

"Trusting in Covenant"  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; September 30, 2018

**Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29**

*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.*

*...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 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 Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.*

I wasn't a very focused pastor last Thursday. The week started out really well; I got a jump start on my sermon and waded through some emails. But when Thursday came around, I was feeling all the national hubbub around Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testimony about sexual assault, and how it might affect Judge Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court. Driving to church that day with the radio on, I couldn't listen to the politicians grandstanding as the hearing started. I thought instead of what I learned years ago, that [one in three women](#) is physically or sexually assaulted in her lifetime. I thought of my three sisters, and my six nieces, wondering which of them would have stories to tell (or already does). And I thought of my own experience as a twenty-year-old, evading unwanted physical attention from a national church leader in his sixties. Throughout the day on Thursday, I found myself obsessively refreshing news websites and trying to learn from the latest commentary. I went home early, since I was clearly getting nothing of substance done in the office.

By Friday morning, focus was farther away still. After Blasey Ford's hours of steady testimony, Kavanaugh's intemperate response, and the committee chair's decision to simply vote rather than investigate further, I found myself in emotional meltdown. The nation had witnessed some terrible effects of sexism and substance abuse, yet there was no pause in the push for partisan power on the Supreme Court. And what could I, just one of 300 million Americans, do about it? I wept because it felt like there were no good options. It would be unhelpful to just harangue and harass on social media—

that only adds to the storm. I couldn't count on the current actors to accomplish a meaningful compromise. Both national political parties seem entrenched and ideological, though to a different degree. Yet I couldn't say "a pox on both their houses" and reject political awareness altogether, because then I become just another cynic who checks out rather than leaning in. And how many lives will be broken by sexism and abuse of power while we endure the centuries-long process "to form a more perfect union"? I want God to intervene in this broken system, to show up supernaturally, say "Enough!", and put a stop to the mess, to make the just and right path plain and do away with all the rest. I don't believe God normally acts like that, but on Friday morning I wasn't sure I could *follow* a God who stays behind the scenes despite grave injustice. I felt powerless as a citizen and backed in a corner, caught—as the saying goes—between the devil and the deep blue sea.

That's where the Hebrew people find themselves, quite literally, while fleeing from Pharaoh in Egypt. We are some four hundred years after the Joseph story we heard last week, after the Hebrew people have prospered and multiplied, after their enslavement at the hands of a new Pharaoh, after the call of Moses at the burning bush, and the ten plagues. Now Moses and the people are fleeing from the brutal existence they have known, yet face a future as free people that is still fearful and unknown. Like Abram and Sarai, they are headed to a new land based on God's promises of guidance, but now there are hundreds of horsemen and chariots—plus one very angry Pharaoh—chasing after them. Their flight leads them to the Red Sea, where they can go no further, but cannot go back either. They turn on Moses in sarcastic anger: "Is there a shortage of graves in Egypt? Is that why you've brought us all the way out here, to die in the desert at the hands of the powerful Egyptians?" I see all these fearful people milling about helplessly, clamoring for salvation. One writer points out that Moses' opponents mention Egypt five times in two verses. How many times do you suppose they reference God? Zero.<sup>1</sup> Anxiety and fear can multiply our foes and keep us from seeing salvation.

Moses, though, recalls God's faithfulness and promises divine deliverance. On our own paths from fear to freedom through faith, it's helpful to hear again how Moses instructs God's people. "Do not be afraid," and "stand firm". "The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." While the first two are classic biblical exhortations, right now I'm especially drawn to that last one: "you have only to keep still". We are in a cultural moment when conflicts about gender, power and control have led to great strife and feverish activity, much heat without much light. We are seeing cultural anxiety in the face of social change—growing representation and power by people of color, growing accountability for men behaving badly, and growing freedom for people seeking ([in the words of OutFront Minnesota](#)) to "be who they are, love who they love, and live without fear of violence, harassment or discrimination." In the face of this tumultuous change and the backlash it inspires, our generations can lose sight of the humanity in the other, getting stuck as I was on Friday in a fearful, polarized muck. Anxiety can be like quicksand, and the first response to both is the same—keep still. At the heart of the conflict between the Hebrews and Moses is the question of whether God is present or not. Whereas the frightened Hebrews turn and churn because all they can see is Pharaoh's threat, Moses understand the greater reality, that God "is indeed a live, active, decisive character in this crisis".<sup>2</sup> Of course God will seem absent if we are too frenzied to sense God-with-us, Emmanuel. Of course we will feel cast adrift, if in stormy seas we lose sight of the deep anchor of faith. When anxious fear gives way to fretful and pointless motion, then we listen to the words of the Psalmist: "Be still and know that I am God".

Beloveds, I don't know for sure how the waters will open this time, how dry land will appear within the waters, just as at the first Creation. The pathway through partisan division to greater wholeness is

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus 14:1-31 Commentary" in the *New Interpreter's Bible* commentary, vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 793.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, 793.

unclear, though at least the next step of investigation has become clear. What is to follow from that future is not yet plain. Like the caterpillar leading to the butterfly, like a church transforming for the future, the process will likely involve further chaos and anxiety, will require deconstruction and reconstruction. But if we seek stillness enough to sense God's presence in the turmoil, we can trust that the God of salvation covenants with us and all people to lead from death to life, and from slavery to freedom. Even—especially—when we can't see the way ourselves. Amen.