

Exodus 14

The story contained in Chapter 14 actually begins at the end of the previous chapter with the almost offhand comment about the people carrying Joseph's bones with them for burial in the Promised Land. This taking of the bones represents the fulfillment of a promise (Joseph being promised to be carried back to the "land"), the fact that the parade of slaves is a funeral procession (burying the old life in Egypt) and finally a rejection of the Egyptian religion of rebirth (Joseph would rather be buried in the ground in the Promised Land than await new life as a mummy in a foreign land). Thus, it becomes clear that the Hebrews are not merely going away for a three-day holiday but have left forever.

Even so, the exodus of the people is not yet complete because YHWH's battle against Pharaoh and for the hearts and minds of God's people is not over. We witness this in God's instructions for the people's journey to freedom. Rather than sending them to a safe location, God sends them to a location of vulnerability with their backs to the sea and the plain open to attack. This setting makes them vulnerable to the never-promise-keeping Pharaoh. Pharaoh and his people soon realize that their slaves are not coming back and so something must be done, meaning the slaves need to be recaptured; an act easier conceived than carried out. Pharaoh and his entire army set out and when they see God's people, an Egyptian victory seems assured. YHWH has other plans.

It is at this point that we witness (and not for the last time in Exodus) the fear of those who have been slaves overwhelm the people of God. They see the greatest army in the known world approaching and they complain to Moses. They tell Moses that they would rather be living slaves than dead free men and women. What happens next is rather unexpected. Moses speaks and God tells him he is wrong.

First Moses speaks. He tells the people to stand still and if they do, the people will never see the Egyptians again because God will destroy Pharaoh and his army. Surprisingly God is not pleased with this response. God may not be pleased because "standing still" is the response of slaves who have no agency. God instead commands Moses to tell the people to act, to move and thus to begin understanding that they are a free people. And it is not only the people who must act. Moses must act as well. He is to raise his staff to make the waters part. In other words, free people must be active and not passive.

What we witness in the parting of the waters is nothing less than a new creation and the birth of a new people. First, the language used in the sea-parting episode is the same language used in the creation story when the "ruach" or breath of God as blowing over a chaotic creation and that ultimately sea and land parted ways. Thus, there is a new moment of creation for all the world. Second, the imagery is that of the people coming out of the birth canal of water into a new life. The result of this new birth is that the people are now called Israel (vs. 30) for the first time and that they have learned to fear and trust God and trust Moses (at least for the moment).

Two final notes. First on the death of Pharaoh and his armies. It is fitting that they die in the water because it was in the water that they tried to drown all the Israelite children. Second this is the last time in the Torah that Egypt is seen as a threat, just as Moses had promised the people.

Reflection: One of the ongoing discussions in the church concerns the question, how much should we trust God to act and how much ought we to do for ourselves? While this story doesn't give us a clear answer, it is a reminder that we are to see ourselves as people with agency, meaning that God expects us to get up off the couch and act with hope. We are to be those who strive to do all we can to make the world better, while at the same time understanding that we need God's help along the way.

Questions:

1. Have you ever had your back up against the wall and had God intervene? What was that like?
2. Have you ever experienced a "new birth" in your life? If so, what was that like?
3. What do you make of God's "justice" in destroying the Egyptian army?