

## **Sermons from Park Hill: September 14, 2008**

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**Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado**

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**September 14, 2008**

**Exodus 14:19 – 5:11, 20-21  
“From Creed to My Story”**

After boils, and frogs, and rivers of blood, and locusts, and now death – plague after plague – Pharaoh finally decided they could leave. No, they needed to leave. "All right, go! You and the Israelites, leave me and my people in peace! Take what is yours and be gone!" It was the moment Moses had been working for and everyone had been waiting for. But they had better hightail it out of there because this Pharaoh will probably change his mind just as quickly.

After all those years of bondage to their Egyptian masters, day after day of meaningless drudgery without end and no hope whatsoever that things would ever change, freedom – in that moment – was within their grasp. Tight-fisted old Pharaoh

had crumpled after that terrible last night of death.

You can almost still hear the Egyptians, even Pharaoh, wailing laments over their lost children. It didn't have to come to that. The intransigence of this dictator didn't have to take down so many innocent people for his own pride. At the same time, you can also still hear Moses yelling to the people: "This is it! Let's go! Let's get out of here! Faster!"

The race against time had started. It was late, but they had one night in which to break the vise that had held them for almost four hundred years, one night to escape a prison so familiar that it had become like home they will miss later. It was now or never. Everybody knew that by tomorrow morning Pharaoh would change his mind. Tomorrow he would come to his senses and realize what he had done. What would happen to their economic strength when all the slave labor was gone? What Egyptian was going to settle for a so-called minimum wage? No, tomorrow would be too late. Tonight was the night their slavery must end.

You can almost see the people running breathlessly, grabbing whatever they could, not even glancing backwards. There was no time for that. They had to make it out of there. God knows, the sea was their only chance. Not the straight road to Canaan, which would have gotten them out of Egypt much faster. "The way to the land of the Philistines", the road was

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called in ancient times, the highway to the Promised Land. But the Egyptians traveled it regularly. And they had constructed it to withstand the pounding of their chariots. The Israelites would have been run down like animals.

No, their only hope of survival was in the roadless wilderness of Sinai; but to get there meant passing through a sea. What they would do when they got to the edge of the water nobody knew, not even Moses. All they knew was that it was their only chance. The devil or the deep blue sea. Tonight. Not much of a choice, but a choice nonetheless.

Then, finally, after a night of running in the dark, that long, straggly band of thousands came to an abrupt halt. The water, stretching out in the distance, was right there waiting in front of them. Already they could feel the ground rumbling; soon they would see the dust of Pharaoh's chariots behind them. Terrified, they clung to the banks while Moses urged them forward.

"Come on! Into the water! Into the water! God will lead the way!" Terrified and panicking, the people started to do as they were asked. But then, suddenly, Moses ordered everyone to halt.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "First, think about what you are doing! Enter the sea, not as frightened fugitives, but as free men and

women! No matter what happens, Pharaoh cannot take that away from you! Even before we get to other side, you are free."

Moses turned to God with a prayer; but God quickly reminded him that this wasn't a very good time! And the people got going, advancing into the sea of reeds. God told them not to stand around praying but to get the heck out of there! And the people, with no more factions, united as never before, swept ahead and crossed that marshy sea, which somehow drew back, or dried up enough from a steady wind, just enough to let them through. So awesome was the moment, so charged with faith and hope – the mystery of God unfolding before their very eyes and within their very souls.

Charlton Heston has really ruined this moment; our capacity to imagine and to visualize anything but the movie version of the Ten Commandments - that dramatic parting of the sea. But let's also remember the miracle of the people stepping out in faith, as significant as whatever body of water may have naturally or supernaturally dried up. The chains of fear did not hold them back anymore.

We are more likely to dismiss the significance of this story if we get caught up in whether this miracle is logical or not. Did it happen? How did it happen? Where did it happen? This is *the* story, told time after time, generation after generation, for thousands of years, *the* story of Israel's salvation. They crossed over it –

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whatever or wherever it was. It's the kind of crossing-over that Christians speak of in the resurrection. We don't know exactly how it's done, but we know what it does. It moves us from proclaiming a *theory* of "God delivers" to the *experience* of "God delivered." Told from the other side.

Our lives are transformed when the words we have said for years – "I believe" – are changed to our stories of "I have experienced." I don't just *believe* God delivers. I have *experienced* it – the moment when we were delivered, despite our fears, to the other side, when we made it against all the odds, with everything and everyone standing in our way. It's no longer a creed; it's our story. And therefore, my story.

When any of us say, I don't know how I survived that divorce, that accident; I don't know how I survived his death; I don't know how I survived that year in prison; I don't know how I got through that time, the debilitating depression, the treatments that never seemed to end – but I have. Therefore, we have. I don't really need to know how it happened; it just did and I thank God for it. And I am here to tell you about it.

Whether you think it's a miracle or not, I don't mind. Was it science or the power of positive thinking; was it the Red Sea or the Reed Sea, a marshy expanse ten feet deep? Just listen to my story. This – fill in your own blank – this is about how I was delivered to the other side of a sea between my troubles and my freedom; from my

bondage to having a choice; from no where to some where. From certain death to restored health and, more importantly, renewed hope.

If you will listen without judgment, you'll hear that I don't have a theory any more that God delivers us to the other side – no more words of a creed. I have a story. I have experienced that God delivered me – a miracle that I too will continue to tell to my children and their children. Not a belief in my head but a story in my heart.

For some people it's much easier to talk about beliefs than stories – beliefs are safer and more distant. But then you really haven't heard my story; what God has done for me. Do you see the difference?

And without listening to one another's stories, it's a legend in a book – even the central story of salvation in the Bible for the Israelites can sound like a fairy tale. But then we'll never understand our own lives, our own stories, to be part of God's ongoing saga of liberation from oppression. We are not the cheese that stands alone. We must engage each other – feel free to tell stories that risk the hearts of teller and listener.

When the people reached the other side, Moses was so moved by what had happened that he burst into song. The old stutterer, the old pain in the neck who couldn't put two words together

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suddenly became a singer! They say that stutterers have difficulty speaking, but not with singing. Moses was the first; and the Hasidic explanation is that it was because the people had faith in God and Moses. And for the first time since Moses had started urging them to get out of Egypt, they had rallied around as one. That was why he was able to sing.

Because it was like the people were singing through him. Horse and chariot were thrown into the sea. And Miriam and the women began dancing. Perhaps we should remember to have a party when we finally realize that we are survivors.

Don't remember the exodus as a tiny band of fugitives sneaking out unnoticed. It was a nation defiantly striding out, flaunting their freedom before a degraded pharaoh. But, that moment of decision comes just as it always comes with the realization of the risk our choices entail. It isn't just about whether we get out of Egypt but who we are on the way.

Would the people trust God and trust that deepest place within themselves that allowed them to have *faith* in God once the moment their *defiance* melted away? This was no Patrick Henry moment. "Give me liberty or give me death!" They knew that there could be no battle. Pharaoh was an unstoppable foe. They could no more stop him than they could stop the wind. Defiance got them to leave; faith got them across.

What they could do was the only thing that Moses asked them to do.

"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that

God will accomplish for you today..." When the statement God *delivers* becomes God *delivered*; my creed becomes my story; our heads grow together with heart; and then risking my story becomes a way for others to follow.

There comes a moment of unearthly silence when we stand between the devil and the deep blue sea. Will we keep moving even as our feet sink into the soft sand? Will we keep moving even as the water reaches past our waist? Will we keep moving even as the rippling waves lap against our ears? Will we survive if we just stop and let the tide continue to rise? To each other we must say, "Let my story encourage you." Take my experience as your own – that moment when I broke free of the oppressive circumstances of despair, the crush of depression, the fear of death, the worst assumptions of disease, all that can hold us captive for so long... Can we stand before an uncertain future and make a break for the other shore? Our defiance and our faith in the God who delivered?

If you tell me how you did it, I'll find strength for my own journey; when the theory of God on one side becomes – thanks to you – the experience of God on the other. And our stories join together as a miracle.

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