

***Stunning Reversals***  
(Sermon Series: The Stories of Moses)  
Exodus 14:9-31  
Sunday, October 18, 2009

Today's sermon is the fourth in a six-week series on the "Stories of Moses." Next Sunday's sermon will focus on the story of how Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai. The final sermon on November 1 will have as its theme Moses' death outside the Promised Land – especially how it connects with our remembrance on All Saints Day of all those who have died in faith before us.

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The name of the second book of the Bible, "Exodus", literally means "exit" and refers, of course, to the great action of Yahweh which enables the people of Israel to exit or escape their imprisonment in Egypt. The story is epic – beginning with a child named Moses being born to an Israelite slave woman and hidden in a basket that is placed on the river waters to keep him from being killed by Egyptian soldiers; of how the child is found by the Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the Pharaoh's court; how Moses as a young man gradually discovers his identity as an Israelite; how he sees an Egyptian overseer abusing a kinsman and kills him in a moment of great rage; how he flees to the East and stumbles into the company of a shepherding family in which he finds the woman who will become his wife; how Yahweh appears to him in a burning bush telling him that he, Moses, must set Yahweh's people free; how Moses finally obeys and goes back to the Pharaoh's court; and all of the events that happened there causing Pharaoh to finally release the captives.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the foremost authority on the Hebrew Bible writing today, says that there are "four major theological themes that order the book of Exodus"<sup>1</sup>: "liberation" ("the transformation of a social situation from oppression to freedom"); "law" (the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai to govern the lives of Yahweh's people); "covenant" ("a binding relationship whereby Yahweh and Israel are intimately, profoundly, and non-negotiably committed to each other); and

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 678 ff.

“presence” (in which the book of Exodus describes the institutional manner in which the unfathomable holy presence of God is hosted by this imperfect and willful people). Today’s sermon focuses on one of the greatest chapters in this saga – the deliverance of the Hebrew children at the Red Sea from the Egyptians, what Dr. Brueggemann calls one of history’s great stunning reversals.

We know what stunning reversals are. Over the last year the stock market took the steepest falloff in value since October of 1929; and how the same market has rallied in the past ten months to reach the 10,000 mark this past week, though, oh so briefly. We see stunning reversals in sports events all the time – how NFL quarterbacks Brett Favre or Payton Manning can come from behind to win a game in the last minute or even the last four seconds in Favre’s case. We note how fame, fortune, and prestige can seem to evaporate over night as it has for Roman Polanski, now jailed in Switzerland. William Shakespeare makes use of stunning reversals all the time in his great tragedies “Macbeth,” “Othello,” and “Julius Caesar,” among others. Some would claim that the election of Barack Obama was a stunning reversal in American political history. We see great breakthroughs in medical science allowing effective treatment of physical conditions for the first time. Social situations and entire communities can be transformed by effective leadership as in the case of Chief of Police Bratton and his amazing job within the City of Los Angeles. When Galileo discovered that the earth revolves around the sun and is not the center of creation, he put into effect what Dava Sobel in her book *Galileo’s Daughter* describes as “the most stunning reversal in perception ever to have jarred intelligent thought: We are not the center of the universe. The immobility of our world is an illusion. We spin. We speed through space. We circle the sun. We live on a wandering star.”<sup>2</sup>

The story of the crossing of the Red Sea takes its place as one of the great stunning reversals of all time. As today’s narrative begins, Moses and the Israelite children, who are camped on the Red Sea’s West side, see the Egyptian army behind them coming closer and closer. The people cry out to Moses in their fear: “What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? It would have been better for us to remain slaves to the Egyptians than to die a humiliating death in the wilderness.” (Exodus 14:11-12)

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<sup>2</sup> <http://uanews.org/node/23237>.

In one of the Bible's great calls to faith in the face of adversity, Moses says to the people: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." (Exodus 14:13-14)

Keeping still, however, is not in Yahweh's plans. Even though they are right at the water's edge, Yahweh "issues an imperative that calls for daring action: 'Journey!'"<sup>3</sup> "Go forward?" Moses and the people must of thought. "Go where?" The only possible answer is that Yahweh means for them to go into the waters, and if they do that they will surely perish. Only if the people journey forward (an utter impossibility, as they see it) can the Egyptians finally know that they are not their former slaves but the Lord God of heaven and earth.

As Yahweh instructs, Moses faces the waters and stretches out his hand over them. Suddenly a wind from the East begins to blow and gradually pushes the waters back so that the sea is transformed into dry land. And the people passed through with a wall of water on their left and another on their right.

As they are reaching the other side, the Egyptian army arrives on the West bank of the sea and begins to follow them. What was dry land suddenly becomes like marshland and worse, and the wheels of the chariots become clogged and unable to turn. The Egyptians panic and try to turn around, finally admitting that the LORD is fighting on the side of the Hebrew children against them. It is reminiscent of Joseph Stalin's question in World War II, "How many divisions does the Pope have?" – "Pharaoh might have asked the same cynical question: 'How many troops does Yahweh have?'"<sup>4</sup>

But it is too late. With the people all safe on the other side, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea a second time and the entire Egyptian army perishes because of their folly. Dr. Brueggemann says that if Moses was replicating "the coming of dry land in creation [in the book of Genesis], ... [Yahweh mobilizes] the powers of chaos...to foil the enemies of liberation."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 794.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 794-795.

In their final moments of life, “the Egyptians are made to confess what the Israelites themselves had doubted, and what Moses himself had affirmed.”<sup>6</sup> The irony, of course, is that the enemy of God makes a stronger affirmation of God’s power than do the Israelites, God’s own people who should have been acknowledging God’s power from the very beginning.

As the Israelite children look behind them to see what has happened to their enemies, it’s almost as if Cecil B. DeMille’s “does a slow, sweeping survey of the shore, at the edge of the deathly waters. The Israelites are not visible in the deathly scene. They are behind the camera looking in astonishment. All that is visible are dead Egyptians: Egyptian soldiers, Egyptian horses, Egyptian chariots, Egyptian power, and Egyptian arrogance... The watching Israelites are driven to two unavoidable conclusions. First, they fear Yahweh... They finally know beyond any doubt that Yahweh, with power and fidelity, will do for them what they cannot do for themselves. Second, the Israelites [finally] ‘believe in’ Yahweh and Moses.”<sup>7</sup>

As Dr. Brueggemann suggests, one is left standing in awed silence “before this stunning reversal of the processes of power. This outcome is no ordinary turn of affairs, to be explained by any human stratagem or by any natural phenomenon. Any attempt to have the story on such terms is a violation of what we are intended to hear in the narrative. In the purview of this narrative, there is only one possible explanation, and the name of that ‘explanation’ is Yahweh, who brings both life and death... One cannot ask merely how this rescue could happen or whether it is possible. One cannot proceed by seeking to explain the miracle of the water, for any convincing explanation would only lead away from the intent of the text itself. This text is not argument, but witness and summons; it is *a witness to the power of Yahweh and a subsequent summons to faith.*”<sup>8</sup>

Albert Einstein famously said: “If you chase physics far enough, you find God. If you chase God far enough, you find physics.”

Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, writes about his first days as a liberated man after being released from a Nazi concentration camp after the end of World War II: “A recollection. The time: After the war. The place: Paris. A young man struggles to readjust to life. His mother, his father, his small

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 795.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 795-796.

sister are gone. He is alone. On the verge of despair. And yet he does not give up. On the contrary, he strives to find a place among the living. He acquires a new language. He makes a few friends who, like himself, believe that the memory of evil will serve as a shield against evil; that the memory of death will serve as a shield against death.”<sup>9</sup>

Mark Frank, “When Our Red Sea Does Not Open”<sup>10</sup>

When our red sea does not open  
We must still SEE by FAITH  
Sometimes things don’t happen on time  
Sometimes we don’t see what we want to see  
Sometimes we fall down and it’s hard to get up

This season of maturity is the essence of life  
Growth with the Lord is important and  
The destruction of our ‘own way’ is needed--  
God delivers His people at the right time  
Because the right time indicates the  
The purpose of His original plan

Sometimes our red sea does not open and  
Sometimes we want to give up but we  
Must know that God does things  
According to His ‘Will’,  
His way is pure and so we  
Should dare to continue to follow God  
When our red sea does not open

Tranquility is good but  
Purity at heart is even better  
Being real to oneself is the  
Letter of the heart and dealing with  
Uncertainty is fulfilling your part  
Therefore, there are no surprises when  
The art of life displays the tales of the crypt!

At times we will face things that

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<sup>9</sup> Elie Wiesel, “Hope, Despair, and Memory,” Nobel Lecture at the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize, December 11, 1986, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html).

<sup>10</sup> Mark Frank, “When Our Red Sea Does Not Open,” <http://www.faithwriters.com/article-details.php?id=104325>.

Look final but it is only the beginning  
We lose many things in life because  
We declare them dead prematurely  
We are all faced with a series of great opportunities  
Brilliantly disguised as impossible situations

God delivers His people at the right time  
Because the right time indicates the  
The purpose of His original plan

Today, as believers of Jesus Christ, whom Matthew the Evangelist says is even greater than Moses, we recall hymns of faith which speak to us in the midst of our journey of uncertainty, fear, doubt, and faith.

Whenever we sing Echoes in “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus”, we also think of the Israelites who were asked to go impossibly into the waters, a journey that could only mean death. And when we sing “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks,” we also think of God’s people safe on the side – in this life and the next.

For it is God’s will that all people be liberated, that all people live according to God’s law, that all people enter into sacred covenant with the Almighty, and that all us have a reverence and awe for the holy presence of God’s being which is always with us as we journey – in this life and the next.

Thanks be to God. Amen.