

A Time to Pray and a Time to Act

Exodus 14:5-31

Sunday, September 20, 2020

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Sermon, "A Time to Pray and a Time to Act"

An eight-year-old boy was reporting to his folks at Sunday dinner what he had learned at church school that morning. "Boy, was it exciting!" he exclaimed to his parents. "Moses organized all the Hebrews into a resistance group. They planned real carefully, and finally they broke loose from their Egyptian slave masters. They moved as fast as they could toward Canaan. They drove every kind of vehicle they could get hold of--jeeps, half-tracks, eighteen-wheelers—everything!

"But Pharaoh's army wouldn't quit. They tracked down the Israelites with color radar. They exploded missiles all around them and shot at them from jet planes in the sky. When Moses and his people reached the Red Sea, they thought they were finished. There was raging water in front of them and Egyptians behind them.

"Suddenly, though, the Corps of Engineers came to the rescue and built a pontoon bridge over the Red Sea and all the fugitives crossed over to freedom. Then, just as Pharaoh's forces were about to go across the bridge, the Hebrews blew it up with dynamite and saved all the people. Then they lived happily ever after in the promised land. What a terrific story!"

The youngster's mom and dad were more than just a little concerned about their child's overactive imagination. "Is that really what they told you at church this morning?" they inquired. "Well, not exactly," their son replied. "But if I told you what they told me, you'd never believe it!"¹

The little boy may have been right, yet this dramatic story of the crossing of the Red Sea has stood on its own for thousands of years. In Jewish history, the Exodus is paramount. It is the high tide of God's power moving on the ocean of Israel's corporate history. Their crossing of the Red Sea, escaping from the death clutches of Pharaoh's army, was a pivotal event.

And it's an event which connects with us as well. We all have times in our life when we face obstacles, times when we are torn between prayer and action.

There's an old story about a fellow who needed prayer, so he asked a couple of leaders in the church to pray with him. The first one put his arm around his shoulder and prayed, "Lord, help my brother to just hold on..."

The second leader followed suit, put his arm around the man's shoulder and prayed, "lord, help my brother to just let go..."

¹ Maxie Dunnam, *Exodus* in Communicator's Commentary, Word, pg. 158.

Exodus 14 would describe such times as crossover times. The text invites us to ask “How might I respond when I find myself trapped between a rock and a hard place? When I’m caught between the devil and the deep blue sea?”

I believe that in the midst of those crossover times, you can experience the saving grace of God.

As you might guess, Candice and I experienced a crossing time this past summer with our appointment to Aledo. We weren’t caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, but for over a year, I had a growing sense in my spirit that it was time for us to move into a new appointment.

The Israelites, however, were in quite a fix and they needed to escape Egypt. After ten plagues had devastated that land, Pharaoh finally permitted the slave-nation of Israel to leave his country.

We don’t know what prompted the events which are recorded in chapter 14. Perhaps Pharaoh snapped his fingers to signal one of the Jewish slaves to bring him his afternoon grapes and wine. No one responded. He snapped again. Still no response. Finally, one of his courtiers cleared his throat and said, “Uh, Pharaoh, remember you released all the slaves yesterday. They left Egypt--every last one of them.”

“I let them go? What was I thinking? Chase after them and bring them back!” So Pharaoh’s army rushed out in hot pursuit.

They found the Israelites at the borders of Egypt, hopelessly stuck on a dead-end trail where the desert, the sea and the marshes barred their way out of the apparent trap which they had marched into. Defeating the Israelites seemed certain. Hedged in on the one side by the Red Sea and on the other by Pharaoh’s army, the Israelites were filled with fear.

We react in much the same way when we face obstacles in our lives. And if not fear, then at least apprehension.

One of the lessons in life is to recognize the dark barrier called fear may be deep and it may be imposing. But you can wade through it. You can navigate it. Or you can see the waters of fear separate before your eyes as you cross over to find your Promised Land on the other side.

One of the marks of such crossing times is that you know the Promised Land lies just ahead. But the question remains, How do you get there?

The answer is given in two very different lessons, given in two acts. The first act is found in verses 5-14 and it is marked by crying out to God. In the case of the Israelites, as Pharaoh’s army pursued them, they cried out not in faith, but in complaint to Moses and to God. “What’s wrong? Weren’t there enough graves for us in Egypt that you had to lead us out into the wilderness to die?”

This is an especially biting complaint because the Egyptians specialized in grave-making. Even today, their pyramids draw millions of tourists. No doubt the Jews had been used as slave labor to construct some of the Egyptians' elaborate burial projects. No doubt in past generations some of them had been buried alive in the pyramids with a dead pharaoh so they might continue to serve him in the afterlife. At least that was the belief and custom of the ancient Egypt.

God's response to the complaint of the Israelites is given in verse 13: "Stand still and see the deliverance which the Lord will accomplish for you today."

Sometimes that's the most difficult thing for us to do: do nothing and let God. Yet that's precisely the prescription which the Lord wrote for the Israelites as they faltered between the devil and the deep blue sea.

It's a lesson which the psalmist David would learn many years later. In Psalm 37 we read:

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him...

Standing still does not imply laziness or inactivity. Rather it implies a quiet assurance in God. It's faith. It's trust. It's a confidence that declares, "Come on, Pharaoh! Bring your whole army with you. I'm not going anywhere, but you still won't get me! I'm trusting in God!"

It's saying with the psalmist, "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth."

The second act begins in verse 15. Here, God's prescription is as different as different could be. What worked in the first act is not appropriate in the second act just as God's prescription for the second act would not have been appropriate in the first.

One of the mistakes preachers make is to present pat answers and easy formulas. "If you do *this*, then *that* will happen."

But life is neither pat nor easy. What works in one situation will not necessarily work in another. I learned that shortly after beginning my second youth pastorate in Garland, Texas. My first youth position had been in Collinsville. Through trial and error in that first position, I learned what would work in youth ministry.

Unfortunately, everything which had worked for me in Collinsville failed in Garland. So I tried some of the things which had failed in Collinsville. Guess what: those are the things which worked in Garland.

What works in one situation won't necessarily work in another. Knowing what to do requires us to be attuned to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit.

And so we find a very different prescription given to the Israelites in verse 15.

I love the way Ken Taylor interprets this verse in *The Living Bible*: "*Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Quit praying and get the people moving! Forward, march!'*"

Quit praying and get moving! The first act is marked by crying out to God and waiting on him. The second act is marked by action. In the first act, you discern what you must do; in the second act, you do what you had discerned.

Before we learned of our appointment to Aledo, we prayed. But once Bishop Beard called me and told me of my new appointment to Aledo, it was time to get moving—literally! Prayer wasn't going to pack our stuff; we were!

There is no question that prayer is a form of action, but how often do we as Christians confuse prayer with the kind of action God requires of us?

“Moses, lift up your staff and the Red Sea will part before you!”

“Wait a minute, Lord, let me pray about that!”

“No! lift up your staff! Quit praying and get moving!” This is not to minimize in any way the importance of prayer, but we cannot fool ourselves into thinking that all we have to do is pray. Sometimes we have to move!

I hope and pray that we reach a crossover time in the very near future: I hope and pray that this pandemic comes to an end and we will be able to fully open our church. When that happens, our focus will have to shift from waiting on God to action. I believe that we are in a time of prayer and waiting on God. But soon the Spirit will nudge us and say, “Quit praying and get moving!”

The Gospels record many times when Jesus went up the mountain to pray, but he always came down from the mountain to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, raise the dead and proclaim God's salvation.

When you reach crossover times in your life--when you find yourself between the devil and the deep blue sea--heed the still small voice of the Spirit. The Lord may be telling you to “Be still and know that I am God.”

And that may be the right word for that moment. But don't take that as the final word. If you listen long enough, you may hear the Lord say, “Quit praying and get moving!” And then you will experience the saving grace of God.