

2020 9 13 Rev. Sara M. Holland Sermon

Scripture: Exodus 14: 19-31¹ & Matthew 18: 21b – 35 (Robert Benson adaptation²)

Title: “On the Road to Freedom”

Theme: a road to freedom, steadfast love

Trouble: Israelites were pursued / our very being is pursued

Grace: There is a steadfast love, it is manifold, we are called to proclaim this

I invite you all to pray with me: May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable to You, oh God, my rock and redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

God “drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.”³ God drove the sea back.

-pause-

There might be a few things that are worse than wandering in the desert . . . one, of course, is being chased through a desert.

¹The New Oxford Annotated Bible. “Exodus,” in *The Pentateuch*, ed. Marc Z. Brettler & Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 103.

²Robert Benson, *Venite: A Book of Daily Prayer* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2017), 229.

³Bible, “Exodus,” 103.

The Israelites are not in some game of freeze tag. The Israelites are in a run for your life itself situation. We might be able to imagine how each of the Israelites there that day might have responded given their own personalities and temperaments. As the Israelites approach this body of water, commonly referred to as the Red Sea, there was, of course, that person who denied the plausibility of the situation. Denial: one favorite way for us humans to cope. Yelling: you know there had to be a few hysterical people standing there beside Moses. And a favorite of many people, myself included: jokes at the wrong time.

One Israelite turns to their pal and says sarcastically: “trust Moses, you said, huh? Right . . .”

We might easily imagine we are in this plight. We might place ourselves in this moment, looking to Moses, trying to escape, searching for freedom. On the road to freedom, encountering struggle after struggle. . .

As these Israelites these encounter hardships, so too we can't find the end of this pandemic wilderness. . . . The pandemic wilderness, this situation we're all in, it seems to represent a greater moment of uncertainty. Hard to imagine: a thing with greater existential threat than a pandemic.

The Israelites may have seen a similar threat in this chase. This moment of being chased through the Red Sea being representative of a greater existential threat – a wilderness wandering that seemed like it would never end.

A pandemic wilderness that seems like it will never end. A stress that many of us can feel in our bodies.

In this text, we read the trouble of the people wandering in the ancient near east: The Egyptians pursued the Israelites.

Today, we feel our trouble as we wander from essential business to home or simply stay home to try and stay safe or as low risk as possible. Our trouble: this pandemic and historical moment pursues our very being.

The trouble for the Israelites is that they are being pursued violently.

Our trouble: this pandemic and moment of uncertainty pursue the depths of our very being. These troubles feel manifold, they feel manifold because they are large and they do pile, one on top of the other.

We feel traumatized by

Pandemic crises, economic uncertainty, environmental meltdown, politics that seem to always lack compassion and racist policies that harm all of us.

On the road to freedom, we encounter struggle after struggle.

Imagine that moment the sea parts and the people are with Moses, working their way over this land that is dry because of God's guidance and might.

Even though this land is dry, we can imagine that they still struggled during this miracle moment.

At the bottom of such a body of water lay rocks, seaweed, and animals.

And then the stress response of being chased. Each, a barrier to the other side, representative of the continuous Israelite struggle.

For the Israelites, their troubles seemed to be manifold. Our troubles feel manifold because they are. Manifold – many and varied.

Exodus is the written account of Israel's exit from Egypt. Exodus is a critical part of the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible, also called the Pentateuch. These first 5 books, starting with Genesis, form a larger narrative of a people who struggle.⁴

Katheryn Pfisterer-Darr of Boston University's School of Theology reminds learners that, "the Pentateuch is the foundation for modern biblical scholarship."⁵ What this means is that all biblical scholarship is viewed from the lens of what the Israelites experienced in their wilderness wanderings. The struggle of the Israelites is one to which we are meant to relate. These struggles repeat themselves not just in other Hebrew Bible narratives, but throughout history more generally.

"The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left."⁶

⁴Bible, "Exodus," 81.

⁵Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, Intro to Hebrew Bible at Boston University (Boston, Boston University, fall, 2012), lecture Sept. 11 2012.

⁶Bible, "Exodus, page 103, verse 22.

There are some patterns which we see throughout the wilderness wanderings that help us understand the overall narrative of the Israelites. Time and again we hear that: 1) the people express dismay, 2) God becomes angry at the people, 3) Moses intercedes, and 4) God responds positively to physical need. These occurrences are repetitive.⁷

If we consider this cycle or pattern and its elements, we notice it recurring not only in the Hebrew Bible but then it comes up throughout the gospel in various ways. And always God's grace is a deep point of focus.

As we turn to our minds and hearts to determine what our still-speaking God offers us for this day, we can remember that while all sources from the Pentateuch have something to say about Israel's time in the desert, not one of them was aiming at a just-the-facts account. The biblical authors of these texts were working to show a larger framework of the Israelite struggle.⁸ This story is about more than the miracle of the Red Sea being divided, it is about the nature of God.

⁷Darr, lecture, Sept 18 2012.

⁸Darr, lecture, Sept 18 2012.

“The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.”⁹

I, for one, am happy to know that the authors of the Pentateuch and writers thereafter have aimed to provide us with stability and flexibility rather than orthodoxy.¹⁰ In today’s text, we hear of a God being determined to show divine might and how God shows up for beloved children.

Yes, the Israelites were pursued and yes, their struggles did seem to be manifold.

We have to keep in mind that throughout the wilderness wanderings the Israelites forgot time and again that they were surrounded by the steadfast love of God. A steadfast love which was manifold. **A steadfast love that is manifold.**

“The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.”¹¹ Standing in the sea, steadfast love all around.

⁹Bible, “Exodus, page 103, verse 22.

¹⁰Darr, lecture, Sept 18 2012.

¹¹Bible, “Exodus, page 103, verse 22.

Manifold struggle, manifold troubles meet steadfast love that is manifold.

Trouble, per its definition is inconvenience, pain, exertion, or the like.

Love, per definition is a profoundly tender, passionate affection

It seems to me that manifold love will overcome manifold trouble or struggle any day. As overwhelming as our pandemic troubles are, God's steadfast love surrounds us as the Red Sea waters surrounded the Israelites. Love will hold us in the toughest moments; when we are able, we must show others this Love too.

In a similar way that the Israelites forgot, we forget over and over that this steadfast love surrounds us. A steadfast love that is manifold. God is with us and this moment is temporary and fleeting. God is the ever-present Truth for which we must strive. Now, more than ever, we must remember that God will stay with us during our pandemic wilderness. Standing in the sea, steadfast love all around.

And God doesn't ask us to come perfectly but to simply come. We are to move towards this freedom, this same freedom the Israelites sought.

Walking through the valley of the Red Sea: Standing in the sea, steadfast love all around.

God walks with us through these waves of change and transition – we must show this profound Love, we must name hope in these times of divisiveness, fear and anger. For this steadfast love is manifold and it *will* manifold.

“The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.”¹²

We, we are called to make this love manifold alongside the Divine, alongside Christ. That forgiveness, which is embodied God's action in the Hebrew Bible, the forgiveness, which is shown in the story Jesus told, that forgiveness is ours not only to have but to give. We must take this good news, this manifold Love, to the world. Too many people are hurting at this time for us to stand idly aside and wait for others to step into our call. We each have a role, for this is the word from God – one body, many parts. The person who stocks the food pantry, the person who organizes the family zoom call.

¹²Bible, “Exodus, page 103, verse 22.

A steadfast love, a steadfast love that is manifold. This Love is what we must proclaim, believe (in our hearts, in our bellies) and reveal to our neighbors. A love of saving grace and understanding, the love of compassion is what we will aim to offer one another in the midst of turmoil. Know that this love of compassion is yours.

Do you sense that this love is yours? Do you realize how very capable you are of showing this Love to others? It *is* yours, this Love, and you **ARE** capable.

We must remember that God is not waiting for us to present ourselves in any perfect way, but simply to present ourselves.

Let us feel God's steadfast Love with our hearts, let us feel that this Love is manifold, and let us proclaim this Love to all in the world. On this road to freedom: exist on that dry ground, know that you stand in that steadfast Love. Let it be so.

Time: ~14 mins

Bibliography

Benson, Robert. *Venite: A Book of Daily Prayer*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017.

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The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fifth Edition, New Revised Standard Version. "Exodus." In *The Hebrew Bible, The Pentateuch*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, & Pheme Perkins, 81, 102-103. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.