

Always Remember

(Disclaimer: This is a revised version of the sermon I preached one year ago, when we also read the story of the exodus on World Communion Sunday. Sometimes reruns are a good thing. I trust that's the case today.)

What are your foundational stories? What do you tell or hear over and over again in your family, with your friends, in our church? What will you always remember?

My mother often talked about a stormy night when she was a child. Lightning hit a barn to the south and set it on fire. Then it hit another one to the north. Mom remembered her father sitting in her room all night, watching their barn, hoping it would remain intact. She also remembered the fear that they would lose their eighty acres of land during the Great Depression. These memories contributed to the anxiety she experienced every time my parents would buy additional farmland.

While I was attending the Mennonite Church of Normal in Illinois, people would often recall the summer they built their building. Two members coordinated the project. Everyone pitched in on the tasks that didn't need to be done by professionals. A few years previously, two congregations had merged to form this one. Working together on the building project helped form their identity as one church. During subsequent projects, the congregation often tried to recreate that feeling of cooperation and unity. But nothing seemed to match that special summer.

Salina Mennonite Church began when three families who had been gathering for fellowship decided to worship together on Sunday mornings. In the years that followed, more families with Mennonite connections joined them. The fellowship was enriched by families who were new to the denomination. As the congregation aged and denominational ties became less important, additional Mennonite families chose to attend other churches in town. We wish there were more people under the age of 35 here, while at the same time we value the experience of who we are now. We also continue to value our origin story.

The story of the exodus is a foundational story for Jewish people. The stories of creation, flood, and the call of Abraham are important, but it's the exodus that truly formed the Israelites into a people.¹

Since the beginning of humanity, we've told stories to make meaning of our lives. As we repeatedly tell our stories we downplay some aspects and highlight others. Timelines may get muddled. One person remembers it one way and another remembers a slightly different version. Over time, we may get some of the facts wrong, but the power of the story remains. Our stories contain deep and abiding truths whether all the details are factually correct.

As we read the exodus story today, I'll concentrate on the truths it contains rather than on the facts of how it happened. The storytelling and sermons from the past few weeks provide the background for this story – God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Joseph's rise to prominence in Egypt; the twelve sons of Jacob (also known as Israel) moving to Egypt with their families; the rise of a new Pharaoh who enslaved the Israelites; the call of Moses who along with his brother Aaron confronted Pharaoh; and the plagues that demonstrated the power of God over the gods of Egypt. Reviewing the end of the story we heard last Sunday:

But Pharaoh's heart wasn't swayed by the first nine terrible things that happened. He refused to let the people go. Moses warned Pharaoh, "All the firstborn people and animals in Egypt will die." But still Pharaoh refused to listen.

¹ Sources consulted for this sermon include: Week Ten Prepare Essay written by Timothy Harvey, *Shine: Becoming a People of God*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Shine - Menno Media](#); Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 104: Rescue at Sea — Pulpit Fiction](#); Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary, [#505: Rescue at the Sea - Oct. 2, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 404 Crossing the Red Sea \(Exodus 14:5-14, 21-29\) \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); Ralph W. Klein, Commentary on Exodus 14:19-31, [Commentary on Exodus 14:19-31 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) and Waldemar Janzen, *BCBC: Exodus*, Herald Press, 2000, pp.154-196.

God told Moses what the Israelites should do. They were to mark their doorposts with lamb's blood. They should roast the lamb and eat it with bitter herbs and flatbread. They were to eat quickly, with their sandals on and their clothes ready for travel.

At midnight, all the firstborn in every unmarked home in Egypt died. Agonizing cries filled the land because someone was dead in every home. Even Pharaoh's own son died. Pharaoh called Moses and said, "Take everything and leave. Go worship your God."

Thousands of Israelites left, taking their bread dough before it could rise. They left with gold, silver, and clothing given to them by the Egyptians. Moses said, "Remember this day. Celebrate with a Passover feast every year, for God's great power has brought us out of slavery in Egypt."²

Listen to Exodus 14:5-14. This is what happened after Moses and the Israelites left as Pharaoh had told them to do.

When Egypt's king was told that the people had run away, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about the people. They said, "What have we done, letting Israel go free from their slavery to us?" So he sent for his chariot and took his army with him. He took six hundred elite chariots and all of Egypt's other chariots with captains on all of them. The LORD made Pharaoh, Egypt's king, stubborn, and he chased the Israelites, who were leaving confidently. The Egyptians, including all of Pharaoh's horse-drawn chariots, his cavalry, and his army, chased them and caught up with them as they were camped by the sea.

As Pharaoh drew closer, the Israelites looked back and saw the Egyptians marching toward them. The Israelites were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt that you took us away to die in the desert? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt like this? Didn't we tell you the same thing in Egypt? 'Leave us alone! Let us work for the Egyptians!' It would have been better for us to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert."

But Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. Stand your ground, and watch the LORD rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never ever see again. The LORD will fight for you. You just keep still."³

This story presents familiar truths about the way people think and act. In Pharaoh, we see the power of an empire with wealth and military might. Even after demonstrations of God's power over the gods of Egypt, even after catastrophic loss of life, even after telling the Israelites to leave, Pharaoh immediately changes his mind and mobilizes his military force to protect his position. Once the moment of crisis passes, he realizes the economic power he's losing and talks himself out of letting them go.

We see this played out in our time as well. Those in power refuse to relinquish it no matter the cost to them and without regard for those most impacted by their decisions. The instinct to overpower leads to impossible situations. Often, it's the people with the least control who bear the worst consequences of their decisions.

Perhaps on a personal level, we can relate more to the Israelites than to the Egyptians. After years of oppression, they suddenly experience release, and almost as suddenly recognize the new danger they're facing. With a sea in front of them and soldiers behind them, they're trapped. They could have lived another day if they had just stayed in the previous situation, as bad as it was. They're on the edge of a total loss of everything when they could have had at least something. They can't imagine how God could make a way for them. They may have forgotten who God is; the relationship hasn't been active for many generations. Moses continues to remind them who God is. He asks them to believe long enough to see what happens.

We've had experiences like this as well. Maybe not on so grand a scale, but we've all been in situations where we oscillate between "survival" mode and "hope for the future" mode. Even the move from a bad situation to a better one involves loss and risk. It's tempting to go back rather than to forge ahead into the unknown. And when it seems we're stuck in limbo, when there's nothing we can do to get out of a situation, we're forced to trust. When it's difficult for us to trust God, those around us encourage us and remind us of God's faithfulness.

² Excerpted from *The Peace Table: A Storybook Bible*, Herald Press & Brethren Press, 2023, p. 56.

³ Exodus 14:5-14, *Common English Bible*.

The next part of the exodus story – the parting of the sea – is very familiar. We’re going to read it in a different way today. As I noted at the beginning, the stories we repeat differ a bit depending on who’s telling them. The person who writes them down may weave together several different versions. This is the case for many of the stories we find in the Bible.

The exodus story was passed along orally for many generations before it was preserved in print. Different groups of people would emphasize different aspects of the story as they passed it along. It’s fairly evident that there are two stories combined in Exodus 14:19-31. The result is somewhat confusing when read straight through. It’s difficult to get the facts straight. When pulled apart, there are two stories that make more sense independently of each other.

The first version comes from a priestly writer. It depicts what most of us imagine when we think of this crossing. Let’s read Exodus 14:21-23, 26-29.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land. The waters were split into two. The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and cavalry.

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. At daybreak, the sea returned to its normal depth. The Egyptians were driving toward it, and the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry, Pharaoh’s entire army that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them remained. The Israelites, however, walked on dry ground through the sea. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.⁴

In this account the waters are piled along the sides, with the Israelites marching through the sea on dry land. The Egyptians follow in hot pursuit, but when Moses raises his hand over the sea, it collapses and destroys the whole Egyptian army. Moses is the great leader, calling upon God’s power to separate the waters. Pharaoh is the embodiment of the Egyptian gods while Moses is the embodiment of Yahweh, the true God of Israel.

The priestly account emphasizes Yahweh’s glory and power over and above that of Pharaoh and all other tyrants. Compare this to the two creation accounts we find at the beginning of Genesis. Like the priestly account of the creation story found in Genesis 1, this version is concerned with power, control over chaos, and order. It also has images of a birth story, where God splits the water, the people pass through water walls, and the nation of Israel is born. They emerge as a people in a way that they weren’t a people before. The priestly account reminds the people that God is powerful and in control.

When we read this account of the exodus, we’re reminded that God can bring order out of chaos. God works on the side of justice. God opposes the relentless pursuit of power and wealth at the expense of others. God is a warrior acting on our behalf.

The remainder of this section of Exodus 14 comes from what is referred to as the Yahwist source. Yahwist comes from Yahweh, the personal, sacred name of the one true God. In most of the Bible translations we read, the *LORD* – in all capital letters – is used instead of Yahweh. The last two verses of Exodus 13 introduce the Yahwist account of the exodus.

The LORD went in front of them during the day in a column of cloud to guide them and at night in a column of lightning to give them light. This way they could travel during the day and at night. The column of cloud during the day and the column of lightning at night never left its place in front of the people.⁵

Now listen to the Yahwist version found in Exodus 14:19-20, 24-25, 30-31.

God’s messenger, who had been in front of Israel’s camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them. It stood between Egypt’s camp and Israel’s camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn’t come near each other all night.

⁴ Exodus 14:21-23, 26-29, *Common English Bible*

⁵ Exodus 14:21-23, 26-29, *Common English Bible*

As morning approached, the LORD looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. The LORD jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn't turn easily. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites, because the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt!"

The LORD rescued Israel from the Egyptians that day. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the amazing power of the LORD against the Egyptians. The people were in awe of the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.⁶

In this account the pillar of cloud and fire settles down between the Israelites and the Egyptians, preventing any kind of violent confrontation between the two peoples. At daybreak Yahweh throws the Egyptians into a panic. They plunge foolishly into the sea and perish.

Parting waters aren't mentioned. Moses isn't mentioned until the very end. The *LORD*, Yahweh, is the prime actor. The *LORD*'s power intervenes to prevent war. The *LORD* works through the natural inclinations of Pharaoh and the Egyptians to rescue the Israelites. As a result of this saving action, Israel reverences Yahweh, believes in Yahweh, and listens to Moses, Yahweh's servant.

The pillars of cloud and fire are significant in this story because they are unnecessary. Moses knows the way to Mount Sinai, which is their next destination. It is a prominent mountain in the region. Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb, was the place where Moses met God in the fiery bush.

Since the pillars of cloud and fire aren't essential to mark the people's path, their significance is in how they reveal God's care. Pharaoh is still a very real risk from whom the people need protection. With pillars of cloud and fire, God leads the people every step of the way, both in securing their freedom and in teaching them to trust—lessons they will learn again and again as God establishes them as a nation. The Yahwist account reminds the people that God desires relationship and restoration.

This is similar to the second version of the creation story found in Genesis 2. In that account, God forms animals and birds after noticing that the man is alone. God then makes a woman to provide a relationship partner for the man.

We are reminded that God works for restoration and relationship. God is our refuge and helper. God desires shalom – right relationships with God, within ourselves, with others, and with creation.

It's uncertain which of these accounts – the priestly or the Yahwist – came first. Even though we might be more comfortable with one account or the other, it's beneficial for both to be included. The story of God intervening on behalf of peace isn't enough. Neither is the purely warrior God account. It's good for us to hold these two stories in tension, as is the case with other biblical stories.

This is also the case in our personal stories, where people and situations can't be classified as completely good or completely bad. We live in the messiness of life when we deal with trust and logic, with faith and fear, with life and death, with strengthening or weakening our relationships with God and with each other.

As we continue our journey here on earth, the stories we tell help us to remember the truth about who God is and who we are. Always remember that God confronts evil. Always remember that God works for redemption and salvation. Always remember that God is leading us to new life. Always remember that God is with us wherever we are. Always remember that we have companions along our journey.

Thanks be to God.

⁶ Exodus 14:19-20, 24-25, 30-31, *Common English Bible*