

Ex 14:19-31
11 September 2011

“A True Exodus”

There are a couple of movies that might lead us to a slightly mistaken impression about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. In Cecil B. DeMille’s classic, *The Ten Commandments*, we have one of the best actors America ever produced for over-the-top performances, Charlton Heston.

In his role as Moses, Heston packs every morsel of macho he can muster. When the Israelites, fleeing from the Pharaoh’s army, find themselves at the shore of the Red Sea, Heston’s Moses is undaunted. “The Lord of hosts will do battle for us,” he thunders. “Behold his mighty hand!” At that point, the sea begins to divide. A highway appears, with walls of water on either side.

The other movie I want to mention is the DreamWorks animated film from 1998, *The Prince of Egypt*. In this one, Moses is voiced by Val Kilmer. When they get to the Red Sea, this Moses doesn’t have as much swagger. As he wades into the water, we hear in his mind the Lord speaking to him, “With this staff, you shall do my wonders.”

In this movie, the walls of water are even **higher** than in *The Ten Commandments*. And it’s presented as a night crossing, which is a little more faithful to the way the scripture puts it. Plus, it’s scarier. The people rely on their torches for light. There’s that, and the lightning illuminating the water beside them. They can see a big old shark swimming by—not the most comforting thing!

Still, why do I say these movies might give us a mistaken impression? It’s not so much the way the Red Sea crossing is presented. I’m really not interested in getting bogged down in debating whether or not it was a miracle. (There are plenty of theories on the nature of the Red Sea crossing.)

I’m more interested in the theme of Banu’s last two sermons: transformation. When the Israelites are safely on the other side, the sea water back in its proper place, there may be a temptation I think we can understand. There may be the impression that the exodus from slavery is finished. We won’t have to deal with that ever again! Our transformation is complete!

As we’ll see in more detail next week—when the people are griping at Moses—just because we’ve experienced an exodus **physically** doesn’t mean we’ve experienced one **mentally**, or for that matter, emotionally or spiritually. Sometimes it’s one step forward, two steps backward. This is something Moses has had to learn his entire life.

At his birth, his mother fears for his safety, so she takes steps to hide him. Eventually, he is discovered, and Moses is raised as an Egyptian. As an adult, the day comes when he realizes the truly pathetic state of his people. The scripture says that “he saw their forced labor” (2:11). When he comes upon an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, Moses dispatches the fellow and hides the body. But word of the homicide gets out, and he hits the road.

Having fled the centers of power, the mighty Egyptian civilization, Moses’ life enters a quiet period. He gets married; he and his wife have a son. He is now living the simple life of a shepherd. However, one day he encounters something that puts an end

to all of that. The voice of God coming from the burning bush makes him an offer he can't refuse!

Moses is reminded of the sorry state of his people. One can only imagine how often over the years he thought of them. It was surely something that nagged at him deep in his soul. **Physically**, he had been liberated from Egypt, but that was it. There was no doubt a voice within him that said: he would have to return.

He tries, and fails, to convince God that he's **not** the right guy for the job. With all of his objections overturned, Moses sets off for Egypt. He has been commissioned by God to go to the Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go." Of course, it's only after he and his brother Aaron do their works of power, and after the ten plagues, that the Pharaoh grudgingly agrees.

Still, when Moses goes to the Pharaoh and says, "Let my people go," what is it that he's really asking? Is he saying, "Let my people go...forever"? Is Moses requiring the Egyptian powers-that-be to set the people free from their slavery? Exodus 5 says, "let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God" (v. 3). Moses is asking that they be allowed to have a festival of worship. This gets back to what I said earlier about the nature of the exodus.

In her article, "Gradual Freedom," Wendy Ansellem speaks about this.¹ Referring to Moses and Aaron, she wonders, "If their goal was the ultimate emancipation of God's people, why not be up front about their motives? Why shroud this pivotal moment of national freedom in the murkiness of deception? They debate with Pharaoh about who will be allowed to come along and what they will bring, but the substance of their petition is always a three-day pilgrimage."

Various explanations have been offered. Some have said that a three-day journey was the best that Moses could ever hope for. Others take a different approach. They point out that Moses **really isn't** being untruthful, because he never promises that they'll come back! (Plus, he had his fingers crossed behind his back!)

Are you like me in thinking that that's probably not the **noblest** of ways to look at it?

Ansellem offers an alternative, one that doesn't involve lies of commission or omission. Remember, Moses doesn't dream this up himself. This goes back to the burning bush in chapter 3. God is the one who gives Moses this plan of a "three days' journey into the wilderness" (v. 18).

Our friend Wendy sees this as **entirely** for the benefit of the Hebrews. Think of it: "A people enslaved for hundreds of years could not imagine anything as sweeping as complete freedom. It was difficult enough to believe that they could have three days free from the unceasing demands of their overseers." (That's partly why the exodus became part of the black experience of slavery in America. Think of how many spirituals deal with this very theme.)

She goes on, "Indeed, after generations under the absolute control of cruel masters, the ability to imagine oneself in lone and independent contemplation of God for three days is almost the same as contemplating eternal freedom."

It's almost like fish living underwater. That's their entire existence. They have no way of imagining what life out of the water, what life breathing air, is like.

¹ www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2000/01/Gradual-Freedom-Exodus-1317-1716.aspx

In a similar way, we can become so immersed in ways of thinking and being that we cannot, and do not, imagine any other way. Even things that are detrimental to us become second nature. Sometimes the proposal that there can **even be** another way produces great resistance.

Anselm continues, “Radical changes in thinking and perspective are difficult and must evolve gradually. The Israelites cannot really [envision] complete freedom while they are enslaved in Egypt. The most they can imagine is a three-day furlough in which they as independent beings can worship God. Once they are in the wilderness, their thinking expands and they can begin to envision a future of complete freedom.”

At that point, everything changes. The metaphorical genie is out of the bottle. It is ultimately self-defeating to keep others down. We’ve seen that this year, as the “Arab spring,” the freedom movement in numerous countries, has evolved.

And of course, today is the tenth anniversary of the 9-11 attacks. That’s a different dynamic than people rising up against a tyrant. But there is a powerful resonance with the exodus, and again, it goes back to the crossing of the Red Sea. There’s this wonderful image in verses 21 and 22:

“Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.”

The word for “waters” (מַיִם, *mayim*) is the same one used in Genesis 1, the story of creation. We’re told that “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (v. 2). That the same word is used isn’t surprising; it’s not an unusual word. The reason it’s meaningful and powerful is because it represents chaos. At the beginning of the Bible, “the waters” are the disorder, the disarray, that exists prior to God beginning to establish order.

In today’s scripture text, the waters are divided. Chaos is turned aside. The people are delivered through the chaos in safety. **They are able to travel through the madness.** We still need that kind of exodus today. We need an exodus that is a true exodus.

A true exodus includes both the inner experience and the outer expression. Moses has the inner experience. He recognizes that God is working within himself; he is being transformed. He senses that God is calling him—even if he fights like the devil against it!

But there’s also the outer expression. A few minutes ago, I wondered how often over the years Moses thought of his people, slaves to their Egyptian masters. Who knows how many times he said “no” to those inner promptings? Maybe it takes something as dramatic as that crazy shrubbery that looks like it’s on fire, but never burns up! Maybe it takes something like that to get him moving.

As for the people, they too, have inner experiences and outer expressions. For their exodus to be a true exodus, both must be present. But we’ll look at that next week.

How about us? To what are we enslaved? How much of it is self-imposed slavery? From what do we need an exodus? Do we ever imagine liberation from it? Are we like those fish in the waters, unable to conceive another way of being?

I would urge you: please think about these things. And read the stories. Read about the exodus. And for next week, read the “grumbling” stories in chapters 15 to 17. Remember, just because we’ve experienced an exodus **physically** doesn’t mean we have **mentally**.

Some wise person once told me that it’s easier to take the people out of Egypt, than to take Egypt out of the people!