

## ***"PARTING THE WATERS"***

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2020

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

I once fractured my pelvis and was bed ridden for a month. It was difficult to read so I watched a lot of television. If one thing will spur your eagerness to get back to work, it is surely daytime television. We have a seemingly endless number of channels, and they all seem to be filled with people screaming at each other. Whether it was reruns of “The Real Housewives of New Jersey” or the guests on “The Jerry Springer Show” these people were seriously one bubble off plumb. Thankfully I managed to find a movie channel and for the first time I saw the movie *"O Brother Where Art Thou,"* set in the depression era south. I had heard the sound track numerous times, but I had never seen the movie.

It has this wonderful baptismal scene near the end where the three chain gang runaways (the heroes of the movie) think they've been freed and that the future is rosy, but the relentless sheriff with his posse and bloodhound surprise them. As they are about to be hanged on the spot, Ulysses falls to his knees and begs for God's deliverance. Now it happens that the state has built a new dam ... and the valley where they stand ... is supposed to be flooded. So as he prays, Ulysses notices a small trickle at his feet and then suddenly a wall of water covers them and washes away the deputy and the posse and the bloodhound ... washes away the trio ... washes away their ropes ... washes away their sins ... and sets them free.

Folks, that's what baptism is about! The real baptism is the flood of troubles we face and our helplessness before them. The real baptism is the struggle and sorrow of our days and the challenges that get the best of us. The real baptism is the experience of dying but rising again by the grace of God. This real baptism we call life is both God's gift and God's judgment. Our sins are washed away ... burned away ... blown away by the mortal peril of human experience. But by God's grace ... if we choose it ... we emerge on the other side free and whole.

I'm not just talking about death, though I am talking about that, too. I'm talking about the flood of troubles that kill our spirits while we are still breathing ... addictions ... health problems ... academic failures ... business failures ... marital failures ... families in conflict ... unemployment ... rejection ... depression ... the weight of grief ... the bad stuff ... the stuff that happens sometimes because of our own bad choices ... the stuff that happens just as often without us ever even having a choice because somebody else made bad choices ... the stuff beyond our control and beyond our fixing ... the stuff that oppresses us and drags us down. That is the real baptism most everybody faces at some time in his or her life, and sometimes several times along the way.

That stuff is going to happen, and it takes us to an end ... to a death of a kind. But the mystery of our faith is that out of these deaths, God brings resurrection ... new beginnings ... new life. An experience we would never have chosen to go through winds up being our turning point ... a salvation ... the worst thing but also the best thing that ever happened to us. But in those awful, deadly moments, so much depends on our response. So much depends on our willingness to turn to God in trust.

You see, God doesn't force us. This resurrection on the other side depends on the grace of God, but it also requires some decision on our part ... an acceptance of that grace ... a faith in the God who will get us through. And more and more I have come to realize ... even though it's usually the only smart choice ... even though it's the only chance you've got ... it takes courage to make that choice and trust in God.

Let's go all the way back to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt praying for God's deliverance. Their life was awful ... their burdens overwhelming ... their sorrows unbearable. I doubt any of us have ever suffered like they suffered. But God saw them. God heard their prayers. God sent Moses to deliver them. Moses and Pharaoh had a contest ... actually Moses' God and Pharaoh's gods had a contest ... and Moses' God beat them ten times in a row in the very areas of specialization that Pharaoh's gods were supposed to control ... the cycles of the Nile, nature and fertility, life and death. It was pretty convincing, so Pharaoh had to say, "Okay, enough already, get out of here!" But then the voices of greed piped up. They were about to lose their cheap labor. That would cripple their economy and keep the rich Egyptians from getting richer. So, Pharaoh changed his mind. But the Hebrews had already packed up and headed out.

And of course, soon, very soon after they've started this journey, they wondered if they've made the right choice. On the horizon they saw the dust of Pharaoh's chariots coming after them. In front of them was the sea. They were between a rock and a hard place, with no way out. They panicked. They cried out. Moses prayed. They spent a long, fearful night with the east wind blowing hard upon them. But in the morning, the wind had pushed back the water and the way was open before them. God did that.

Good news? Well, maybe, but now they had a choice. Behind them waited Pharaoh's army, which was not there to slaughter them, but to take them back home to slavery. That would be bad, but at least it was known. Ahead lay the path to freedom, but it was terrifying. An unknown wilderness ... a hard journey leading ... where? Would they be up to the test? What should they do? Moses told them again to trust God and come on. And what did they do? They stepped out.

It takes courage to be saved. You have to admit you need it in the first place, that you can't do it on your own. You have to acknowledge the slavery that's killing your soul. You have to be tired enough of it to walk away from it. You have to trust that God has something better for you ahead. That is why we often get stuck. We will stay in a soul-crushing situation because we are too proud to admit that we can't handle it ... or that we're too afraid to change. Moving forward, stepping out in faith calls us to a commitment, "a long obedience in the same direction" as Neitzsche put it. Will we do it? All the forces of grace wait for that first small step. But will we take it?

To be sure, the courage to step forward into God's deliverance is a selfish courage. It means overcoming our fear enough to do what is best *for us*. But I think it leads to a greater courage ... the courage to do what is right for others ... sometimes even at a sacrifice to ourselves. That first small step of self-care leads to a life of care with a community ... and within a community ... caring for others. All the Hebrew children had to take that step to freedom, one by one by one. But they were not alone. They were part of a people, which made the journey easier. We, too, are not alone. As Christians we are part of a people called "church," making God's journey together. And what do we do to support each other in the journey? We "*encourage*" each other. We give each other the courage to do the right thing.

Now I don't mean to suggest that being baptized and choosing God's path to freedom and deliverance is an act of great courage like running into a burning building to save a child or throwing yourself on a hand grenade to protect your buddies. Such extraordinary acts of courage are certainly rare and virtuous ... but they also depend on chance. And most of us aren't given or pushed by such chances. But every day all of us face the small steps of courage to move towards health ... to move towards salvation ... to help another person ... to be a little stronger because we all need each other to be stronger.

When I was in parochial school as a child, one of my obsessions was collecting holy cards. They were like baseball cards but with pictures of the saints on one side and their stories on the other. Most of my girlfriends coveted the ones of St. Theresa with her arms full of roses. Not me, I went for St. Sebastian with his body riddled with arrows. I wasn't attracted to the gore, but to the sacrifices the martyrs made. I longed to be able to make that kind of sacrifice too and thought it was such a shame that nobody was chasing or imprisoning or killing Christians in Midland, Texas. I pictured myself standing against a gray wall, facing a firing squad and someone saying, "One last chance. Deny Christ and you'll live." I imagined myself confessing my faith and the soldier saying, "Ready, Aim, Fire." Of course, I continued to fanaticize that later they would build a monument and people would come with their cameras. "Johnny, you stand over there so we can get your picture where Mary Anne gave her life" ... wiping away their tears.

I was sincere then, and truth be told, I did give my life, but not by writing one big check. I've written 69 years of little checks ... I guess you could say I just nibbled away at this giving of life. I think that's how it is for most of us ... little steps ... baby steps of courage ... faltering and falling ... getting up ... getting our legs beneath us ... making a few strides ... but still, one step at a time. A lot of little

courageous moments make up one great courage. It means taking care of yourself enough to be here again tomorrow and ten years from now so you will be able to help some more. And it means getting down into the muck and mud of real life ... messy as it is ... and having the water come up to your neck and sometimes even over your head ... but trusting God to bring you through. So as valuable and courageous as our martyrs to faith ... and our martyrs to freedom may be ... those who gave their lives all at once for the rest of us ... both faith and freedom have been built just as much by those who gave their lives a little at a time over the years ... day after day and person by person ... one small courageous step at a time. That's what makes a nation great. That's what makes a people great. That's what makes a church great.

So, what step do you need to make today? To become a Christian? To join the church? To start off in a new direction? To leave some slavery behind? Do you trust God to help you? You know that old Chinese proverb ... "The longest journey begins with the smallest step." Why don't you take that first step today? Why don't you take the next step? Trust in God ... step out!

May we pray?

One step at a time, Lord. Just one step at a time. Help us to take now the next step in our journey with you ... for Jesus' sake. Amen.