

“Miraculous Living and Forgiving”

Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 13, 2020, Proper 19, 15th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to the memory of Alice Anderson who passed to Eternal life on September 8th, to my daughter Thalia Lewis on her 26th Birthday, to all in the west who are battling wildfires throughout the region and to Susan and all my sisters and brothers in Judaism who celebrate their new year - 5781 - this week and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today’s text from Exodus opens with the people of Israel on the edge of promise – standing on the beach of the sea. Behind lay Egypt and bondage. Ahead lay the wilderness and freedom. As Moses leads his people to the shore of the Red Sea the God of Israel sends an **“ancient wind”** from the east.

In the words of Levi Yitshak Berdichov writing two centuries ago:

The Ruach Kadim is the “ancient wind” through which God does not suspend the laws of nature to work miracles. Rather, the wind that divided the sea had been created for that purpose at the time of the creation of the world.

There on the edge of promise, as the ancient wind stirred with purpose as fear overcame the people. Midrashic writings tell us that one faithful man fearlessly marched into the sea. His name: Nahshon, son of Amninadab. Only then did Yahweh separate water from sea bed and make a way where there was no way.

The faith of one man opened the sea to a miraculous future for all. Often it takes the faith of only one to save everyone.

Faith, in the Hebrew Bible, is not a belief in a doctrine or Creed. Faith refers to trust and loyalty expressed through commitment and obedience. Such loyalty and obedience pave the path to freedom. Faith is about action, not about thoughts. From faith - Yahweh does for Israel what they could not for themselves. Yahweh, the God of mercy and justice, delivers the people from their oppression. And this deliverance comes, not because Israel is superior, or in **any** way better than other people and nations. Deliverance comes because (in the words of Deuteronomy 7:8) *“Yahweh loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors.”*

Through the faith of one man and through the leadership of Moses, one God’s special agents, the people are delivered and Pharaoh’s army drowns in the sea as the wall of water envelopes the chariots and soldiers of Pharaoh.

As we consider the devastation of Pharaoh’s army, we might also read on in middle eastern legend.

Legend has it that the Pharaoh survived the closing of the sea - the only Egyptian to do so. Because he had learned his lesson, legend continues, he was appointed King of Nineveh. Later, he led his people through penitential prayer and fasting to avert disaster in the face of Jonah's decree. When Pharaoh died, the story continues, he was stationed at the gates of the underworld, where he would greet the tyrants of history with the words: *"Why did you not learn from my example?"*

That question haunts every generation of oppressors since. Beyond legend and rabbinical teachings, on that day so long ago, the great hand of God severed the tyrannical hand of Egypt and God's people were saved.

But, as we learn from the texts of Exodus 15ff, getting Israel out of Egypt proves to be the easy part for God. The much harder part is getting Egypt out of Israel. By this, I mean Israel "moves out" but they don't "move on". They get stuck in the wilderness – with slavery behind, freedom ahead. For the next forty years they are stuck in the wilderness – somewhere between slavery and freedom.

Stuckness defines the next stage of their life together. They grumble, bicker, fight, worship fake Gods, and they blame other people (including Moses and Aaron) for all their problems and wilderness wandering. They repeat this cycle over and over and over and over some more. It literally takes a change of several generations to get Egypt and slavery and oppression out of the souls of God's People!

I find it too easy to talk about other people - way back then and over there! I can wander around their shortcomings all day long. It is time to take a look at ourselves and bring this home. I'm going to meddle a little bit.

How is it with your soul? How are you doing? Can you relate to the people of old getting stuck in the wilderness? Have you ever had a problem moving on from a crisis in your life? Have you found yourself going back to that point in time over and over again? Have you ever felt stuck? Have you ever wandered in a spiritual desert - where your trail is covered over by the seemingly Godless dry wind pushing you into an unrevealed future? Do you have trouble moving on?

In the exodus story of your life - can you identify the place and time God loved you so much that God saved you with an *ancient wind* - with a Spirit blowing through your body, mind and soul - and yet - now you have found yourself unable to breathe and begin anew in the liberated light of God's Love?

What is true about our forebearers in faith is also true about us. We get Stuck in the pity parties of our past, even while God is whispering: *"You are okay. Time to Move on. Go forward."*

What we miss when we leave the Exodus Story in the Wilderness is this: God's miracles don't end on the other slavery side of the Red Sea! On the Freedom side of the Sea - God sends quail and manna for food, God send clouds to cover the desert sun by day and a pillar of fire to guide their path by night.

I have a secret to share - God will provide what we need in the wilderness – whether we recognize it or not.

In our desert wanderings and sultry stuckness, God sends us signs and offers a hand to lift us out of the muck. The kindness of strangers, the comfort of friends, a call, a smile, a package unannounced, the touch of a child on our fist-formed hand, the

encouragement of a parent, the community of the faithful in prayer and worship, the community of the faithful in fellowship and love. The community of the faithful.

All of these serve as signs, wonders, even miracles in the desert lostness of our lives. All these signs point to miraculous living. Pay attention to the signs and wonders as you wander. They are no less than road maps to the promised land of peace.

The times in which we are living are filled with blossoms in the desert as well as fires in the desert. It is often hard to see the blossoms from the fires. But if you look, you will see them. Blossoms rise from the desert floor while the fires rage across the terrain – they find life in the terror of the times.

Living is what we are designed and called to do. We live through the miracles, into the wilderness and all the way to promise. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans that all our living is done with others in mind. He puts it this way:

“None of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 8 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. 9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living” (Romans 14:7-9).

In and out of the life and death struggles we see and encounter every day; we find a way to make this life better – to heal in the midst of all we are up against.

Through the path of miraculous living, we are blessed by a Savior who gives us a way out of the desert wanderings of our lives and of our nation’s life. In Matthew 18:21-25, he tells his followers (which

includes us) to forgive when we are wronged. While the acceptable Judaic law rate of forgiveness is three times, Peter asks if seven times will be enough. In Matthew Jesus says, “seventy-seven times.” In Luke, he says, seven times seventy! - 490!”

In other words: Forgive until **YOU** hear it. Forgive until **YOU** live it. Forgive until **YOU** feel it. Forgive until **YOU** know it. Forgive until **YOU** mean it!

When you forgive like this, you will feel as if you have received mercy and of the hand of charity rather than the sword of justice.

To find our way out of the desert - the desert of our personal lives and even the desert of COVID-19 - we must reach out with our moral imagination to the promised land of possibility. If we have learned anything about this pandemic in the last six months, we have learned that our capacity for not facing the full and fatal force of this virus has exceeded our reach of moral imagination. This script must flip. We must use the full capacity of our desire to live and help others to live to outlive this coronavirus. We have to employ the full capacity our imagination, our feelings, our love to win this war on an unseen opponent.

Now is the time to deploy the Jesus survival strategy - for those of us, and our children and the world’s children - who have suffered too much already. Now is the time for the “ancient wind”, the *Ruach Kadim* to blow! As the rabbis taught through the model of Nahshon, it only takes **the faith of one person to open the sea to a miraculous future for all.**

Allow the ancient wind of God to blow through you. May the Ruach Kadim show you the path to miraculous living and forgiving. By

living fully and forgiving completely - your moral imagination will be revived. With such a revival, we will find our way out of the desert to a new day of promise.

Amen.