

Getting Our Toes Wet

The final verse of last week's text tells us: "Whatever Joseph did, the Lord made it prosper."¹ While in prison, Joseph catches the attention of pharaoh's household because of his gift for making sense of dreams, especially pharaoh's dreams. Under Joseph's guidance, Egypt sets aside grain and livestock during years of plenty and is well-prepared when famine strikes. Then, as you may recall, Joseph's family comes to Egypt looking for food. They do not recognize Joseph, but he works to give them what they need and eventually reconciles with them and is reunited with his father Jacob. So all is well...for a while. The beginning of the book of Exodus tells us that the Israelites thrived in Egypt and grew in strength and numbers. But then, things change. The people once welcomed as guests are now seen as a threat. A new king who has no memory of Joseph and his saving ways fears that the Israelites will side with Egypt's enemies in a time of war, so he makes a plan to oppress and enslave them. One part of this plan includes having the male Hebrew children killed in childbirth. When that fails—thanks to some courageous midwives, the king orders that the baby boys be thrown into the Nile. And that's when we meet Moses. This baby boy is hidden by his mother in a reed basket that floats him into pharaoh's household as the adopted child of pharaoh's daughter. Moses grows up surrounded by wealth and privilege, but eventually something nudges him to protest the beating of a Hebrew slave and ultimately killing an Egyptian guard. Moses flees to the wilderness, lives as a shepherd, and meets God in a burning bush. He returns to Egypt to tell pharaoh to let God's people go. Pharaoh resists. God keeps pushing through a series of plagues and eventually, on the heels of the final plague, the death of every Egyptian first born child, pharaoh relents. The Egyptians hurry the Hebrews out of town and hand off their gold and silver, too. Then pharaoh changes his mind. [Exodus 14:5-14, 21-29]

A few weeks back, it was hard to turn away from the coverage of Hurricane Florence, or Flo as she's come to be known. One of the most powerful images was a graphic on the Weather Channel showing what a rising storm surge looks like.² The reporter stands in the middle of circle, and an image of rising water grows around her. It shows the power of the water at 3 feet, when the current is strong and walking becomes difficult. Then at 6 feet the water rises above the reporter's head, over the car parked over the speaker's right shoulder and even begins to lift the

¹ Genesis 39:23, NRSV

² <https://youtu.be/bRkXPuGAHKE>

car. As the water swells to nine feet, the reporter points out that the water will now flow over the top of any one-story building in its path. It's a powerful image, one that is intended to encourage anyone who would dare risk staying behind to leave. It also drives home for those of us on dry ground just what our brothers and sisters in the Carolinas were up against. It is stunning to see how quickly one human being is dwarfed by this wall of water, water that almost entirely surrounds her. But that water is no more than a graphic on a green screen, a make-believe threat that she can leave behind with the click of a button. It's a different story when the water is real.

That image of water towering overhead makes me even more sympathetic to the grumbling Israelites. They are newly free and newly wealthy. Life should be good, but now, at God's command Moses wants them to move into the sea, and they do not swim. Water means chaos and the unknown. They are stuck between Egypt's world-class army and the sea, and they understandably protest. They know what it is to live as slaves in Egypt. They know how to make bricks. On their good days, they know how to avoid the taskmaster's wrath. On their not-so-good days they know how to endure that wrath. Their vision is skewed. As another preacher says:

Their rose-colored glasses have erased the memories of being enslaved, of being persecuted, of having their children thrown into the Nile, of being abused by their Egyptian taskmasters.³

The water distorts their vision yet again. They are terrified by the unknown that lies ahead, and they begin to romanticize what they have left behind. Maybe it wasn't so bad. Maybe if they wave the white flag, Pharaoh will let bygones be bygones and let them get back to brick-making. But God wants more for them. God wants to lead them out of slavery and into life. It seems so straightforward to us. We know how the story goes. We know that sea will not overwhelm them, but they do not. They cannot see the new thing God is doing in front of them. All they can see is water. All. That. Water. And the angry empire breathing down their necks. And so they look back, and long for what they had—or what they now think they had. They do not even want to dip a toe in to that swirling sea. They cannot imagine how anything good could come of that. Except, perhaps, for Nachshon.

There is a story from the midrash, a story the rabbis told about this moment, recorded in the Talmud, the Jewish teachings about scripture. In this story, the Israelites hear the order from God: "Go forward."...and they look at the roiling sea and hesitate. The pillar of fire and cloud move behind them, separating them from the Egyptians, so they can no longer look back. They can only look at the sea. Moses stretches out his hand, and the Israelites look at

³ The Rev. Teri Peterson in her sermon found here: <https://clevertithere.blogspot.com/2018/09/forward-in-faitha-sermon-on-crossing.html>

the sea...until a man called Nachshon, brother-in-law of Aaron, the brother of Moses and Miriam, takes the first step. He walks into the sea, up to his ankles...up to his knees...he keeps walking, and the people watch...up to his waist, up to his chest...still he walks forward in faith. Up to his shoulders, up to his chin...[when he is in up to his nostrils] the waters part, and he stands on dry ground, going on, just as God had called. He goes forward and the way appears, and the whole body of the Israelites walk across, with a wall of water on one side and the other.⁴

This story is not in the scripture we receive, and yet, it is true that in Red Sea moments like this one, someone has to go first. So I find myself wondering what gives someone like Nachshon the courage to step forward first into the water. I watched that virtual wall of water surround the Weather Channel reporter, and I found myself frustrated with those who still would not leave. All I could see was the water that would soon tower above stop signs and mailboxes. Because I had seen that water before. We lived in eastern North Carolina in 1999 when Floyd blew through. Before the storm hit, I was frantically—and naively—on the phone with the world’s most patient state trooper while she calmly explained that it was a bad idea for me to try to take my college students to Montreat in the western part of the state for a retreat. I could not envision just how bad it would get, just how difficult it would be to get out and back in, let alone how hard it would be to get students back to their families and out of harm’s way. But I did what she told me to. I stayed put and watched the waters rise.

I have never seen a sky as blue as the one overhead after the winds died down. It was sunny and beautiful, like everything had been washed clean. And then the waters came. Our house was spared, but the water filled streams and rivers and eventually streets undaunted by any barriers. It was hard to see anything other than water, and it was nearly impossible to imagine that anything good could come in its wake. But then the Nachshons arrived. They wore waders and donated clothes and cooked hot meals and offered hugs and sat and wept with those who had lost everything. And not once did I hear them disparage the ones who had stayed behind. Because anyone who found their way into eastern North Carolina that fall saw what the water could do, what the water had done, especially to the lives of those who were barely able to stay afloat even before the first drop of rain fell.

It is so easy to shake my head at the Israelites when they hesitate at the sea’s edge. They should know better. They should get out. And yet, they have no way to imagine life outside of slavery. Their vision is clouded by

⁴ As re-told by the Rev. Teri Peterson, <https://clevertithere.blogspot.com/2018/09/forward-in-faitha-sermon-on-crossing.html>

generations of oppression. They have forgotten that the empire cannot be trusted. They have forgotten that God can. They cannot see the new thing God promises to do, because all they can see is water.

I'm guessing you've had moments like this, moments when you have stood between the old life that led only to dead ends and the new life in the unknown ahead. What or who gave you the courage to walk forward? Because walk forward you did. Somehow you put one foot in front of the other. Somehow you found a way to trust—even for a moment—that the walls of water on either side could be trusted to hold, that the God who built them could build something new in you, too.

There are many who are trapped between the old life and the new even now: Flood survivors who are knee deep in the business of mucking out; survivors of abuse whose pain is ridiculed or dismissed; immigrants who have left behind family, customs, language, and culture because their village is no longer home; foster children who carry all they own from one temporary home to another in garbage bags; opioid addicts whose lives—and those of their families—teeter on the brink. Who will be Nachshon for them? Who will step forward in faith and invite them to come, too? My hope is that it will be the church. My hope is that we will speak God's holy words of promise instead of the empire's language of disdain. My hope is that we will show what it means to trust not the mighty chariots of pharaoh, but the faithfulness of a God who makes a way through the sea. Because at some point along the way, we have been stuck, too, and God refused to leave us there. When we were beaten down, written off, or paralyzed by fear, God fought for us. We who have passed through the dangerous waters of baptism, who have trudged through the mud, who have been welcomed into new life, just may be the very ones called to be Nachshon here and now. Maybe it's time to get our toes wet so that others can walk forward on God's dry ground, too.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.