

Stuck
Exodus 14:10-14, 21-29
October 5, 2014
Sermon by Dan Schrock

¹⁰As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. ¹¹They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." ¹³But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

²¹Then 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. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." ²⁶Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (NRSV)

There you are, stuck.

Maybe you're stuck at work. One woman I'm acquainted with felt trapped in her work at a church-related organization. This organization did great work in the community for the sake of Christ, and was known far and wide for doing competent, compassionate work. Her stuckness came from the fact that the boss demanded more than she felt was justified. For example, she had no regular day off, not even Sundays, but was expected to be available for work seven days a week. The salary was low and had no benefits like health insurance, even though the job was a full-time. In spite of these unsavory aspects of the job, the woman didn't know what other job to look for. So she remained, stuck and resentful.

Maybe you're stuck in family life. For decades my grandfather was trapped in a series of disputes with two of his sisters. At one point they fought over who

would inherit their father's shaving brush. Of course the shaving brush wasn't the real source of the conflict, since shaving brushes from the 1930s have little inherent value. Instead they fought over the shaving brush because they were stuck in a larger pattern of grinding conflict, and the brush was just a convenient object to renew their old fights.

Maybe you're stuck in your relationship with God. Between you and the Holy One is the same old same old. The vitality between you and God has leached away; the freshness between the two of you has evaporated. Perhaps your image of God has become static rather than dynamic. Your prayers travel the same byways they've always traveled. The spiritual landscape is too familiar. Yet you don't know what to do. You're trapped.

The Hebrews also found themselves stuck. Thanks to ten signs and wonders from the hand of God, they had finally escaped from the slavery of Egypt. Freedom was theirs! They were released from the tyranny of brick-making under the merciless Egyptian sun! They were going to a new land, their own land, where they would be able to decide what crops to grow, what animals to raise, and what sort of houses to build. They could worship their own God, Yahweh by name, who was creator of heaven and earth! Hallelujah!

Except now a new problem appeared. A very big problem. Directly ahead of them on the road lay the Red Sea. It blocked their path. There was no bridge for them to walk over and no boats for them to ride over. How were they supposed to get to the other side?

You might think that they could simply back up, retrace their steps, and find another route. But that wouldn't work either, because directly behind them were 600 Egyptian chariots (cf. 14:7), each pulled by a finely-bred Egyptian horse, driven by a skilled Egyptian charioteer and probably carrying a deadly Egyptian archer.

The Hebrews, by contrast, had no chariots, no horses, and no charioteers. They didn't even have any military training, and even if they had been trained soldiers, they were not equipped with the standard weapons that infantries of the time would have carried.

Quite simply, they were stuck between a sea they could not pass and an army they could not defeat.

It looked to them like certain annihilation. Surely they were going to be slaughtered, or at the very least recaptured and marched back to Egypt to slave away for Pharaoh once again!

Wouldn't you lose hope in such a situation? The Hebrews did. They lost their hope in God. Their trust in God evaporated. Despair clutched at their throats.

So they did what we humans often do in such situations: they complained. And like the rest of us, they reached for the most convenient target they could find. Usually the most convenient target is the leader. So that's what they did. They sniped at Moses. "At least Egypt had graves!" they complain to Moses. "Good graves! But now you've dragged us out here in this wilderness to die in the sand. Why did you take us out of Egypt? We'd have been better off staying in Egypt than coming here! Didn't we tell you while we were still in Egypt that you should let us alone so we can serve the Egyptians in peace?" (cf. 14:11-12). As often happens when we complain, the Hebrew people were twisting the truth, because back in Egypt they had said no such thing. In fact, they had wanted to leave the oppressive conditions in Egypt. In fact, they had expressly cried out to God asking for deliverance (2:23-25). They made a choice to come out here in the wilderness. It wasn't Moses' fault at all.

Being a good leader, Moses did not take all this personally. Even though they were attacking him personally, he knew people were really mad at God, not at him.

Instead of confronting them directly about their misplaced anger, Moses calmly offers some suggestions about how they can respond to this stuck situation. He acknowledges that things look pretty grim for all them. He admits there's an impassable sea ahead of them and an invincible army behind them. Nevertheless he offers three suggestions about for what they can do, all of which are found in verse 13.

First, do not be afraid. This is actually one of the most common pieces of advice in the Bible. Do not be afraid! It's used at least 59 times in the Bible and is addressed to both women and men: to Abraham, Hagar, Rebekah, Jacob, Ruth, the widow of Zarephath, Elijah, Solomon, Zechariah, Mary the mother of Jesus, the shepherds outside Bethlehem, the disciples, the women at the tomb of Jesus, Paul the Apostle, and John the author of Revelation. It's a long and distinguished company. Do not be afraid, because God has a course of action in mind. Do not be afraid, because God has endless ways of getting what God wants. Do not be afraid, because God has abilities we don't even know about. Back in Sarah and Abraham's day, no one could imagine how God could give them a son when they were so old, but God did. You had no idea how God was going to get you out of Egypt, but God did. And now you have no idea how God will get you out of this stuck place, but God will. Do not be afraid.

Moses' second suggestion is to stand firm. Don't run away, because the chariots will quickly chase after you, catch you, and shoot you. Stand firm right here, and trust God. Don't despair, because God is infinitely and inventively crafty. Stand firm, because God is not going to abandon you no matter what happens next.

The third suggestion is to see the deliverance that Yahweh will accomplish for you today. In this context, the deliverance, or the salvation, is not focused on spiritual concerns. We Christians have a long history of thinking

about salvation in exclusively spiritual ways, but that is not true to the Bible as a whole. In this passage the deliverance is framed in explicitly political, social, and economic terms. You are not going back to the empire of Egypt! You are not returning to slavery! You are not going to toil in Pharaoh's economy any longer! Watch. Keep your eyes open, because God will do something here on this seashore that you have never seen.

You and I know the rest of the story. God sent a mighty wind to blow a path through the sea. That mighty wind reminds us of what God did back in Genesis 1, when a wind from God hovered over the watery chaos of the world. Just as that godly wind created something new, so does this godly wind in Exodus 14 create something new. You might say that here, in this event at the Red Sea, a motley, rag-tag group of Hebrews is finally created into a unified people, the people of Israel. To put it differently, this is their birth into a distinct peoplehood. Later on they will receive the law on Sinai and still later they will enter the land of Canaan, but here on the seashore is their birth. Here they are created anew. In the later language of the New Testament, here the Hebrews are symbolically baptized into new life.

On the other side of the sea, the people of Israel leave behind their stuckness. They walk into a new space where they are free of Egypt and its death-dealing ways. The way is now open before them. God has come through in unimagined, unforeseen ways. They thought they were stuck in an impasse; yet God knew better because God has at hand a wide choice of options that we know nothing about.

I do not know where or in what ways you may be feeling stuck. But I point you to Moses' approach:

- What will help you let go of your fears and strengthen your trust in God?

- In what ways are you standing firm in the incomparable power of God?
- How are you watching for God's deliverance?

You and I serve a wily God who is capable of doing far more than we can imagine. So let our souls cry out with a joyful shout!