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Moses & His People & Their God IV. Get Up and Go

(Exodus 14:10-22 NRSV) As 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. 11 They 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? 12 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." 13 But 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. 14 The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." 15 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. 16 But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. 17 Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. 18 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers." 19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. 20 It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. 21 Then 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. 22 The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

The story was told to me by Lester Palmer, the former President of the Disciples Pension Fund and a renowned storyteller – especially stories about parrots. It seems there was a young woman, living in her very first apartment, away from home. Her father had taught her to love animals, birds in particular. And so, she sought to make her new home complete by buying two female parrots. They were beautiful birds, bright with lovely plumage and she bought a beautiful cage in which to keep them. These two parrots brightened up the woman's little living room and reminded her of the long hours she and her dad had spent teaching his parrots to speak. There was only one problem. The parrots had apparently had speaking lessons before she got them – because

whenever anyone came into her apartment, the two parrots would start talking: *“Hi, want to have some fun? I know you do, big boy. Want to have some fun?”*

The young woman was, of course, rather embarrassed by this behavior. She finally decided that she needed her father’s advice on how to retrain the parrots. So, when she traveled home for the weekend, she told her father about her troubled pets. Her rather straight-laced father was shocked. He thought and thought. Finally he said, *“I have the solution. You know my two parrots: Peter and Paul. I’ve taught them to pray and recite scripture. Next weekend, you bring your two parrots home and we’ll put them in the cage with Peter and Paul. They’re sure to be a good influence on your parrots.”*

The following weekend, the young woman did just as her father advised. She brought her two parrots home to Dad. She put them in the cage with his parrots, Peter and Paul. The two female parrots eyed the two male ones and immediately said, *“Hi, want to have some fun? I know you do, big boy. Want to have some fun?”* The parrot Peter quickly nudged the parrot Paul, and said, *“Paul, you can quit praying and open your eyes. Our prayers have finally been answered!”*

It may not seem like it at first glance, but our scripture story today, the climax of the flight of the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt, is actually a story about prayer – even if it doesn’t have parrots in it. Now, as you listened to it being read, though, it probably didn’t strike you as being about prayer. I think partly that’s because we’re more used to thinking of this as a *miracle* story and as an *action* story. Hollywood has conditioned us to do so. What movie do you think of when you think of Moses? For some of you, I’ll bet it’s the now half-a-century old movie “The Ten Commandments” with that dramatic and larger than life portrayal of Moses by Charlton Heston. In fact, the way that Cecil B. Demille depicted the story of the Exodus and the

parting of the Red Sea became a kind of standard for action movies ever since. And that motif of being, as the cliché goes, “between the devil and the deep blue sea” is a now-standard plot element of virtually every action adventure movie. For Moses and his people, it was the devil of Pharaoh and his army behind them and the apparently impenetrable water in front of them. In fact, the original Indiana Jones movie, “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” even very loosely used another motif from the story of the Hebrew people’s flight, that of the ark, the altar, that they carried with them on their exodus from Egypt. And goodness, how many times in that movie did Harrison Ford seem to be indeed between the devil and the deep blue sea, trapped between two terrible things, looking as if time had run out and then lo and behold he was saved by something seemingly miraculous. It was a motif that would continue to be one of the central plot elements of even the latest Indiana Jones movie a couple of years ago, even if Harrison Ford confessed later that his knees hurt and his back hurt and maybe he just wasn’t as young as he used to be.

But the point is this: Hollywood and television shows have conditioned us to think of this story as an action adventure story with a miracle. And that’s ok; it’s a pretty dramatic and miraculous story – the wholesale movement of an entire people out of slavery. And whether the route of the Hebrews was through what we now know as the “Red Sea” or whether it was through a nasty, dismal, swampy, morass known as the “Reed Sea” – for you see, the words in the original Hebrew can be translated either way and there is just no way of knowing what they originally referred to – it is still a dramatic, action-packed, and indeed miraculous-seeming story.

But my friends, there’s another miracle in the midst of this story *and it’s about prayer* – which, believe it or not, is its own kind of action adventure! We often hear it said that *God answers prayers*. But what might we **mean** by that? And, much more important, how does God understand what it means to “answer prayer”? That’s the

other story in this story. To see how that is so, let us recap and recall how we got to today's story.

As we have heard in the last few weeks, for generations the pharaohs of Egypt had held the Hebrew people in slavery. For generations, the great monuments of Egypt were built from their sweat and the toil and the blood. For generations, those slaves must have fervently prayed for liberation, prayed to be released from bondage, prayed to see their children alive and free. And God called Moses, as we have seen, and led him, even with his stammering and stuttering, to be the one who would confront Pharaoh and demand that he free the Hebrew people. And finally Pharaoh agreed. Reluctantly. After warning and threat and devastation and tears, Pharaoh had agreed to let the people go. And so they packed quickly, with only what they could carry. And like refugees throughout the ages, they set off on foot with nothing but the clothes on their backs and a few things they could carry. Little food. No idea where they were going. They set out and got but a few miles out of town when they stopped to camp for the night-by the sea – whether “Red” Sea or “Reed” Sea, it doesn't matter. Weary and wondering, anxious and scared, this motley group of people, diverse in age and ability, set about to gather wood for cook fires and branches for make-shift shelters. They were free! But they were so very vulnerable. They were out from under the overseer's lash! But they were also out under the stars, in the midst of the wilderness, with little food and no plan.

And before they could even settle into their first night of freedom, they saw him coming – Pharaoh had changed his mind. With chariots and horses and deadly spears, Pharaoh's army was headed straight for them. On one side of them was the sea. And on the other, a mighty and angry army that had controlled them for all of their lives. And in their anguish and fear, they turned on Moses, they turned in fury on their leader and they cried, “*Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out*

here in the middle of nowhere to die?”

And that's when Moses prayed. Now, our New Revised Standard Version doesn't quite capture it, but it is in fact a prayer, even if it looks like an address to the people. You know how sometimes you say something hoping someone else will overhear you? That's the kind of prayer this is. And here is what Moses said to them, hoping that God would hear and approve and answer this prayer, as he stood there between the devil and the deep blue sea: *“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; ... **you have only to keep still.**”* Now, being still in order to understand the will of God, in order to try and discern what God's hope for your life might be, in order to understand how God might be answering your prayer, has a much to commend it. When it says in Psalm 46 “Be still and know that I am God,” that can be very good advice indeed. It's hard to hear God if you never be quiet. Being still is indeed sometimes a good way to try to know what God is saying, what God is wanting, how God might be answering your prayer. **But – not this time.**

When Moses says, in essence, *“Ok, Lord, we're being very still now; do your thing,”* God answers back in the very next verse and says, *“Uh, Moses, not this time. Get up. Get your people up. Move. **Put your feet in the water.**”* Our translation puts it this way: “Why do you cry out to me?” says God. *“Tell the [the people] to **go forward.**”* There are times in life when it is NOT time to be still and this is one of them. Rabbi Michael Siegel says this about this exchange between Moses and God and what happens next:

So the answer to their prayers was to walk into the water. The people were expecting God to respond to their prayers by acting on their behalf. God's answer was for the people to be participants in the fulfillment of their own

prayers! No less miraculous than the sea splitting open was the site [sic] of a people taking that first step into the water.... The lesson that Moses [and the people] learned [is] that prayer... should be a prelude to action. Then and now, salvation comes when people are willing to respond to their own prayer with the amen of action, inspired by the faith... that we will not walk alone.

Moreover, he continues,

Had the Israelites not taken that first step into the water, that leap into action, those who would have survived Pharaohs [sic] onslaught would have been returned to Egypt, and this slave people would not have even amounted to a footnote in history.... [But] When we respond to our own prayers with the amen of action it can change everything.¹

"It can change everything." In fact, that's one of those old, old slogans about prayer: *"Prayer changes things."* But here's the rub: "Have you ever found yourself praying for guidance, asking that God help you make some needed change in your life, to help you solve some problem or find a new solution?" And then God does it!

Barbara Blaisdell puts the point this way; listen to her words:

Too often we pray and then do not listen for an answer. But when we ... do listen, the answer we get is not likely to be as neat and tidy and safe as we want it to be. In fact, the bigger the stuff we ask for, the more risky and dangerous [God's] answer is going to be.²

In fact, the first thing that prayer can and should change is **us!** Because God is going to ask you, as Rabbi Siegel says, to cooperate in the answer to your prayer, to be

¹http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/siegel_4814.htm

²The Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, "Moses and a Church In-Between. The Terror of Freedom and the Faithfulness of God," a sermon preached at First Christian Church, Concord, California, June 17, 2001.

willing to do your part, to take action, to truly trust that in the midst of change, even when the deep blue sea is on one side and the devil the other, that God will move with you through the change.

Let me close with more of Rabbi Siegel's wisdom; listen carefully to what he has to say about how we should pray and what we should do when we are caught in the midst of change, in the midst of worry, in the midst of hard choices – and what God will expect of us!

Friends, if you have concerns about your family, and who doesn't, God will want to know what you are doing to solve your family's problems. If you have concerns about health and safety, God will want to know what you are doing to respond to your own prayers, what you are doing to help.... [I]f you are praying for the victims of tragedy... God will want to know what you are doing. What steps are you taking? Are you collecting food, are you making donations? Are you willing to take a step, to act, even when logic tells you that the problem you seek to solve is insurmountable? Wondrous things can happen, seas can split open when people are willing to take a step, to act as the amen to their own prayers.³

"To act as the amen to their own prayers." What a lovely way of putting it. And it's what God was saying there to Moses: "Cooperate in your own prayer! Get up! Put your feet in the water and move forward." Be your own "Amen"! It is what God says to us too, my friends: Get up, move forward amidst the change – and know and trust that God indeed goes with us and indeed answers our prayers. May we have the grace to recognize those answers and to cooperate with them!

³http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/siegel_4814.htm