

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
Exodus 14:10-22
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Backwards and Forwards

Where do you stand in this story? If you try to step back and see yourself as a character in the midst of this story, what role do you take?

When I step back and try to see this story, I must admit that my imagination is almost completely captured by the film version starring Charlton Heston. It is difficult for me to not simply stand in the place of the cameraman, watching the action unfold from a third-person, neutral perspective. I am sure that many of you remember the film—Heston as a very tan, blue-eyed Moses, standing with arm outstretched, the water becoming walls as the Israelites pass on the dry ground. Whenever I read this story, I cannot help but think about that particular picture. It is etched into my imagination from years of watching its annual appearance on television.

And I wish it were not so! Because that movie is such a flat portrayal of a thick text. Hollywood leaked all of the nuances and complexities out of the story. For example, when you only think of this story through the lens of movie, then you miss all the Israelite complaining going on in the background. Moses was leading the people out of their slavery in the land of Egypt into the promised freedom of a new land. But when they realized Pharaoh and his armies were hot on their trail, the Israelites began to be shaped more by fear rather than by hope.

And some of them spoke that shift out loud. “Moses,” they cried out, “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? Is 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.”

It is startling—the change in the Israelites. Just last Sunday we read how they were ready for their liberation—hurriedly eating the Passover meal, loins girded, sandals on feet, staff in hand, blood on the doorposts. They were ready for their freedom, their imaginations defined by what might be, what would be, in their future of hope, rather than by what had been in their history of oppression and fear.

But now—now that they were actively on the way from slavery into freedom, now that they had gathered up their families and whatever else they could carry to follow Moses—now, all of the sudden, they looked around at an unfamiliar landscape and into an unfamiliar future, and fear started to take hold of them again.

And we cannot blame them, can we. Pharaoh and his armies were hot on their trail. The Israelites knew that if the Egyptians caught up, it would be, as children’s books poetically say, “the end of them.” Of course they became fear-shaped as they looked back and saw their enemies quickly approaching. We would be too!

And it did not help matters that they were standing there on the banks of the Red Sea. If they look backwards, they see Pharaoh’s armies barreling towards them with chariots and spears and officers dressed for war. But if they look forwards, they see the churning waters of a sea much too deep to swim with its opposite bank much too far away. And if they look down, they see their own children clinging to their legs with eyes as big as saucers overflowing with worried tears. Of course the people of Israel became fear-shaped, rather than hope-shaped.

They became so fear-shaped that they momentarily forgot why they had left Egypt in the first place. With fear-shaped imagination dominating their memories they decided slavery wasn’t so bad after all. We could endure

that pain and violence. We could endure the brickmaking and the sting of the whip. At least we were alive. At least we had a place to sleep. At least we had some food. At least our children had time to play. Now—now all we have is a possible death in an unfamiliar land, sandwiched between Pharaoh’s armies and a sea of chaos.

I understand how they could become fear-shaped rather than hope-shaped. I have seen it first-hand with women who are trying to leave a home life full of domestic violence. A staff person at a battered women’s shelter told me that it usually takes, on average, seven times for a woman to leave her abusive situation before she can leave it behind permanently. She looks behind her and sees the armies of abuse and terror and knows that is not the way it is supposed to be. And yet she looks forward and sees an unknown future in an unknown land; filled with worries about how she will make it financially; how she will keep her children; what her friends and family will think; will he come after her; and the waves of chaos and the unfamiliar seem worse than what she is trying to escape. When you are standing between Pharaoh’s armies and the banks of the Red Sea, it is understandable that you quickly become shaped more by fear rather than by hope.

I understand how that shift can happen. I have heard about it in my own family’s stories. My great-uncle Don battled the disease of alcoholism for his entire life. It ate him up and spat him out to the point where he started living on the streets. But it was not like he and his family, my Aunt BB, did not try to liberate him from its clutches. Uncle Don tried rehab on numerous occasions.

But Uncle Don would stand there on the edge of a journey to freedom, looking back at the army of an addiction that would probably kill him but that was also a familiar way of life, and looking forward to an unknown future that held promise but would also require constant work and real change. And as he stood sandwiched in between the army of addiction and the sea of change, he would become completely shaped by fear. And every single time, he decided to go back to the way it had been rather than on to the way it could be. And Uncle Don died homeless on the streets of Fort Worth. I understand how the shift can happen. When you are standing between Pharaoh’s armies and the banks of the Red Sea, you can quickly become shaped by fear rather than by hope.

And that is exactly what was going on with the Israelites. There they stood, sandwiched between an army that wanted to take them back into brutal, yet familiar, slavery; and a sea where the waters churned and the opposite bank seemed way too far away. And all of the hope that had accumulated as their escape was planned and first set into motion started to leak out of their hearts and the all-too-familiar fear began to take residence in their souls again.

This past week, Rev. Joe Clifford, a pastor at First Presbyterian here in Dallas, told me a Jewish midrash on this text that he learned about from a rabbi in Atlanta. Now, a midrash is a kind of rabbinic literature that flows out studying the Torah. The rabbis believed that every word in the Torah was from God and therefore, no words were to be regarded as superfluous. If the word was in there, it had a purposeⁱ.

The midrash Joe told me flows out of verse 22 of this 14th chapter in Exodus. “The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground.” The ancient rabbis focused on why the Torah would say “they went *into* the sea on dry ground.” Why did the Lord use the word “into?” Why did it not say something like “they went on dry ground through the sea,”—something that would lead to the picture you get when Charlton Heston raises his hand and the waters form the walls **before** anyone goes in. The rabbis wanted to know why the Torah said **into**. The ancient Rabbi Judah answered the question this way: When Moses raised his staff, nothing happened to the Red Sea. But the Lord said, “What are you waiting for?” So the twelve tribes of Israel started arguing about who would have “the honor” of going into the sea first.

Well, Rabbi Judah claimed that as they argued (remember Pharaoh and his army are on the way getting closer and closer), a man named Nahshon ben Aminadab, had enough of the arguing, turned toward the sea and started

walking. He walked in up to his ankles, nothing happened. He kept going until the waters were up to his waist. Nothing happened. The waters reached his chest. Nothing happened. The waters reached his neck and still, nothing happened. But when the waters of the Red Sea hit Nahshon's nostrils, the sea opened up and the waters became dry ground, just as God had promised they would. And Nahshon led all of the others to their freedom.

When you are standing in between Pharaoh's army and the banks of the Sea, fear can quickly take hold and render you motionless. You can quickly decide that you were better off back in Egypt's land under the yoke of slavery than you are standing at the edge of the waters of change or newness. We all understand how that startling but sudden shift can happen—how you can go from being shaped more by hope to being shaped more by fear. It can happen in the blink of an eye as soon as you feel the stampede of Pharaoh's army shaking the ground but still don't see a way through the watery, unfamiliar sea that stands in front of you.

But I believe it is precisely in that moment when God asks us the question God asked Moses and the Israelites—"What are you waiting for?" And we are called on to make a decision. Will we decide that fear and Pharaoh get to tell us who we are and keep us enslaved; OR, will we decide that God will fulfill God's promises even when we cannot see how or when the fulfillment will happen.

We know what Nahshon and the Israelites decided. Nahshon felt the ground shaking from Pharaoh's horses and decided that he would trust God to live up to God's job description. He decided he would doubt his own doubts and go forward as God had commanded, trusting that God would indeed make a way out of no way; trusting that God would indeed finish what God had started way back with Abraham and Sarah when God made a covenant with them and promised to always be their God and to never abandon them simply to themselves.

And clearly, Nahshon's decision to plow forward and trust gave the rest of the Israelites courage. For they all went across the sea on dry land, even though they did not understand how any of it was happening and did not know what would happen once they reached the other side. It is as if that one voice of courage and trust within that community of faith emboldened them all to step out with courage and with trust.

And I cannot help but wonder if one reason why a woman finally leaves an abusive home even if it takes her seven tries, is because she eventually discovers in a shelter or in a support group that she is not alone and that others will walk the journey with her. And I cannot help but wonder if my Uncle Don's life would have turned out differently had he decided to become a part of an AA group, to get a sponsor, and to surround himself with others from whom he could borrow hope and courage on the days he needed them.

For our testimony as a people is that God does make a way out of no way, but many times we need one another to help us see it and step out into it. We need other people, other brothers and sisters in faith, to help us remain hope-shaped when everything around us shouts the cadence of fear. Because I do believe that every day we make the decision—either consciously or unconsciously—to choose whether we will live out of fear or out of faith. On some days we make that decision hourly. But our rootedness in a community of faith can be our Nahshon ben Aminadab—giving us courage and hope that we could not sustain on our own.

One more thing—if you go to the genealogy of Jesus as recorded in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, you find the following in verse 4 : "Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab, the father of Nahshon." Wonder of wonders, Nahshon ben Aminadab is a part of Jesus' family tree. Now doesn't that say something about the God who makes a way no one can imagine, a God who can make a way of salvation that begins in the middle of nowhere, in a manger, and becomes the way that leads to the reconciliation and healing for creation.

ⁱ Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. Jewish Literacy—The most important things to know about the Jewish religion, its people, and its history. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991.