

### 9-17-17: “People Who Have Been Through the Waters”: Exodus 14:19-31

We are people who have been through the waters.

Quite literally, in the last month, we have watched helplessly as our neighbors’ homes have been inundated with flood waters from Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. From Texas to Cuba to Florida to South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana...the waters have been rising and we have been powerless to stop them.

As the people of Texas and Florida and the Caribbean nations now go about the hard work of rebuilding and recovering after these hurricanes of unprecedented proportion, as those of us who have not been threatened by the waters send money and volunteers and prayers to help out, I don’t know that there’s anyone who doubts we are living in a world of troubled waters.

Or maybe the “troubled waters” in your life aren’t quite so literal as the waters in Texas and Florida. There are other places in which we wade through the troubles of life, searching for higher ground. Perhaps you find yourself wading these days through the waters of grief, or the waters of illness. Perhaps you are navigating the troubled waters of living paycheck to paycheck, or not knowing where your next meal will come from. Maybe the waters of addiction or depression, of fear or of hopelessness, are rising around you. They take many forms, but always, it seems, there are troubled waters.

There are many stories in the Bible about “the waters,” starting with the very first chapter of Genesis when God sends a mighty wind over the face of the waters and separates the light of day from the darkness of night. When God’s order and intention for life on earth triumphs over the chaos of the deep, dark waters. And indeed, when we come across stories about “the waters” or “the sea” in the Bible, there is almost always some element of chaos and fear in the face of overwhelming forces. Perhaps after this last month, we can especially appreciate why. Few things make a person feel so *powerless* as the rapidly approaching, rising waters.

So it goes with our story this morning; when we meet the Israelites in this text, they could hardly feel more powerless. On one side, they have Pharaoh’s army chasing them down to destroy them or, perhaps worse, return them to slavery in Egypt. On the other side, they have the waters. In the verses immediately before this morning’s reading, the people have cried out in desperation to Moses, “Why have you brought us here to die in the wilderness?! Look, we are caught between certain destruction and utter chaos!” Surely, this is the end for us.”

The Israelites are frozen with fear at the edge of the waters. They have resigned themselves to their fate; they have given up all hope. And yet in their darkest hour, when they are sure they will be destroyed, God delivers them and brings them *through* the waters. God makes a way where there is no way. It is God who troubles the waters, and the Israelites, in their own shock and dismay, walk across on dry ground.

After this has happened, the text tells us, they fear the Lord and believe in the Lord and his servant Moses. The Israelites begin to recognize their identity: They are God’s people. They are the people who have been through the waters.

And yet, it’s never quite this clear cut in real life, is it? It makes for a nice Bible story, but we who have been through the waters know that we don’t always come out unscathed.

No one knows this better, of course, than the Egyptian soldiers in this story. They’re the elephant in the room, aren’t they? This is a story of salvation, of God delivering the Hebrew people from the waters of chaos and certain death. But this is also a story of destruction, of the Egyptian army entirely annihilated, destroyed by the very same waters through which the Israelites escape.

It's easy, of course, to make this into a good guy/bad guy situation. To be fair, that's how it's written: This is the Israelites' account of the story, and as they say, history is written by the victors. And, we who have been following this story know that the Egyptians are the oppressors, the ruthless taskmasters, and the Israelites are the fleeing slaves. It's not hard to choose a side here, to root for the underdog. As we learned a few Sundays ago at the burning bush, *God* seems to have no trouble choosing the side of the oppressed Hebrew slaves. And while the sight of the Egyptian armies washed up and dead on the shore might make us squeamish, or uncomfortable; if nothing else it does seem to satisfy some sort of poetic justice.

If the death of the Egyptians leaves you feeling unsettled, you are not alone. Jewish rabbis through the centuries have troubled over this disturbing part of the text, wrestling with how to reconcile a God of love with drowned Egyptians. In fact, there are some traditions of Jewish midrash – in which the rabbis expound on the stories of the Bible – in which God rebukes the Hebrews for the joyful victory song we hear in chapter 15. God scolds them, saying, “The works of my hands are drowning, and you would dare to sing?”

Which is to say, perhaps there's more to the Egyptians in this story than just the classic antagonist. Maybe they are more than one-dimensional characters, more than a plot device. Maybe we recognize something of ourselves in the Egyptians, who feel the waters crashing down on them. Maybe we recognize something of God in them, recognize the fact that safe passage through the waters is not always a given.

For even when we do pass through the waters, we do not make it through unscathed. The waters have real powers of destruction. If we were to go through them alone, we would almost certainly be destroyed. Even as God accompanies us through the waters of our lives, we may come through sputtering, dripping wet and gasping for breathing on the other side.

We know this, don't we? This is how things are in our real, embodied world. Remember, the Exodus is not the story of some God up in heaven who rains down blessings from afar. This is a story about a God who chooses to come down and be present in our broken, messy world, replete with illness and injury and loss and even death.

Which means that when God brings us through the waters, it is through the real troubles of our lives. This is no “pie in the sky in the by and by” experience. These waters are real, and dangerous. We may emerge from them wet, scarred, and worse for wear. And yet, we *do* emerge. And when we do, we are changed people. God's people. Because we are the people who have been through the waters.

I think that's why we come to the font and do this strange thing called Baptism. When a person first comes to a Christian community – as a child or as an adult – we mark them with water. The same water with which we were marked when we first came to the Church. We proclaim that this person has been claimed and known and loved by the God of all Creation. And we become part of God's community of the Church by passing through the waters.

The waters of our baptism are a sign and seal of the God who is in the business of bringing people through the waters. As it touches our forehead, God says to us, “You are my child, and I bring my children through the waters. These may be the first waters you will encounter, but will by no means be the last ones. The Christian life to which I have called you is a life filled with waters. And some days, you may feel like those waters will overwhelm you. But hold tight to me, and I will bring you through. You may not be quite the same when you emerge from the waters, no. But then again, you have been through *these* waters, the waters of Baptism, and therefore you will never be the same again. You've been called and claimed, marked and

named as my child. You are now a part of my people: The people who have been through the waters.”

The last verse of the hymn we opened with this morning goes like this: “Standing ‘round the font reminds us of the Hebrews’ climb ashore. Life is hallowed by the knowledge: God has been this way before.”

In the end, that’s how we know we’ll make it through these troubled waters, isn’t it? Because God already has. God already *has* made a way where there was no way. In Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, *God* has been through the waters.

God has been through the waters of chaos at the dawning of Creation. God has been through the waters of Christ’s own baptism by John in the Jordan. God has been through the same troubled waters that you and I navigate each day – of illness and injury, grief and fear. And even through those most harrowing waters of suffering and death, God has already gone before us. God has been through the waters, and even from the depths of the grave, Christ has emerged victorious in Resurrection. All of life – and even death – is hallowed by the knowledge: God has been this way before.

We are the people who have been through the waters. Thanks be to God.