

“Crossing with Courage”

Exodus 14:10-31

This text, the “Exodus,” has long been celebrated as a text of liberation and freedom for a people long enslaved. Directly following what we just heard, Moses and Miriam and the Israelites burst into a song of thanksgiving and praise to their Almighty and Powerful God:

a God who ignited protective pillars of fire and who parted the chaotic waters of the sea...

a God who personally spoke with Moses while publically silencing Pharaoh...

a God who drove the Israelites to the Promised Land while drowning their enemies in a Raging Sea.

No wonder the *Israelites* were celebrating! But this Israelite song of celebration and praise transitions very quickly from being a *postlude* to their cries of enslavement in Egypt to becoming a *prelude* to their complaints of hunger in the wilderness. In just a handful of verses, the victorious memory of crossing through the Red Sea to safety recedes behind the flooding of more familiar and long-standing memories of living in slavery, a safe and stable – albeit difficult and demeaning – life.

The Exodus is a story of a threatened and enslaved people who were called and guided by God **to cross from their known past into their unknown future**. And that takes courage.

With all due respect to Cecil B. Demille and Charlton Heston, I have to imagine that the Israelites were not so confident as they marched across the dry ground in the middle of the divided Red Sea. In the 1956 movie, *The Ten Commandments*, the parting of the Red Sea is displayed with cinematic drama and triumph. But in the *ancient* story, the one we read today, certainly there was some fear and trembling on the faces of this persecuted people as they rushed through the parting waters away from the powerful faces of the ones that had held them under their power for so long...and as they looked up at these huge walls of water not knowing when they might cave in and drown them all. Sure Moses raised his staff and the waters split, but at the time, they had no idea how long those waters would hold. It took courage to trust God enough to walk through those waters. Granted, they had no choice! (Behind them was a fire and an army and ahead of them a sea!)

Isn't that the way courage normally works though? It comes upon us when we are caught between a rock and a hard place...when there is no easy way out...when adrenaline kicks in and suddenly courage overrides cowardice. More often than not, *we do not choose to be courageous*, rather *courage comes upon us without our consent*. And before we know it – we have been courageous – we have completed an otherwise unthinkable task – we have crossed through an otherwise unliveable reality. And then? We celebrate and give thanks. And then? Time passes and we move on.

You'll recall that soon after the Israelites sang their song of celebration – they started complaining about being hungry. One trial just led to the next. The Israelites (literally “the strugglers”) moved on, only to face even more struggles and trials and wars than they had in Egypt. When the ways of the world haven't changed – ways of war and of power – ways of greed and of dominion – ways of “good guys” and “bad guys” - when the ways of the world haven't changed, then no amount of celebration will last very long.

Ten years later, our country is grappling with what it means to “move on” from 9/11. In fact those very words – “move on” – are controversial, to say the least. To some, they imply “forgetting.” And

that is unthinkable: “to forget.” We've all seen the words “we will *never* forget” pop up on business signs and bumper stickers across the country over the past 10 years. And so in order not “to forget” – we focus on “remembering” and “honoring” the 3,000+ folks who died on that day.

But in addition to “remembering” the tragedy and loss and horror of that day, we have read about and watched on TV and perhaps even attended ourselves “celebrations” that mark this day as the day the United States of America came together in *unity*. The day when people on United Flight 93 and first responders at Ground Zero didn't think twice about helping one another or acting on behalf of the greater good. They just acted. With courage.

These are acts of courage that were not chosen by these individuals. On 9/11 the choices of a network of extremists changed the history of our country - and sadly, those choices have continued to chart the direction of our world.

We live in the fear that another attack will happen. People in New York City and Washington, D.C. are on high alert, even this very weekend. We have all come to accept the inconvenience of heightened security at airports and we are all trained to look for suspicious packages, suspicious vehicles, suspicious

people. And sadly, “suspicious” has become defined as “Muslim” or “Arab”...and so we also live in a world now where millions of Muslims are misunderstood and live in fear. We have spent and continue to spend unspeakable amounts of money to fight in the only ways we know how – this new kind of indefinable and unlocate-able war - this “War on Terror” – *terror*, which is defined as “*intense, sharp, overmastering fear and anxiety.*”¹

9/11 changed us. The memorials and services of remembrance and celebrations that are taking place around the country and the world today – mark not just a horrific day of loss in this country – but they also mark the days that came after *that* day...the now 3,650 days post 9/11...days that include acts of bravery and unthinkable sacrifice but that also include even more countless innocent deaths on soils across the sea from us.

In some ways, everything has changed. In many ways, nothing has changed. The ways of the world today – ways built on power, greed, religious strife, enslavement, and domination – are the very same ways of the world that were at work when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. The Israelites were the weaker of the two

armies in that case...they were the slaves, the Egyptians were the ones in power. That is why their deliverance – their victory, if you will – was all the more powerful. It was brought about only because of *God’s power*, not their own.

Reading this text today is quite haunting. Especially because today, Egypt is predominantly Muslim. And while we all know *intellectually* that the extremist actions of 9/11 were a sick distortion of Islam, few of us really do the hard work (emotionally and patriotically) to make that distinction. In silent ways, day by day, Muslims are ‘drowned’ by the waters we have parted and let come crashing down. And so if any one of us is tempted to read today’s text as a commentary on today’s world...especially on 9/11...the commentary ought to be focused on ourselves...those who like to think we are “God’s chosen people” but who are really and truly Israelites in the literal sense of the word: “strugglers” – those who are “striving with God.” And with one another. And with the world.

I have to think that the only way we can live into this post-9/11 world...is to live with a courage that is not defined by “winners” and “losers” or “allies” and “enemies.” To cross from this terror-stricken world to a peace-creating world we have to walk with courage through some rough waters.

¹ Definition accessed on 10 September 2011 at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/terror>.

Waters that need parting. Waters of resentment and hate...waters of fear and retaliation...waters of pride and power. How do we do this? I really don't know. I don't think any of us can know. But what I do know – is that we can't do it on our own. We need the power of God to help us part these waters...waters that *we keep* chaotic when we continue cycles of violence and hate and misunderstanding. But if God gives us the strength to help part these waters that rage in our souls and in the soul of our country...then we have to trust God and have enough *humility* to walk through. And that takes courage. But it's very counter cultural. Because *that* kind of courage is starting to sound a little too much like Christ.

One of the stories you may have heard about this week speaks of a courage that could easily go unnoticed. Because it's a courage less about moments of heroism and valor...and more about days of putting one foot in front of the other. This is a story of Christ-like character...ironically, or perhaps not...exemplified by a Muslim mom as she helps explain to her 10-year-old little boy why it is important for him to be nice to other boys who tease him.

"If someone's mean to you? What do you say?" his mother asked. "What does mommy tell you?"

He peers at her and shrugs.

"To be nice to people," she told him.

"I don't want to be nice to mean people," he said.

She smiles. "But that's the way they'll learn to be nice. And Daddy wants that, too."²

What makes this story remarkable is that this boy's dad died in the North Tower on 9/11. And this boy, his son, was born 2 days later. He is believed to be the first baby born to a 9/11 widow. And he is Muslim. At 10-years-old he doesn't understand why people taunt him – he knows some people did something bad to a lot of people and that other people died with his dad. His older sister knows that the people who killed her dad were Muslim – just like them – but he does not know that yet. At 15, his sister struggles to share the same religion as the murderers of her father. But what both these two children don't understand – their mother does: **that the way other people learn to be nice is by us being nice to them.**

Simplistic advice? Maybe. But truth doesn't always have to be complex. And this truth is even more compelling, because this family has to grieve their loss in private. They are called names on the street...accused

²Jessica Ravitz, "For Muslim family, faith complicates grief for loved one lost on 9/11" (29 August 2011) *CNN's 9/11: Ten Years Later*. Accessed on 10 September 2011 at <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/08/29/911.muslim.widow/index.html>.

of causing the 9/11 attacks...their accusers not knowing that they themselves are victims of 9/11, not perpetrators.

A family like this has a lot to teach us about what it means to “move on” as followers of Christ in a seemingly stagnating post 9/11 world. This kind of “moving on” is not about forgetting anything...but it is rooted in forgiving and looking forward. It sounds a lot like the voice of God when he says to Moses, “*Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward!*”³

And they do. And God moves from being the guide out in front of the Israelites to being the pillar of strength from behind – and the Israelites move forward in faith - crossing with courage from a known past to an unknown future. Crossing through from their “known” life of living in fear into their “unknown” life that will depend upon faith and lead them to freedom.

The late American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr is given credit for penning this now-popular prayer: “*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*” It is known widely today as “The Serenity Prayer.” When I was growing up my parents had a framed

cross-stitched version of this serenity prayer in their bedroom. I now have a magnet on my refrigerator with the serenity prayer. You can find it on coffee mugs and journals, t-shirts and bookmarks. It is a mantra for 12-step programs and a nice quote to print on greeting cards.

Perhaps its popularity has come because of its name, “The *Serenity Prayer*,” a name of course that Niebuhr did not give to it, but that was added later. Some of serenity’s definitions include “*a disposition free from stress or anxiety*,” “*peace of mind*,” “*a feeling of calm*,” “*being untroubled or at peace*.”⁴ No wonder this prayer is so popular. Who wouldn’t want to feel stress-free, calm, and untroubled?

But I wonder while this prayer may be *popular in print*...it surely mustn’t be *popular in practice*...because to truly pray a prayer that calls you to accept things you want desperately to change but have no control over and then to have courage to actually pour blood, sweat, and tears into working for change where you are called and gifted...well...that sounds more like a “Unsettling and Inconvenient and Scary as Heck Prayer” to me! “*Serenity prayer*?” Really? They should have gotten the title from the

⁴ Definition accessed on 10 September 2011 at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/serenity>.

³ Exodus 14:15

second clause...not the first. If anything it should be called “The Courage Prayer” with a warning tagged on the end: *Pray this and your life will change.*

There is nothing “serene” about calling upon God to humble our desires for power and control and to ramp up our trust and commitment to change. Change is hard and long and challenging and usually fraught with frustration and sometimes even failure before it is fully functioning freely in one’s life. And so this is the kind of courage we have to choose...different than the kind that just comes upon us in a crisis. And we have to choose to have this kind of courage because in our privileged position it’s all too easy to become complacent and comfortable in our faith...which is the exact opposite of how the Christ we claim to follow calls us to be.

Tragically, no one can change what happened on 9/11 and none of us want to accept it serenely. But – while we can’t change the past - what we can always work to change in the future is how we are acting. Or reacting. How we are responding as a people of faith to this crossroads in our country’s history. As one pastor put it, *“Will we have the courage to not just remember the events of 10 years ago...but to also remember the events of 2,000 years ago? When God's own Son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, chose to call*

*down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and in this way opened a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by calculations but trust, not by despair but hope, not by fear but courage, not by violence but healing, not by scarcity but abundance, not by hate but love, and not by death but by new life.”*⁵

Calvary – may this be our collective conviction as a church family on Gathering Sunday:

to always remember and honor our past;

to celebrate with joy our present;

and to cross with courage into our future.

Amen.

⁵David Lose, “Faith, Forgiveness, and 9/11” on *WorkingPreacher.Org at Luther Seminary: Where Interpretation Meets Imagination* (4 September 2011). Accessed on 10 September 11 at http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=508.