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We are invited today to wade in the waters of a well-known story ... So, let's do it! Let's Wade in the water ... wade in the water, children ... wade in the water ... God's gonna trouble the water.

We are no strangers to troubled water these days ... Troubled water, thy names are Harvey and Irma! We have seen what water can do ... what it brings in with it, and what it leaves behind. We have certainly seen images of too much water – too much falling from the sky and too much rising up over the earth, engulfing cars and homes and traffic lights. More surprising, to me, have been the images, from Florida and the Bahamas of whole stretches of beach and ocean where the water was simply, suddenly gone as the hurricane boldly re-distributed the resources of the sea at her disposal, calling in on one shore to unleash on another. The images of flooding out of southeast Asia this summer are no less terrifying.

So, what brings us to this moment of drama in Exodus? We picked the thread up three weeks ago, when Jonathan Sauder re-told the story of Moses' birth and his placement in an Egyptian household – the very household of Pharaoh and the heroic actions of the midwives who defied Pharaoh, saving countless Hebrew babies. I picked up the story after Moses had fled Egypt, and was tending sheep when God came to speak to him in the form of a burning bush. There, Barefoot Moses received the call to lead his people, the Hebrews, out of slavery in Egypt. Last week Malinda Clatterbuck brought us the story of the final plague – or the story of the first Passover, depending on your perspective – the story of the dying of all the first-born males in Egypt. And it is here that our story picks up today.

On the one hand, you could say that the story of Passover was a “victory” for the Israelites. In the metaphorical sense, there is incredible significance to this story where God destroys all the leaders and potential leaders of every household of the oppressing, enslaving culture. The group of people most likely to carry on the status quo, who are also the folks who most benefit from it are removed. It's a powerful statement about what is necessary for societal change – an underlining of the conventional wisdom & experience of the oppressed that privilege and power will never be voluntarily given up. This cut at the heart of the power structure – current & future was brutal. You might imagine that, within the exodus narrative, the Passover did not make the Israelites more popular with the Egyptians. No, they are needing to run for their lives at this point, which is where we find them – being led away by God, in the form of a pillar of fire by night, and a cloud by day. Earth, wind and fire ... so, of course, the story turns to water. and God's gonna trouble the water ... yeah, God's gonna trouble the water, so wade in the water, wade in the water, children wade in the water – God's gonna trouble the water.

This season we are exploring what this Exodus narrative, that so profoundly formed the communal identity of the Judeo-Christian faiths, has to say to us about building community. How did this near-death encounter with the Egyptian army and the miraculous troubling of the waters of the Red Sea help form the Israelites into

community? It is a story that is referred to within the scriptures, and one that has been often referred to by oppressed peoples in the centuries since – as testimony that God is on the side of the oppressed – that God’s will is freedom from slavery and that through God, a way can be made out of no way. It is used as a call to be merciful – “remember when you needed to be saved?” Don’t be Egyptians! Don’t become the evil you deplored!

But when you dive into this story, it’s not a simple one. For one, there’s a lot of attribution of motives & actions to God. God drove the sea back; God clogged the wheels of the chariots; God threw the Egyptians into a panic in earlier passages; God was always hardening Pharaoh’s heart; God tossed the Egyptians into the sea; God saved the Israelites. And I have to say, I always get a little squirmy with that. One of my interpretive mantras is: Adopt a healthy suspicion when things get attributed to God in the scriptures!

Identifying where God is at work in a moment or in a story, is rarely an easy thing. We can barely do it in our own lives and times, much less between the lines of ancient scripture. The writers of the Old Testament clearly hadn’t yet gotten the memo about “I-messages” “Let’s try that again, Moses – You felt like God was with you, when your enemies were destroyed.” But nope – they were unapologetic mind-readers of God, boldly sports-commentating God’s actions on the fields of human history. I maintain that the presence & intentions of God are almost always a mystery; and that we are invited, community by community, generation after generation -- no, I’ll say it more strongly -- we are required, community by community, generation after generation, to confront our stories, and histories, even the ones that seem the most obvious, to prayerfully and corporately discern what, if any, divine action or intention can be detected and to do so to the best of our knowledge, and with utmost humility and courage. And that even when we feel the message is so clear and urgent we could scream it, we must always proclaim it in the form of conditional confession, even as we act boldly based on our understanding, when necessary.

I think we can learn tremendous amounts about ourselves, by tracing backward from the things we attribute to God. I think especially regarding the repeated references in the Exodus stories to God “hardening” Pharaoh’s heart. I find this notion of “hardened hearts” coming to me often these days. As I look at the resurfacing of conscious white supremacy in more public and less apologetic ways, and the apathetic response to it by a large swatch of American Christianity, I find myself thinking that “hardened hearts” is a pretty apt descriptor. It’s the only way I can wrap my brain around it. Whether or not God hardens hearts, I think our understandings of God, especially when we cannot trust that God is not ultimately merciful and loving can very easily lead us to hearts hardened by god – even though it is a god of our making, not the God who in fact made us in God’s image. Some of the most destructive acts and movements in human history can be attributed to hearts hardened by blasphemous misunderstandings of who God is. This is why I think we must always be in the practice of critiquing and questioning and bowing and flexing our image of God – and offering up our questions and hunches and epiphanies to one another that we may not become hard-hearted followers in an attempt to imitate a hard-hearted god of our own making. And when a story attributes awful things to God, one must also have the courage to consider whether it’s a moment to legitimately push back ... in which case we must trust that God doesn’t not need our

defense, but that our call may very well be to question and defy (and we'd be in good company to do so – think Abraham, think Jacob, think Job, think the Canaanite woman who challenged Jesus about throwing crumbs to the dogs).

So, what can we learn about building community in this story? This call to be faithful, critical interpreters is a huge prompt. But I also hear in this story a people called to act now. Here they are, an army behind them, and before them a sea that is impossibly open, in a way that they must have known was temporary. Ever since I learned that the walls of water in the 1956 Cecil B. DeMille movie *The Ten Commandments* depiction of the parting of the Red Sea were, in fact, made of jell-o, I imagine the walls of water quivering and trembling on either side of the Israelites, not at all reassuring as one would ponder such a passage. But in this story, a community's survival is dependent on their willingness to step into a tenuous opening, to accept a way too good-to-be-true invitation and you know what they say about things that seem too good to be true? I can imagine being terrified to walk into this water, even with an army behind me.

I'm reminded of the powerful poem, called "Home" by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, inspired by the many refugees dying as they attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea: no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark; you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well; your neighbors running faster than you, breath bloody in their throats ... no one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear saying- leave, run away from me now I don't know what I've become but I know that anywhere is safer than here. What other reason would there be to lead your children into an ocean that has receded unnaturally, and who-knows-how-temporarily? There is a now-ness to this story – the waters are parted now that is both its danger and its opportunity. How can we be build ourselves to be a community that can respond to such situations? I'm proud of the discernment we did as a congregation about how we'd respond if one of our pastors was invited to officiate at the wedding of a same gender couple, knowing there could be denominational consequences. Because of the work we did ahead of time, I was able to respond very quickly to that question, knowing I was acting on the will of our congregation. We have not been prepared to act as quickly on some other issues – what if folks locally are in need of sanctuary? How are we mobilizing ourselves to respond to increasing visibility of white supremacist groups? What is the call of today's story in how we might prepare and equip ourselves for such situations? That we might be ready to wade into waters when need be, even if they are troubled, dangerous, life-saving waters.

I see in this story a people who learn to recognize God leading them in unexpected ways - - the writers describe seeing the presence of God move from the front of the people, to the rear -- almost as if God knows that a nudge will be needed to complete this exodus – a vanguard to protect from the approaching enemy, but also perhaps to keep them from turning back. In an ironic reversal, God plays the sheepdog to Moses' shepherd, nipping at the heels of the flock. What might the sheepdog Spirit of God be nipping us and nudging us to move forward into, that would move us into a newly life-supporting place?

I see in this story, elements of baptism.¹ Two weeks ago, when I was preaching about Moses and the burning bush, Stock Weinstock (very appropriately) asked in Sharing Time: “But, really, aren’t we the equivalent of the Egyptians/oppressors in these Exodus stories? How can we claim the storyline of the oppressed?” I don’t think he’s wrong. But, that’s a very hard read for us. I think there are ways in which one must always read one’s self into all sides of a story, we are all our own oppressors and oppressed; as such, a story in which some strong external movement is needed so that a part of us that is violently holding back another part of us will die off or at least back off, makes a lot of sense. Is this not what baptism is all about? Dying to self, so that self may live.

In the bunny trail of my research on this passage this week, I came upon a sermon on Exodus 14 by a 19th century white Episcopalian Abolitionist, Phillips Brooks (also the writer of O Little Town of Bethlehem). In it, he wrote of the baptismal quality of the exodus: “But there comes something vastly [different] . . . , when the soul dares to believe that its enemy may die, that the lust, or the prejudice, or the covetousness may absolutely pass out of existence, and the nature be absolutely free – sure doubt to meet other enemies and to struggle ‘til the end, but done with that enemy forever, with the Egyptian finally dead upon the seashore. When that conviction takes possession of a [person], [their] fight is a new thing. The courage (not of desperation, but) of certain hope, fills every limb and gives its force to every blow. The victory which the soul believes is coming is here already as a power for its own attainment.”

But what of the non-metaphorical oppressors. For the Egyptians in this story outright die, their horses and chariots – their tanks and weapons of war – are drowned. The ways of power-over & oppression & supremacy & violence – these ways must die – for there to be new life for anyone. But was there a choice for the Egyptians that would have led to salvation – or at least survival? What were the routes of deliverance for the Egyptians? Or was it too late for them? There is a quote that has been attributed to our own country’s Moses – Harriet Tubman, who led so many enslaved Black Americans out of slavery. It goes: “I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew

¹ I think for those of us who are, let’s face it, mostly “walking like an Egyptian” here in the U.S., our salvation, as well as that of those whose current lives parallel those of the Hebrews in Egypt, is, in fact, going to be pretty baptismal – things dying in order that a new way of life, newly aligned to God-who-is-Love-which-is-Justice can be born. In a sermon that Martin Luther King, Jr., preached on this passage in 1956, he said: “The story [of the Red Sea] symbolizes something . . . much deeper than the drowning of a few [people], for no one can rejoice at the death or defeat of a human person. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil. It was the death of inhuman oppression and ungodly exploitation.” [God] is seeking at every moment . . . to lift people from the bondage of some evil Egypt, carrying them through the wilderness of discipline, & finally to the promised land of personal & social integration. May it not be that this is entirely within the realm of possibility? I prefer to live by the faith that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of [God and Christ], and [they] shall reign forever and ever, Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” Wade in the water . . . wade in the water, children

they were slaves...” But, just as you should always withhold hasty judgment from scriptures or people who claim to speak for God, you should also have a healthy suspicion of quotes attributed to famous people like Harriet Tubman. Luckily, I had just enough skepticism to head to Snopes.com on this one. Turns out this quote was probably never spoken by Tubman – In fact, one slave historian, Dr. W. Caleb McDaniel, claimed the quote was “actually harmful both to Tubman’s legacy and to current efforts of anti-slavery activism: Modern historians know the truth: enslaved people resisted their condition in countless ways, large and small. If they were not able to attain freedom, it was not because they didn’t want it or because (as the fake Tubman quote would have it) they “did not know they were slaves.” It was because powerful forces were arrayed against them. The idea of “tacit consent” distracted attention from that fact.”

<http://www.snopes.com/harriet-tubman-quote/> I found the history (or lack thereof) of that quote very interesting, because I had always assumed that the people referenced in it were the slave-owners, or other whites who participated in upholding the economy and society that allowed for, and in fact fed upon, slavery. I had always found it a rather inspiring quote, in the vein of If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together. (attributed to Lila Watson, who attributes it to “"Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, [Australia] 1970s.”