

Hexham Trinity Methodist Church

Sunday 13th September 2020 - Sermon

Reading: Exodus 14:13-31

Prayer

Last Sunday we spent some time looking at the story of the Passover in Exodus 12. We thought about what God was doing through the Passover, the event itself and the festival that is established through it. In looking at the passage we remembered that it was part of Moses' call recorded in Exodus 3 to tell Pharaoh to let God's people leave Egypt. We considered how the passage spoke to us, about how God doesn't give up when God's plans are thwarted by humans and how we all have our part to play in God's plans becoming a reality. We also noted our, or certainly my, uncomfortableness with the how of what God does in the Passover.

At the end of Exodus 12 after the Passover and the impact of the death of all the Egyptian firstborn Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and tells them and the Israelites to go. 12:31 tells us *"During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me."*

Today our reading from Exodus 14:13-31 takes us to the next significant part in the journey of the Israelites journeying to the Promised Land, the moment when God parts the Red Sea to enable the Israelites to cross and then closes the sea over the pursuing Egyptians.

Before we look at these verses it's important to remind ourselves what has happened between the middle of chapter 12 where we left the story last week the middle of chapter 14 where we've picked the story up today. The rest of chapter 12 records the preparation for the first passover and the moment when God passes over and the Egyptian first born are struck down. After this, as I've already said Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and tells them and the Israelite people to leave Egypt, he releases them to go and worship God and to begin their journey to the promise land.

This leads to Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egypt. At the end of chapter 12 we read about how many of them left, how they took their bread dough but didn't have time to prepare the food properly and add the yeast leading them to eat unleavened bread. To this day the bread at Passover is unleavened and some Churches insist on unleavened bread or wafers at Holy Communion. This is followed by instructions for the Passover festival and in chapter 13 instructions that every firstborn male must be consecrated to God whether human or animal.

Verse 13:17 is a significant verse in the narrative. It says: *'When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God*

said, *“If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.”* So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. This is a key verse as it tells us why the people of Israel ended up needing to cross the Red Sea in the first place, I’ll come back to it again in a few minutes. As the people of Israel travelled the way God called they were led by God. Verse 13:21 tells us *‘By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.’*

At the beginning of chapter 14, we are nearly at today’s reading!, God tells Moses to set up camp near Pi Hahiroth (Ha hi roth) between Migol and the sea. He also tells them that he *‘will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.’* This leads Pharaoh to change his mind about letting the people of Israel go and the he and his army set off in pursuit of the people of Israel. You can read in verses 6 onwards about how many chariots etc they had. As the Egyptians approached the Israelites they were terrified and said to Moses: *‘Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’*. It’s at this point that our reading begins today, at this point that Moses says to his people in verse 13 *‘Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today.’*

So having caught up with what has happened in between we come to the point where Moses tells people to stand firm and they will see the Lord act and bring you deliverance today. If you like the moment is coming when God will finally deliver his people, this is what they are finally going to see.

How then does God deliver his people?

Imagine the scene for a moment, the people of Israel stood by the Red Sea, the Egyptians are coming towards them, six hundred chariots we are told in 14:7, where do they go and Moses is telling them to stand firm! Then God tells Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand to divide the waters. In verse 19 onwards we’re told this is exactly what happens, the pillar of cloud which has been with them on their journey moves out in front of them and then as Moses raises his staff and stretched out his arms the Lord sends a strong east wind which drives the sea back so that the people of Israel can go through the water on dry land. It is an amazing act of God and do you notice that the separating of the water, God creating a path for his people by separating the water, has real echos of God at work in creation, remember the narrative in Genesis when God separate dark and light to make night and day, when he makes land and sea.

No doubt the faces of the Egyptians was a picture as the sea parted and the people of Israel went through the sea. The Egyptians follow into the dry land between the parted sea in pursuit of the Israelites. Then during the last watch of the night, as we are told verse 24, God from the pillar of fire stalls the Egyptians by jamming their wheels and then when the people of Israel are safely on the other side he commands Moses to stretch out his hand again so that the sea closes up again and the Egyptians are swept up the by sea. Verse 28 tells us *'not one of them survived'*. Here we see God protecting his people and keeping them safe as they followed God and journeyed to their destination.

This was the great act of God saving Israel from the Egyptians. Verses 30 and 31 tell us: *'That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.'* In fact more than being the day that Israel was saved it was the day that their oppressors, the Egyptians, were killed. The blessings for Israel were more than they could have imagined, saved from the Egyptians, brought through the red sea and those who oppressed them destroyed. Verse 31 tells us it was a day when they truly put their trust in God who had done amazing things for them.

It was a great day, a great moment, a significant moment in the story of the people of Israel which would be remembered from generation to generation like the Passover. Although like the Passover it does make me feel uncomfortable and may also make you uncomfortable that God's purposes are achieved in such dramatic and destructive ways. This is not the place to repeat last weeks sermon but much of what I said then about the Passover applies here.

So a great story, a significant part of the story of Israel which we've worked through together but what can we learn from it, what does it say to us today as we journey as God's people as we continue to live during a global pandemic?

Three thoughts:

1. **God's route is not always the direct route.** I find those verses in 13:17 really significant. God knows both where the people of Israel need to get to, and how they need to get there. God knew that he needed to take them on a journey so they didn't decide to turn back, so they could learn more about him on the way, so they could see his power in the sea being held back for them. God knows the journey each of us is on, God knows where we are going whether that is a physical destination or more metaphorical, we may know where we are going or we may not feel we do. But God knows the best route to take, God knows the right timings, God has things to show us on the way. However indirect, roundabout, unexpected God's route might be there will be a reason why God takes us his way. God will also constantly reroute us to make

sure we get to the right destination. The rerouting might be because of something we do or something others do, but God will get us to where we need to be. God's route doesn't always need to be bad, it can be good, it might even just be to see more of the beauty of God's creation that God leads us on a roundabout route. God's route is not always the direct route but it will be the right one and get us to the right place.

2. **We need to stay close to God on the journey.** What I love about this passage in Exodus is that we are constantly reminded of God's presence with the people of Israel. The scripture comes back time and time again to pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. As we walk our journey of faith, whether at the moment that has a particular destination or is simply the normality of life, God is with us, God's Spirit is here but just as the people of Israel had to stay close to God to know the way, we need to consciously stay close to God through prayer and worship, through words and pictures and silence, to ensure we are travelling to where God wants us to be. This is so so important for each of us.
3. **God's blessings are beyond our imagination.** Whilst I may struggle with the death of the Egyptians in this passage what I recognise without a doubt from that part of the passage is that God was bringing a blessing on the people of Israel which was beyond what they ever imagined. They were hoping to get to the promise land, to the land of milk and honey, to get away from the Egyptians who had oppressed them. The death of the Egyptians really was the icing on the cake for them, it showed them that not only did God bring them towards the promised land but also ensured those who had oppressed them paid the ultimate price for that. For the people of Israel this was a blessing, if that's the right word, beyond their imagination. In the same way for us, time and time again as we follow God, as we walk with Jesus we find that when we follow God's way, when we listen to the word of scripture and promptings of the Spirit we are blessed in ways we never imagined. Week by week in lockdown we shared at church together, something I will soon work out how to incorporate into our new way of being church online and in person, and week by week in joys and in sorrows we heard of blessings beyond our hopes and imaginations. What an awesome God we follow.

God's route is not always the direct route, we need to stay close to God on the journey, God's blessings are beyond our imagination. Three things I believe this passage shows us as God's people today. So I wonder how this passage and these three points might help us going forward.

I believe each person here today, in person or online, listening later is special and unique. I believe each of us, each of you is called by God and has a purpose with God. It's so easy to think that others are called, others have things to do for God but I believe each and everyone one of us is special and unique to God and called by God. Our callings and are purposes are the journey that God calls us on, some will have a particular destination, maybe even a physical place, for many it

will be a way of life or a ministry to be involved in, but each of us has a purpose, each of us is called by God.

For me this passage, these three learning points are a reminder that we are each on a journey with God, that God has a purpose for us. But more than a reminder they are an invitation an invitation to take stock of where we are and where God is calling us to be. An invitation to pause and check in with God. An invitation to ask God:

- Where are you calling me to at the moment, what are you calling me to be or do?
- Am I taking God's route to the destination or am I seeking my own route?
- Am I staying close to God on the way, am I near to the pillar of cloud or fire?

They are also a reminder not to limit our horizons. A reminder that God can do infinitely more than we ever imagine, that God's blessings can and will be beyond our imagination. I wonder do we expect God to be miraculous or do we contain our expectations of God to our imagination?

The parting of the red sea is without a doubt an amazing story, a story of God at work and fulfilling his purposes. We are part of God's story, we are God's people just as the Israelites were. Each of our lives are journeys with God, journeys where we are invited to go with God, to see God do amazing things through us for ourselves and for others, where the blessings we will receive even in these difficult times will be beyond our imaginations. From time to time it's good to take stock of where we are, to check in with God and if needs be to adjust our path so that we are on God's path. As we take the next steps out of, or even back into, lockdown it seems now is a good time to do that checking in with God and to let the images and story of this passage to help us to do so.

So I invite you to take some time this week to think about those questions, to check in that you are walking closely with God and on the route that God wants you to take. I pray as you check in with God, that as you draw close to God that you will be inspired to follow God afresh, blessed by God's presence and renewed on your journey with God.

I pray that in the days and weeks ahead we will all have stories to tell and to share of God's faithfulness of God's mercy and love, of God's blessings which will be beyond our imaginations.

Amen.