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Not Fake News: Who, What, When, Where, Why 2. Where – In the Midst of Our Aquatics

Exodus 14:5-16 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon. 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. 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? 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." 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. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. 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. 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. 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." 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. 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. 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

The power of water has been much in the news, and much in our minds and hearts the last few weeks. The hurricanes that have so destroyed and so damaged many lives here and in the Caribbean, the terrible pictures out of Africa and the Indian sub-continent showing the devastating power of water and mud to wreak havoc have torn at our hearts. As befits what a generous people you are, you have opened not just your hearts and your prayers, but your wallets as well, giving over \$8000 so far to Week

of Compassion for hurricane relief. Even if we have not been directly affected by a hurricane or typhoon or tsunami, I suspect most of us have been in the desert parts of the southwest United States when a summer thunderstorm rolled through instantly turning dry washes into raging torrents, rain coming down like buckshot on your windshield so hard that you can't see and you fear that fragile barrier between you and the tumult may break. There is an undeniable power to water and it is no wonder that virtually every religion and culture has in their ancient stories some version of a catastrophic flood, for life sometimes indeed has its moments of disaster and catastrophe, and water – so life giving and yet so death-dealing – is an apt metaphor for where we sometimes find ourselves when life assaults us.

Our scripture this morning is also the story of the power of water and how water can be a very fitting metaphor for our lives. In this, the second of our short sermon series from the Book of Exodus, we are looking at some of these familiar stories as a way of countering the scourge of our day, the proliferation of fake news about our world, whether from the left or the right. It's good, then, to sometimes return to our ancient founding stories to remind ourselves what the real news is and where God is in our lives, particularly when life turns hard or hurtful or when we too are deluged by the floods. So let's remind ourselves of the story of Moses and his people exiting Egypt, a story that has been the fodder for many, many movies.

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 and led him, even with his stammering and stuttering, to be the one to 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. Weary and wondering, anxious and scared, this motley group of people, diverse in age and ability, set about to gather wood for cooking 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?*" You can understand their despair, their anger, their sarcastic lashing out, for on one side of them was the literal flood of a scary sea and on the other a flood of armed and hostile men seeking to hurt them and return them to a life of slavery.

And what does Moses do? He prays. 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. Sometimes the aquatics of our lives are such that when Psalm 46 "Be still and know that I am God," that is very good advice indeed. It's hard to hear God if you're never 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 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.

Listen one final time to more of Rabbi Siegel's wisdom as he reminds us 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, when the storms of life are pummeling us – and what God will expect of us!

Friends, if you have concerns about your family... 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

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.

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.... 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 Emphasis mine.