

A Way Out of No Way

Exodus 14:5-31

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I heard a story once about the time little Johnny's class studied the story of the crossing of the Red Sea.

"Tell us what you learned today, Johnny," his parents said on the way home from church.

"Nothing much," said Johnny.

"Wasn't it exciting about the Israelites crossing the Red Sea? How did they get across?"

Johnny thought a bit and then began to warm up to the subject. "Well, the Egyptians had the Israelites trapped against the sea. So Moses called in the engineers and threw a pontoon bridge across, and in the night and the fog he moved all his troops across to the other side. In the morning the Egyptians saw what had happened and rolled across the bridge in their tanks. But just before they got to the other side, Moses called in an air strike and sank the bridge with all the Egyptians on it."

"Johnny," said his mother. "You know your Sunday School teacher didn't tell the story that way!"

"Well, not exactly," said Johnny. "But if I told it the way she told it, you wouldn't believe it."

It is hard to believe, isn't it? Biblical scholars haven't suggested Johnny's solution, but they do suggest it was the Reed Sea, not the Red Sea. It was a shallow lake, full of reeds, that disappeared when the Suez Canal was built. The Israelites waded across on foot, but the heavier chariots of the pursuing Egyptians got bogged down in the mud. Maybe so. And maybe not. Nobody made a videotape and we shall never know how a modern reporter might have recorded the event. The point is that the Israelites were convinced that they had been trapped, cornered, with no power and no solution for their problem, destined for destruction, and God had acted to save and deliver them. God made a way for them where there was no way. This was the exodus, which means "a way out." And the exodus is the origin and cornerstone of the Jewish faith, on which our Christian faith is ultimately based.

I

God makes a way where there is no way. That is a precious truth for our individual lives. Black Americans understand this. So far as I can tell they invented the phrase: "a way out of no way." I think of my great friend and mentor Howard Thurman, growing up in Daytona Beach where the black schools ended with the seventh grade. The only high schools open to black

students began with the ninth grade. There was no way. He was cornered against the Red Sea. But Professor Howard, the principal of the black school, taught Howard Thurman the eighth grade on his lunch hour, the superintendent agreed to examine him, and he passed the examination. A way out of no way.

There is good news in the Red Sea story for all of us, whate'er our race or clan. Are you backed up against the Red Sea because you've lost your job or because the job you have has no future? God can make a way out of no way. Are you cornered against the Red Sea because your marriage has failed? God can make a way out of no way. Has the loss of a loved one got you hemmed in by the Red Sea, with no way to get on with your life? God can make a way out of no way. Has old age overtaken you and shut you up against the Red Sea of increasing weakness, loss of power, loss of independence, loss of dignity, and self-worth? God can make a way out of no way.

I know young people who are disillusioned with the mess we older people have made of this world, with the doom that hangs over the planet, if not from nuclear war, then from the ecological disaster that threatens all species including our own,— I know young people who look at all that and are not sure they want to complete their education or plan a career or get married or have children. They're trapped against the Red Sea. And I want to say to them that God can make a way where there is no way. I want to say that to each and every one of us here.

It is significant that almost the only hymn in our book that mentions the Red Sea is an Easter hymn, where the Red Sea miracle is treated as a symbol of the greater miracle of the resurrection. Just as Moses led ancient Israel through the Red Sea, so Christ leads us his people through the impassable sea of death, safely to the other side. In the most ultimate sense, God has made a way out of no way.

II

Wouldn't it be great to stop right there with the promise of God's deliverance from our individual dilemmas and difficulties? But we have to be honest. The story of the Red Sea is not primarily about individuals. It is about a people, a nation of slaves, who had no way. It is, to use a nasty word in church, a political story.

Once again, our black brothers and sisters have always understood this. As former slaves, as oppressed and powerless people, they have identified with the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. So they sing: "Go down, Moses/ Way down in Egypt land/ Tell old Pharaoh/ Let my people go." Or, "Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't you mourn/ Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't you mourn/ 'Cause Pharaoh's army got drowned/ Oh, Mary, don't you weep."

They understood, and we all need to understand, that God is on the side of the stateless, the homeless, the unarmed, the powerless, the marginalized, the oppressed. God's justice is not equity, but a tilt towards the poor.

How often in recent years and months we have seen God make a way out of no way! In the Philippines the army of Ferdinand Marcos confronted streets

full of singing, praying, unarmed people. Miraculously, the waters parted and the people marched through to freedom. There have been subsequent problems and difficulties, even as the Hebrews faced problems in the wilderness. But that does not erase the Red Sea miracle of the Philippines.

In Argentina the Mothers of the Disappeared gathered every day outside the citadels of power: so weak, so powerless. No way. But the military dictatorship that laughed at the mothers is gone. A way out of no way.

In Eastern Europe millions of people lived under communist dictatorship, with their backs to the wall. Two years ago who would have bet a plugged nickel that they could make it through their Red Sea? There was no way. But God made a way.

All the stories are not success stories. At least not immediately. Remember Tianamen Square. The verdict is not yet in on the struggle in South Africa or the West Bank in Israel. No one knows yet how to fit Iraq's pursuit of Kuwait into this picture. Oil-rich Kuwait, with its heavily armed ally, the U.S.A., does not exactly parallel the poor, disarmed Israelites. And there is at the moment no inclination on anyone's part to stand still and see what God will do.

Still, there is arresting evidence that God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt was not the last time God delivered a powerless people from a powerful foe. The Red Sea miracle happens again and again in history. No wonder that the chapter following our story is a song:

Sing to the Lord
for he has triumphed gloriously,
the horse and the rider
he has cast into the sea.

III

We sing about the Red Sea, as we have seen, but we sing about it sparingly and apolitically, mainly about our final triumph as individuals over death. We don't sing about the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore the way the Hebrews did for centuries, or the way our black brothers and sisters celebrate the fact that "Pharaoh's army got drowned."

Can it be that we white Americans know somewhere, deep down in our subconscious minds that we are the Egyptians? The Egyptians have nothing to sing about at the Red Sea!

Think about it. Egypt was a power with great wealth and overwhelmingly superior armament, determined to preserve the current distribution of power (and oil) in the world at all costs, including the lives of its own young men and women. Egypt was opposed to any change that would better the lot of the world's enslaved, underpaid poor if that change would come at their expense. It describes us all too well. Ask the peasants in Nicaragua or Guatemala or El Salvador who the Egyptians are, and they will tell you. We are not the only Egyptians, of course. The description fits the Soviet Union and others. But it helps us understand why the third world has never been greatly interested in preventing a nuclear shoot-out between the two superpowers. To them, that would simply be Egypt against Egypt.

IV

Bad news! Is there any good news for Egyptians like us? Many of you may not agree with my understanding that we are the Egyptians. After all, it runs contrary to much of what you hear and read. But if you do agree, what can you do? You cannot stop being an Egyptian. Even if you refuse to pay taxes, go to jail, and so on, you are still an American, not a Nicaraguan or a South African black. But you can express solidarity with the Israelites, you can become an advocate of the oppressed. You do this not to save your skin in some future judgment, but because it is right. You do this, not out of guilt, but to thank God for his amazing mercy, even to Egyptians.

There is a Hasidic story that helps. According to one of the Rabbis, the angels were all rejoicing over the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea: playing their harps, singing, dancing. "Wait," said one of them. "Look, the Creator of the Universe is sitting there weeping!" They went to God. "Why are you weeping when Israel has been delivered by your power?" "I am weeping," said the Maker of the Universe, "for the dead Egyptians washed up on the shore — somebody's sons, somebody's husbands, somebody's fathers."

When I was teaching at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, as the civil rights struggle began to heat up, one of my distinctions was to belong to a small group of blacks and whites, which included among others a young Montgomery minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. We were called the Alabama Council on Human Relations, and we tried to keep the channels of communication open between blacks and whites, between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Our underpaid executive was a young Methodist minister named Bob Hughes. We were regularly visited by deputations from Harvard, Yale, and other points north, who came down to solve our problems in the forty-eight hours they were with us. I remember a Yale professor who said to me in amazement: "I don't understand Bob Hughes. We know where we stand. We are for the blacks and against the segregationists. Now Bob Hughes is certainly for the blacks. He literally risks his life for them. But he also tries to understand the segregationists. He's amused at some of the things they say and do. I think he actually loves them!"

Is God like Bob Hughes, with a compassion broad enough to embrace both the Israelites and the Egyptians, both the oppressed and the oppressors? Yes, and more so. Bob Hughes was a pale though wonderful reflection of God. We do not have to rely on Hasidic lore; we find it right in the Bible:

In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt. . . .And the Lord will smite Egypt, smiting and healing, and they will return to the Lord and he will heed their supplications and heal them. . . .In that day Israel will be a third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage" (see Isaiah 19:19-25). That incredible, undeserved grace is the good news for us Egyptians.

For the past weeks our air waves have been full of self-righteousness. We are the guardians of right and truth all over the world. Our motives are pure and righteous altogether. God is surely on our side. But if I understand Scripture,

God is on the side of the Israelites, the oppressed, the wretched of the earth. And we Egyptians, we oppressors, are included in the broad compassion of God — way out on the edge, but included, thanks to grace alone. It is out of that grace that you and I must live and act very humbly. Very humbly indeed.