

## Creating A New Vision

### Exodus 14:19-31

You may have visions of Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner in your heads as you listened to this story being read. Cecil DeMille's 1956 movie of *The Ten Commandments* fits the particular episode of this Biblical event. DeMille's interpretation of the story was literal. Word for word. Imagine -- the waters dividing, splitting, *parting* so that thousands of Israelites could walk on dry land. Imagine the faith and fear and awe in their eyes as they made that journey. In the movie, you can see the people running breathlessly, grabbing whatever they could, without even glancing backwards. There was no time for that. They had to make for the sea. God knows, the sea was their only chance. Not much of a choice, but a choice nonetheless.

About 2 years ago, Ridley Scott, who professed to be an atheist, directed another Exodus movie with Christian Bale as Moses. Scott used scientific explanations for the parting of the Red Sea. It has been suggested in the movie that the water parted because of a tsunami caused by an earthquake. This is because, before a tsunami strikes, coastal waters often recede. According to Scott's explanation, Moses used his knowledge of the tides to enable his people to cross shallow waters at low tide. His perfect timing meant that as the last of the Israelites crossed to safety, pursuing Egyptian soldiers were drowned as the waters suddenly returned.

I agree that when we tell this particular story to children or even adults, it is way too easy for us to use visual means such as movies to do this. But what kind of interpretation are we feeding our listeners? We all know that the film industry is all about telling a story, entertaining the masses and selling movie tickets. But the Bible wasn't written particularly as entertainment. Entertainment wasn't in the minds of those ancient storytellers who told and retold these stories for their children and children's children to hear. These stories were meant to inspire faith, to find and understand who God is.

God's parting of the Red Sea has many layers of meanings. The story tells us that the Israelites were delivered by God from the bondage of slavery, but their liberation didn't just happen. They had to go where they didn't want to go. They didn't want to go into that sea. They didn't want to march into the unknown. But if they won't take the risk of crossing the sea, then no deliverance would have happened. If they had stayed in place, nothing would have changed. They will be slaves forever.

Put yourself into the shoes of the Israelites and imagine for a moment how it feels to walk on dry land. Feel the weight of the seawater mixed with sand, so that the ground they're walking on has to be thick and heavy and muddy. Anthea Portier-Young, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School, points out that the Hebrew word most commonly used for dry land is *yabbashah*. But in this story another word for dry land was used: *charabah* which means to dry up or be in ruins. *Charabah* was used 8 times in the Hebrew scripture to name the waste and desolation that follows after warfare and destruction. That's the nature of the dry land that the Israelites have to walk through to find deliverance and salvation. They have to walk through waste and desolation, the scraps of slavery, the debris of injustice and brokenness before they reach liberation and freedom. They have to trek through worse things than what they'd already known to get to the Promised Land. Why would they want to go through that? Why would anybody want to go there?

At the lectionary group this past Tuesday I got to listen to some interesting discussion on the parting of the Red Sea. How do we deal with a story like this? Some biblical scholars argue that there is no historical, no archaeological evidence that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry land. So if it was all made up anyway, why should it matter to us? Despite what disagreements may exist about what happened in historical accounts, there is ample evidence that these texts have a history or significance in the lives of ancient Israel. The ancient Israelites read these texts, Jesus himself read these texts. The early Christians read these texts. We still read it today. These texts have taken on a life of their own apart from whatever happened in history—they have become history by impacting the lives of persons of faith. Our lives, our histories are changed by these texts, when we encounter them within our history, and hear them speaking to us here, and now. James Robinson, an Orthodox theologian, spoke of how this text of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea has been interpreted as a symbol of baptism, of going through the waters of baptism, from death into new life, with the dead Egyptians a symbol of our sins washed away in the waters of baptism.

Lorrie shared an interpretation of this story that made sense to most of us in the lectionary group. She said that this story shows God's power over the monster of chaos, symbolized by the waters. Once the people pass through these chaotic sea movements, once they cross over, they become a new people, recreated by God. The crossing of the sea was Israel's rite of passage

through which the people became a nation. Behind them lay Egypt and bondage, in front of them, the great wilderness leading into freedom. The people entered the channel as a group of refugees, terrified and in panic, they emerge, after the strong east wind has carved out a path, in awe and with a new attitude of faith in God for the miracle of deliverance and salvation. There is no need to analyze what natural phenomena might have taken place in order to do this, the point of the text is not about factual history. It is about God saving Israel from oppression and slavery. So what do we do with this text? How can it speak to us today? This story reminds us that salvation has nothing to do with strength or cleverness, it is nothing other than saving work of God, the same God who sides with the oppressed and the one who champions for justice and mercy. The walls of the sea are a symbol of God's grace, parting to protect and shelter the people from Pharaoh's wrath.

This crossing-over image seemed to be an apt description of where we are as people of faith. It is a story of new visions and hopes. We've been in one place for a long time, and then a dry land was made out of nowhere, where there was only uncrossable water, there is now a clear path, and if we don't cross the water, we will stay in our own cocoon forever, but the journey is not easy. It entails lots of hard work, determination and perseverance. As people of faith and people who have inherited the stories of liberation and freedom in the Hebrew and Gospel texts, we know what it means to walk beside the difficult waters of life and we have witnessed the parting of the waters in our own lives. Each one of us can tell our own stories of loss, hope and renewal through the grace of God and the hope of community. Some of us can speak about the despair we have faced in the death of a loved one or the separation of a spouse and the healing that has come. Some of us have known the parting of the waters in the midst of a difficult medical diagnosis and the grace which arrived in the form of others who cared for us. We can tell stories of hope through acts of love and justice as we have fed the hungry and encouraged the homeless, sponsored refugees or travel to Nicaragua to work with the poor. The God we know is a God who delivers on the promise to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Creating new visions is like an ever-present fear of the unknown ahead, and as we make decisions, as we continue to build a community of visionaries and doers of faith, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. As your minister, there are times when I felt like I am in the middle of the

Red Sea, with Egyptians coming after me and towering walls of water ready to crush over me. It reminded me of how much I still have to learn and grow, about balancing work and family, caring for others and caring for myself, and how I can always improve on many things. But the care and support I receive from many of you tells me that I am not alone in my journey. We as a church are in this together. And all of us are growing. All of us are changing and being changed in the process. We need to be reminded of this common calling, because the difficulty in a journey is not its beginning, but its process of going through it. The Israelites, walking between towering waves of water, no doubt questioned where they were going. And when they got to the other side, they questioned whether it was a good idea to have started this journey in the first place! We've started this journey together, and there may be moments when we wish we could go back. Go back to the way things were but there is no turning back. We have begun this journey, and we must cross over into this new time, this new season of leadership, and trust that God is bringing us where our vision leads us.

On January 1, 2019, the United Church of Canada will implement the remits that have been approved by the presbyteries and pastoral charges. In addition to approving changes to the traditional operating practices of the denomination, presbyteries and pastoral charges voted in favour of a three-council model and a new financial arrangement among pastoral charges, communities of faith, regions, and the General Council. We as a church are in a Red Sea crossing. We do not know what the future entails. We have a vision. We trust in God. That's all that matters.

I close my sermon with some questions that Nicole contributed in the *Gathering* for your personal reflection. Are you at a Red Sea crossing? Can you afford to remain in the old country? If you safely crosses, what are your losses? What are your gains? Do you trust that God is leading you, even when the way forward seems uncertain and possibly treacherous?

Let this verse in Exodus 15: 13 sit with your soul, whispering encouragement when the going gets tough. "In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode." Amen.

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Sources:

BCUC lectionary Group; The sermons of Rev. Dr. Dan De Leon and Rev. Dr. Pat De Jong; the commentaries of Anthea Portier-Young and Casey Thornburgh Sigmon.