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**“The Exodus: Moses and the Red Sea”**

Exodus 3-15 (Selected Verses)

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Here we are friends, on the sea shore. I'm not precisely sure which sea shore. Growing up, I heard it called *The Red Sea* – I suspect you did too - and there is a Red Sea in the vicinity of Egypt. But its not the one Moses and the Hebrew people crossed. The geography doesn't work out. And anyway, the words used in the original Hebrew text – *yam sup* - are more accurately translated *Sea of Reeds*. Which makes it sound a lot less like a sea, and a lot more like, the sloughs and lakes we are familiar with here in Minnesota. When you put it that way, it sounds so beautiful, and tranquil. When I hear *Sea of Reeds* I think of red wing blackbirds, croaking frogs, herons and wood ducks. I suspect that camping on the shores of the *Sea of Reeds* could be a great outdoor experience – back to nature, closer to God. Unless you are being pursued by Pharaoh's army. You think mosquitos are bad, imagine an army of spear carrying soldiers coming after you. Not so tranquil. Not so beautiful.

Here on the sea shore you have a choice. You can turn around and look at your pursuers and be overcome by fear. Or you can look at the water – the beautiful water – and let it remind you who you are and to whom you belong. You are God's people. And your God, from the beginning, has demonstrated mastery over the waters. In the beginning, the breath of your God moved over the watery chaos and brought forth life. Your God separated the heavens from the earth, and the light from the dark, and the water from the land. Your God created this body of water and has dominion over this body of water. And your God promised, after lifting you out of the waters of the flood to begin again, that God would always be with you. God is here with you on the shore of the *Sea of Reeds*. And once again, God's breath, like a mighty wind, is moving over the water's, rearranging and dividing the sea to reveal dry land. Exodus, the road out from slavery to freedom, is a new creation.

But this new creation is not for everyone. This road that has been cleared through the sea is a safe harbor for God's people. This road is intended to bring freedom from bondage and hope from despair. It is a road for the underdogs who have been too long under the thumb of tyranny. It is a road for the oppressed to seek justice. For them it is the road of life.

For Pharaoh's army, not so much. The waters weren't held back for them. This wasn't another resource for them to claim for their own power, another loophole to leverage. The water was held back for God's faithful people, who had ~~nothing but faith to carry them forward onto the path.~~ Well, faith and fear of Pharaoh's army. Talk about a rock and a hard place – face certain death at the hands of Pharaoh's army or take a step of faith onto the path between two walls of water that shouldn't be possible. Are we surprised that they followed Moses onto the path? We shouldn't be. In very dramatic fashion, God has already demonstrated his power and might, to Israelites and Egyptians alike. The difference was that the Israelites knew and trusted that God's power and might was more powerful and mightier than Pharaoh's army; they knew God's power and might were for their preservation. Pharaoh, on the other hand, held onto the prideful conviction that God's power and might were no match for the power and might of Pharaoh's army, and that would be their downfall.

A tyrant, according to Merriam-Webster and Dictionary.com, is "an absolute ruler unrestrained by law or constitution. A sovereign who uses power oppressively or unjustly." Pharaoh was a tyrant. "Tyranny," according to Michael Walzer, "is symbolized by Pharaoh's horses and chariots, the core of his army and the source of his power." It may be hard to imagine horses as being weapons of war, but in the scriptures, nearly all references to horses are associated with war. When Israel saw Pharaoh's army on horseback, they were horrified. Israel, with flocks and families, was on foot and could not move very fast. The cards were stacked against them. They had no means to protect themselves. Except for God.

We learn from this story that the God who has power over the waters also has power to defeat tyrants and their weapons of war. God is not just the God of Israel; God is the God of the universe. That means Pharaoh is under God, whether Pharaoh wants to admit it or not – he doesn't. It means that God can defeat the worst Pharaoh has to throw at God's people – God does.

Fast forward, if you will, to a future chapter of this story. Casey Sigmon, in her commentary of this text, invites us to, "picture Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey." You recall this scene on Palm Sunday referred to as the triumphal entry. ~~Jesus made an intentional choice that day – to enter on a donkey~~ instead of a horse. Jesus chose to enter the city on a donkey "instead of the equivalent of a tank." The violence in the exodus story is unavoidable, but if we view through the lens of Christ, "we glimpse the will of God that all

weapons of tyranny and war be destroyed at last, be they horses and chariots, or guns and drones,” and be replaced by faith, hope, and love.

No matter what God does, how many warnings and chances God offers, how many demonstrations of power God performs, Pharaoh is a tyrant unwilling to set aside his weapons of mass destruction. He refuses to stop grasping for more power. He refuses to bend to grant the Hebrew people a just and equitable standing within his borders. He is determined to continue to oppress them for his own gains. His heart is hard. In stark relief we see, according to Old Testament scholar Anathia Portier-Young, “the end result of an economy built on forced labor, exploitation, and domination. In refusing to let God’s people go, Pharaoh leads his own people to their grave.”

Let’s pause for a moment. If you have ears to hear, you are hearing echoes of this story in the current events of our world. I imagine, as you are sitting here, you can name some of the tyrants in our world, and some of the oppressed longing for freedom and justice. If you have eyes to see, you will also notice the places in our world where God is working a new creation and forging paths through the watery chaos, and the places where tyrants are being knocked of their pedestals.

Pay attention. Notice what is happening in our world. There are tyrants, yes. There is injustice, yes. But the God of the universe is bigger than them, and God is always – ALWAYS – creating new paths where safety, freedom, and justice can prevail for those who are willing to follow God in faith. For those who are willing to follow God in faith.

Now I am going to ask you, just for a moment to reflect on yourself and your own life. Where do you see yourself in this story? In what ways are you oppressed, the victim of injustice? I’m sure all of us can come up with some way you have been slighted, taken advantage of, treated unfairly. All of us would love the assurance that God will clear a path for us and sweep away the bullies in our lives.

But lift up your eyes and look around yourself, and you may notice that you are not as oppressed as you would like to think you are. There are those around you who carry a heavier burden and more marginalized than you. It is just possible – possible – that you have more power than you think you do.

How many of us have more power than someone else? Anyone else. Parents have more power than their children. Supervisors have more power than the people they supervise. Those two are obvious, but what about some other less obvious imbalances of power? The educated have more power than the uneducated. The wealthy have more power than the poor. People with access to health insurance have more power than those who don't. People who own vehicles for transportation have more power than those that walk or depend on public transportation. Consider that next time the railroad crossing is blocked and you have the luxury of turning around and driving to another crossing. Unlike the pedestrians (on foot or on bike) who have no choice but to wait in 90 degree sun or wickedly cold winds. It may not be fair, but it's the reality of the world in which we live.

So, consider, just for a moment, the ways in which you are powerful; think of one relationship in which you have more power than the other person. Now, are you, or have you ever been a tyrant? I'm sure none of us have ever been tyrants. Not really. But we can come pretty close, can't we? The temptation is there to exert our power and get our way at all costs! If you don't believe me spend the day with a 3-year-old who has been pushing every button. Or a teenager who defies every limit you set. If the phrase, "because I said so" has every come bubbling up out of you, you just might have had a moment where you were in touch with your inner tyrant. We all have one. But we can choose a different path. We can choose to exercise patience and mercy. We can choose to set aside our own desires in order to be just and fair with the people we encounter - at home, at work, in the community. We can choose. Sometimes we don't choose. Sometimes we cling to our power instead. We surround ourselves with that which preserves our illusion of control, status, importance. We place our faith in horses and chariots instead of God.

Here is the truth we don't like to hear. If we are trusting in chariots, and horses, and weapons of war to save us, we are not on the side of God. We can trust all of the symbols of power and might, like wealth and status. We can trust more powerful weapons and intimidating defenses. Or we can trust God. We can't trust both. God is inviting us to follow where God leads, to step out in faith and trust God to make a way for us through the chaos. But we can't be on the side of tyranny, holding fast to the weapons we think will protect us AND cross safely to the other side. It is important to notice that the Israelite people did not fight back, they didn't pick up their own weapons to stand against

Pharaoh. They possessed nothing of power except faith in God. If you recall the story of David & Goliath from a couple of weeks ago – they didn't become like the giant to defeat the giant. They trusted in God and believed faith in God would be enough. But when we become hard-hearted, prideful, we doubt God's power and trust in our own power instead. If we remain hard-hearted like Pharaoh, the waters will not be held back for us. We can stand on the side of the oppressed, or on the side of the oppressor. We can't be in both places.

There is a contrast in this story you haven't heard if you've only heard this story in its Sunday School paraphrase. It struck me, this piece of the story I'd never really noticed before. We all know about Pharaoh's hard heart. We hear it repeatedly in Pharaoh's response to the plagues: Pharaoh's heart was hardened against the Israelites. But did you know that God softens hearts in this story, too? It's easy to miss, overshadowed by the drama of the plagues. But even before all the plagues have played out scripture tells us that God softened the hearts of the Egyptian people towards the Israelites. God softened the hearts of the Egyptian people to take pity on the plight of the slaves. With softened hearts, the Egyptian people aided the Israelites in their escape, supplied them with food, resources, even gold. They warned them of the army's approach and helped them make their way out of Egypt. Pharaoh may have been hard-hearted, and his army may have been obligated to follow his orders. But the everyday people who lived and worked in Pharaoh's empire, their hearts were soft. Hard hearts are prideful, boastful, arrogant and unrelenting. Soft hearts are generous hearts.

I think it matters that when God defeats the Egyptians it is Pharaoh's Army – the symbol of hard-hearted tyranny – that was swept away by the waters, not the rest of the Egyptians, the ones who were open to the nudging of God's spirit to show mercy to their slaves. If you aren't the oppressed, but you know them. If you don't want to be one of the tyrants, but you know them. There is a third option. You can ask God to soften your heart and show you ways to offer compassion, kindness, and generosity to those who have suffered injustice.

God is always creating something new – new paths through chaos. It might be a path you are called to follow. It might be a path intended for someone else who needs your help to reach that path to freedom. Whatever you do, proceed with caution, friend. If your heart is not in the right place, if you are trusting your own strength instead of trusting God, you might find yourself on the

path intended to bring the mighty low. If that happens, I have good news for you. God has a special love and care for the underdogs, if you have been brought low by your pride, and can find it, in humility to reach out to God, God just might make a path for you through the chaos.

I've enjoyed our journey this morning here as we've paused on the shore of the *Sea of Reeds*. But look --- a wind is coming up, the weather is changing, and a path is about to appear before us. Are you ready to follow the God of the universe into this new creation of freedom, justice and peace? Are you ready to lay your burdens down and leave your horses and chariots behind so that your hands are free to reach out a helping hand to your neighbor in need? Moses may have started this journey, but it is Christ who calls us forward into a new future - his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. May we all find our place in that kingdom.

Alleluia! Amen.