Sea” from our reading says it very well:

**“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously...**

**“Horse and rider, he has thrown into the sea.**

**“The Lord is my strength and my might – he has become my salvation...**

**“This is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.**

**“The Lord is a warrior...**

**“The Lord is his name.**

**“Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?**

**“Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?**

Who God? Who, indeed?

Brothers and sisters, as we forge ahead into God’s future for us, for our families and our church, I implore you as Moses implored the Israelites, to remain faithful, to trust in the God that has already brought us this far. I remind you, as Moses reminded God’s people, the Lord will fight for us, we have only to keep still!

Thanks be to our warrior God!

Amen and amen.