

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XIV
“STAND STILL AND SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD”
(Exodus 14)

The expression “between a rock and a hard place” was never so apt. After their escape from Egypt, the children of Israel, who were encamped at the Lord’s explicit direction at a place called Pihahiroth by the sea (14:2), “lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were in great fear” (14:10). The Pharaoh had quickly come to regret his decision to send the Israelites forth. Surely great tragedy had visited the land of Egypt, but who is to say, Pharaoh thought, that this was really at the hand of Israel’s God as Moses said. Besides he had apparently heard from an outpost tower near the Israelite camp (and we know that such existed) that the escaped people had circled back and were obviously lost. “They are entangled in the land; the wilderness has shut them in,” He said (14:3). Immediately Pharaoh called for his chariot and the 600 chariots of the Royal Army, plus all other chariots throughout the land, and drove like fury toward where the children of Israel camped, their escape blocked by the sea. You can imagine what the Hebrews thought when, as it is written, they “lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them.” Six hundred chariots and who knows how many more racing toward them, the dust rising in great clouds, the charioteers armed to the teeth with shields, swords and javelins, and here they were stuck and on foot, sitting ducks. Between a rock and a hard place, indeed!

But there was another obstacle in the way, another enemy, this one not without but within, namely, “doubt, distrust and disbelief.”¹ When the Israelites saw Pharaoh’s army bearing down upon them they cried out to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to 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” (14:11-12). Cassuto observes, “The psychological reaction

¹ Gören Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, p. 99.

of the Israelites was typical of the usual fickleness of the masses who willingly obey their leaders when things go well, but are quick to rise up against them in time of calamity and danger.”² We understand how difficult it is to stay positive when we don’t see a way out. Like Israel we lift up our eyes and see the problems, and reckon not that the one who has called us will deliver us, and has, perhaps intentionally, led us to a point where we can see no way out on our own.

They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”, and Moses whom God had called at the burning bush for this very moment, among others, said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, of Yahweh.” “*Fear not,*” he began. It was Pope John Paul II who from the very outset of his Papacy pointed the Church continually to the words that were so often the first upon our Lord’s lips when he spoke to the disciples, “Be not afraid.” Our Lord can say that because he is the one whom the seas and the storms obey. And for the disciples, as for Israel of old, as for us today, the greatest danger is not the sea or the storm, but fear, fear which has its roots in unbelief. To be afraid is to doubt God and look only to our own resources. There is no hope in fear, and it is absolutely debilitating. The Pope was right: a most fundamental need of the Church in our age is to be not afraid.

“Fear not,” said Moses, “*and stand firm.*” Standing firm is the opposite of a fearful drawing back. To stand firm is not to run away, but rather to plant one’s feet and face squarely whatever difficulties are in the way. “My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever,” said the Psalmist. It was St. Paul, however, who put it best in his picture of the Christian warrior:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Eph. 6:10-13)

Three things Moses told the people: “Fear not.” “Stand firm.” And lastly, that which is the reason for fearless courage, “*See the salvation of God,* which he will work

² U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 162.

for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today, you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you and you have only to be still” (14:13-14). We know the story. We anticipate the results, and we take careful note that the salvation which the Israelites saw that day was not in any wise due to them. It was not their hand that saved them, nor even their faith, for they failed there, but the mighty hand of God. And what was true of them is true also of us. What we enjoy of the great salvation of God in Jesus Christ, of which the Exodus is the clearest foretelling, is by grace and grace alone, sheer grace, amazing grace. We simply turn from fear, that is, from relying our ourselves, and stand still and see the salvation of God. (Incidentally, let it not escape us that for all the unwavering certainty with which Moses addressed the people, counseling them to watch and see the Lord’s salvation, Moses himself had as yet no idea in what manner that salvation would come.³ Therein is surely a lesson for us.)

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How does God accomplish this salvation? We are told first, “The angel of the God who went before the host of Israel moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was a cloud and the darkness and the night passed without one coming near the other all night” (14:19-20). First, the Lord becomes a protecting shield between Israel and the foe. The Egyptians saw only darkness as we do when the sky blackens before a terrible storm, and they could not see what the Israelites were doing.

Next, the sea is opened that the Israelites might pass through on dry land. How this happened, I don’t know. I think, as in the case of the plagues, that we should by no means rule out natural phenomena. God most often works his wonders without disturbing the working of nature, which, after all, was created by him. It also is his servant. Beyond that, even the text by referring to “a strong east wind” points us in that direction. Furthermore I think that we need not imagine great walls of water towering on either side as pictured by Cecil B. DeMille. The text does speak of walls of water, but that may well be hyperbole. Several explanations are given. I’ll mention but two.

Writes George A. F. Knight,

³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

It is only in recent years that we have learned how unstable the areas of Suez and the Aegean Sea were in Moses' day. It has long been known that there is a deep fault or crack in the earth's surface that runs from the mountains of Lebanon down under the Sea of Galilee, along the deep Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, the Arabah, the Gulf of Aqaba, the Red Sea, across into Africa, and down the chain of Central African lakes. But it is only recently that a consensus of scholarly opinion has been reached that the two continents of Asia and Africa were in strong friction in early Old Testament times. [Here he refers to an article in the Jan. 1973 issue of *National Geographic*.]

A severe earthquake may well have heaved the Suez area several feet up, when the bottom of the Gulf of Aqaba would subside to an equal extent. The waters of the shallow *Yam Suph*, the Sea of Reeds, would then drain quickly away. Simultaneously there would be a tremendous wind caused by the quick elevation of the land surface. Then a second earthquake movement, again caused by the 'moving plate', could have swung the Suez area back to its original level or even lower, thus causing the sea from the Gulf of Suez to roar back into the *Yam Suph*. We must not forget that a tidal wave from the ocean, 35 feet high, overwhelmed the city of Tokyo at the great earthquake of 1923.⁴

Another explanation, even more involved, is offered by Rabbi Cassuto,

In order to understand the purport of the Biblical account of the division of the Sea of Reeds, we must bear in mind the natural conditions prevailing in the area. The following phenomenon is a common occurrence in the region of the Suez: at high tide, the waters of the Red Sea penetrate the sand, from under the surface, and suddenly the water begins to ooze up from under the sand which had hitherto been dry; within a short time the sand turns to mud, but the water continues to rise and ultimately a deep layer of water is formed above the sand, the whole area becoming flooded. This was once experienced by Napoleon I, when he toured that neighbourhood; when he set out he passed, without difficulty, over dry land, but on his return he found the place covered with water, and his position became dangerous. The same thing has happened in that region to tourists in our own day; they were compelled to return by boat over the water that covered the area where but a few hours earlier they had traveled on foot. The reverse sometimes happens when the Red Sea is at low tide; the water covering the sand gradually diminishes and finally disappears, and in the part that, several hours earlier, was covered by water suddenly dry land appears. Now in the vicinity of the Great Bitter Lake, which [as he has explained] is to be identified with the Sea of Reeds of [the] narrative, there is a zone where such, or similar, phenomena are particularly liable to occur on a large scale. Between the southern third of the lake, and the remaining two-thirds to the north, the lake narrows, and

⁴ *Theology as Narration: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 104-105.

in the strait thus formed the water is not as deep as in the southern and northern part, and the bed of the lake is firmer. Against this natural background the Biblical account can easily be understood.⁵

Now I am quick to say that I don't know what happened, but I know that it did—the establishment of the nation of Israel and their constant ascription of its foundation to this great deliverance of God through the sea is ample proof, in the same way that the birth and growth of the Church is for us proof of the resurrection of Christ—and I remember that the miracle is not necessarily in the interruption of natural processes, but in the extraordinary timing, which is in God's hand. The miracle is not necessarily in how the sea parted, but in that it parted at just the moment when the children of Israel desperately needed a way of escape and that the waters returned at the precise moment to catch the wheels of Pharaoh's chariots in the mud and deliver to them a resounding defeat. And it is an encouragement for us to know that whatever our situation, while the waves will not necessary stand up 10 feet high, God will move in his mysterious way, his *mysterious* way, his wonders to perform. He'll plant his footsteps on the sea and ride upon the storm.

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Let me bring us back, however, to that moment when with the sea before them and Pharaoh's hosts behind, Moses said, "March." The children of Israel could not control the sea, and even if they saw the strange phenomena of the movement of the waters, they could not know that the way was safe. They could not control the sea, they did not know its ways, but they could control their feet. They could put one foot in front of the other. They could take one step and then a second, and that is all they had to do, that and have faith.

When this 14th chapter of Exodus ends, Israel is safe on the far shore and looking back they behold, not the Egyptian host bearing down upon them, but a wreckage of chariots and the bodies of Egyptians strewn along the shore. And the last verse of the chapter reads, "And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses" (14:31). They feared the Lord with a godly fear and reverence, not the danger. They witnessed his mighty arm at work. "And they believed in the Lord and in his servant

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 167-168.

Moses.” Moses is not portrayed here as a hero. He was not. He accepted his role kicking and screaming, but was used, again by God’s grace alone, for his glory. He simply spoke the word and pointed with his rod. God did the rest.

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