

“Faith: A Moving Motion Picture”

Adventures in the Bible Summer Series

Week 1 of 3: Adventures on Land!

Exodus 13:17-18, 21-22; 14:1-31

New Revised Standard Version

Show video clip: (:08-:40)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqCTq3EeDeY>

Pretty impressive for 1956!
Thank you Charlton Heston and Cecille B. DeMille. The Parting of the Red Sea is a Dramatic Moment for God’s People because it reveals the Defining Movement of God. No matter the commotion we cause, the motion of God’s leading is always toward Liberation.

Scripture reveals to us that no matter how much we wander and wonder, no matter how many circles we dizzy ourselves in, no matter how much muck or mud we get ourselves stuck in, no matter how much we protect and privilege ourselves out of fear, no matter how many times we take two steps forward and one

step back, or one step forward and three leaps back - the Grand Movement of God in the biblical narrative and in our lives is the Movement toward Liberation. Freedom.

We see this on a communal level in the Old Testament. And we see this on a more personal, individual level in the gospels as Jesus shows grace, inclusion, and forgiveness to the forgotten and forsaken, the Samaritan and the self-doubting, the leper and the lost, the blind and the beaten, the aged and the accused, the poor and the prostitute, the outcast and the ostracized, the chastised and the child. Just as Jesus always moves toward the marginalized, God always moves God’s people toward Liberation. The consistency and constancy of this movement is undeniable.

The Movement of God, the Movement of the Gospel, is always and forever toward Liberation because the Heart of God and the Heart of the

Gospel is Love. A true understanding and practice of Love for ALL inevitably leads toward Liberation for ALL. So if all people are not yet liberated, that means all of us have something yet to learn about love.

The Exodus, our story for today - our first Adventure on Land (albeit in the midst of the Sea) - is a miraculous moment, but even more, it's a MOVING moment. In two ways: it's moving in a literal sense because God and God's people are always on the move, and it's moving emotionally because finally the people of God are free - out from under the oppressive labor, slavery, and scrutiny of Pharaoh.

Now like many of our Adventure stories, this story speaks of an agency of God that we often struggle with today. It can be troubling and tricky theologically. It's troubling, to me at least, that all the Egyptians die. The Israelites are led to freedom and the Egyptians are led to their death. Does this mean God intentionally kills people? Does this mean the Egyptians didn't get a second chance or don't

deserve grace? Does this mean God takes sides?

Well, those are questions we could debate all day. But the answer to the last question is undeniably yes - this is a text where the author intends for us to believe that God does in fact take sides. There's no escaping it. But it's not what we think. We think of sides as God should be on the side of the Broncos, the Rockies, the Nuggets, and the Avalanche and everyone else - well, good luck! But this is not the kinds of "sides" I'm talking about. God doesn't take sides as in God loves the Israelites and God hates the Egyptians. God is always on the side of ALL PEOPLE; we are all God's beloved creation, created in God's image after all. And it's because God is on the side of ALL PEOPLE that God does take sides against any and all actions that harm God's creation or oppress God's people. Scripture reveals that God is on the side of liberation, freedom, grace, justice, and love. So when our human actions are actively working AGAINST these things, then yeah, in that case, God is not going to be on our side. But not

because of who we are.
Because of who we are neglecting to care for and stand up for. God takes sides against evil actions over and over again in the Bible, even as God redeems and uses people who have done those evil actions. God takes sides against actions that harm and oppress. And when we are working for liberation and freedom for all, it's kind of like we're stepping onto God's side by stepping onto the sidelines of our own lives long enough to see the viewpoint and perspective of others. When we step out of our bubble, we step into the grand vista of how God sees the world.

You see, liberation begins with knowing our need of God and our worth in God's eyes. Often people who abuse power, and therefore others, are playing God, failing to see their own need for God, their own worth for who they are and not as measured by what they produce or make.

The good news is, God's side never fills up, we are always

being beckoned to this vista, invited to join the movement of the Gospel toward liberation.

Are there still difficult theological questions and tensions in this text?

Absolutely. But those tensions can coexist alongside the truths that we learn about God's presence and movement in this text and God's preference for liberation for our lives.

Because here's the thing: the liberation of the Israelites may seem straightforward if we just focus on the one big Charlton Heston dramatic moment, but there's so much movement and motion around that moment that is equally important. As we long for liberation, we must remember that the long walk to freedom, to paraphrase Nelson Mandela, is frequently difficult and almost always confusing.¹

Case in point: in their escape from the Egyptians, FIRST God leads the Israelites in "a roundabout way" in the wilderness (Ex. 13:18), but ULTIMATELY God makes a straight away getaway for them

¹ Cory Driver, "Commentary on Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29," *Working Preacher* (30 Sept. 2018), accessed on 31 July 2020 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3775.

in a direct path right through the middle of the Red Sea. If we don't read the whole context of the Red Sea story, we could falsely assume that liberation happens in a straight line or with one direct move. But that's not the case. BEFORE their liberation, there's a lot of wandering around and confusion and even AFTER their liberation there's a lot of wandering and confusion that continues. History shows us that while big breakthroughs are needed in the journey for liberation, the journey is never over with one action - because it is a journey that involves all of us, and for whatever reason, our own humanity and pride keeps us going in circles.

Civil Rights Leader and Congressman John Lewis was laid to rest this week. His life is a testimony to the constantly moving work of liberation. As a 25 year old, Lewis marched across the Edmund Pettus bridge to ask for nothing more than to be treated like other Americans, to vote freely without discriminatory red tape to step over and racist hoops to jump through.

While I'm sure Lewis would have hoped that crossing that Bridge would have been his final Red Sea moment that settled equal voting rights once and for all, we know that wasn't the case. He was severely beaten and jailed and yet the marches kept going and his efforts and leadership paid off; the Voting Rights Act was passed into law. Many say this is the single most important act of civil rights in living memory. But of course, in Lewis' own lifetime, he saw strides forward (with the expansion of the Voting Rights Act in many administrations) and he saw stumbles backward (with direct measures implemented against it in others). We humans have a way of going round and round, repeating history - for better or for worse. Lewis lived this circular chaos even as his actions made a lasting impact that forever changed our country.

It is comforting to know that when it feels like we are going in circles, that could indeed mean that a straight away is ahead, a direct action is on its way, a parting of the Red Sea is coming and is still yet possible. This should give us all hope -

whether we are working on systemic issues such as racial justice, voting rights, protection for immigrants and refugees, affordable housing OR whether we are working on some issue or struggle in our own life - a dissolution of a relationship, a coming to terms with a grief or change in our lives, an habitual attitude of our hearts that needs changing, a blindness or bias in our upbringing or understanding, a struggle with trust or faith or hope.

Whatever move we wish God would just hurry up and make in our lives or in our world, the story of the Exodus reminds us of two important truths. One: just because we're wandering and going in circles now doesn't mean that a clear path forward isn't on the horizon; we never know and therefore we must never stop working and moving. And two: even when that clear path comes (or that long-awaited answer or resolution or stride toward liberation), it doesn't mean the journey is over or that all our problems go away. The Israelites wandered before the Red Sea parted and they wandered in the Promised Land. There is no perfect

solution or resolution this side of the kin-dom of God. But that doesn't mean we should stop moving or stop working.

The Israelites journey helps us see just how varied and treacherous the journey toward justice is. Remember, as the Israelites camped by the sea (Ex. 14:2), they had not only just been freed from slavery, but God had instructed the Egyptians to pay reparations for the Israelites' forced labor - they had to give them objects of silver and gold and clothing (Ex. 11:2-3, 12:35-36). So the Israelites had both the freedom to go on their way and some resources to help them survive. Imagine their relief at being free, only then to experience the whiplash of fear, shock, and horror as they lifted their eyes and saw the Egyptians coming after them! (Ex. 14:10). No wonder the Israelites cried out to God in fear (Ex. 14:10)! They were convinced that Pharaoh had set out to massacre them. They told Moses that it would have been better for them to grow old in slavery and be buried in Egyptian graves rather than to die that day in the wilderness (Ex. 14:11-12). And Moses, their great leader, told

the people that they need only to stand still and see the saving work that God would do on their behalf (Ex. 14:13-14).²

It's as if Moses invites them into the theatre of their lives and says, "sit back, relax, and enjoy the show!" All will be well. God's drawing the curtain even as we speak.

But then, all the sudden, in probably my favorite move of this entire motion picture of faith, God reverses this seemingly wise guidance of Moses saying, "*Why do you cry out to me? [Stop standing still] Tell the people to move forward*" (Ex. 14:15). God's heard enough crying out (Ex. 2:23, 14:10) and doesn't want the people to stand still and watch, as Moses had said. **Instead God tells the people to move forward into an uncertain future!**³

And THEN, as they move forward, following what God tells them, God switches things up again! God reverses God's positioning and presence with them. Previously they'd been led by a pillar of smoke by day

and a pillar of fire by night that never left its place IN FRONT OF the community (Ex. 13:21-22). Now the pillar shifted TO THE REAR of the camp between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Their guiding light was behind them now. Which may not be that big of a deal, but tell that to someone who's just gotten out of bed in the middle of the night and tripped and fell because someone moved the night light from the hallway by the bathroom where it's ALWAYS been. Sure, we can adjust to a new location for the nightlight, but it's not gonna happen overnight and with no warning; it's scary, frustrating, and potentially harmful.

So as the Israelites proceed through the night and step into these vast uncharted waters, to their right and left are walls of watery death, behind them is a holy burning fire roaring at their heels, and in front of them was only the uncertainty of their own shadows."⁴ Sounds like a horror movie doesn't it?

You see how confusing all these movements must have

² Driver, *ibid.*

³ Driver, *ibid.*

⁴ Driver, *ibid.*

been. First they're freed with gifts of gold and silver. Then God leads them wandering in a round about way. Then they look up and are pursued by the enemy army. Then they run one way and come up against a huge vast ocean with nowhere to turn. Then their leader tells them to be still and see what God would do for them. But then God tells their leader to stop standing still and move forward. So then they start moving - following the light, the presence of God that had been guiding them. Then that pillar of light and presence moves behind them. And while that's meant to be a measure of protection between them and the opposing forces, now they're moving forward on their own instinct and skill without that familiar guidance. Then, they miraculously make it across dry land in the middle of an ocean only to turn and see their opposing forces drowned and wiped out as the waters close up over them.⁵ No wonder the people are all over the place; it feels like God is all over the place too!

Because God is. But is that such a bad thing? We tend to like to think of God in one place in our lives, but I think God moves around a lot more than we realize, because God is always at work in the world. And if we can't find God or feel God's presence, it could be because God moved and we didn't notice or didn't follow.

The Exodus exemplifies that there are many confusing reversals and movements in the process of being freed. And we won't always understand them or see what purpose those movements are serving. It may feel like God has abandoned us altogether or is intentionally trying to confuse us. But maybe that's not the case.

An ancient Jewish commentary compares the movements of God in the Exodus story to a man walking alone with his son on a dark night. The man and son walked single file to remain on the narrow road. When the man sensed a thief ahead, he moved his son behind him to protect him. When the man sensed a wolf behind them, he moved his son in front of him.

⁵ Driver, *ibid.*

When both a thief and a wolf approached at the same time, the man put his son on his shoulders to protect him from both threats.⁶ The son, no doubt, felt confused at being jostled back and forth by his father, though he trusted his father to keep him safe on the dark path.

If you feel like God's not out in front of you leading you, then turn and look over your shoulder, maybe God is supporting you from behind, ready to catch you when you fall and to protect you from the old habits and voices that are persuasive and persistent in pushing you down. If you feel like you need God to be behind you, supporting you, and your missing that presence, then look ahead, maybe God is up there, calling you forward, trying to bushwhack away all the fears and doubts that keep you stumbling and stuck. And if you look ahead of you and behind you and still can't seem to find God, consider that God's presence just might be all around you in those who surround you or even that God's presence might be within

you, in the very air you breathe and within your own intuition wisdom and heartbeat. There is no "one size fits all" location for God in our lives, just as there is no "one size fits all" direction and movement toward liberation and freedom. We need ALL the ways, ALL the movements, ALL the motions.

God calls us all to freedom from sin and death, including freedom from structural sins and systematic oppression. But even in the clarity of that calling to freedom - sometimes the path to fulfilling that call to liberation is confusing and circular, and our act of faithfulness is to stop standing still and to move forward - in whatever way we can - into what the Lord is doing, even if we can't see the end result yet on the horizon.

So whether you are in need of assurance and encouragement as you work for justice and liberation for ALL God's children, or whether you need assurance that God will liberate you from a situation or relationship or job or fear or emotion that is holding you

⁶ Mekhila d'Rabbi Yishmael 14:19.

back and keeping you from
living a truly free life,
remember the story of the
Exodus and just how many
moves it took for the ultimate
Movement of Freedom and
Liberation to happen.

All motion is good motion if it
leads us out of fear and into
freedom. If it springs from love
and leads to liberation. We
cannot stop moving in this
gospel work. No matter how
many moves it takes. Because
in the Moving Motion Picture
of Faith, every move YOU
make matters.

Amen.