

Exodus 14:10-15:1
2 Corinthians 4:5-12

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STAYING POWER

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (2 Corinthians 4:7)

The Bible's telling of the Exodus, the miraculous flight from Egypt and crossing of the sea into the wilderness, is a tapestry woven of two distinct stories. One tells of how the sea was divided into two great heaps, like opposing walls, as the people of Israel walked through that watery canyon on a dry sea bed. This is the dramatic image favored by Hollywood, with Charlton Heston leading the Hebrew slaves as Egyptian chariots hurtle in pursuit. The other story tells of a great east wind that blew all night driving the sea back until morning, drying the land to a crust hard enough to walk on, but swallowing the wheels of Pharaoh's pursuing chariots.

While biblical scholarship has been much distracted with separating these interwoven stories, the biblical writers themselves were not at all concerned about marrying different traditions. What consumed them, here and elsewhere, was not the facts of an event but the *meaning* of the event. Here it speaks to the faith born in an all powerful God, for the new nation. Meaning, rather than facts, should therefore be our concern too, not least because the gospels take such Old Testament images and use them to underscore who Jesus is.

In ancient oral cultures where hearing outpaced reading, all new information had to be set against what was already known. Moses was the greatest figure of the Old Testament, so the gospels contrast Jesus with him to demonstrate that Jesus is greater than Moses. Take these examples.

1. Like Moses who was born into slavery in a foreign land, Egypt, Jesus was born in Judea, away from his family's homeland of Galilee. He, too was born among a people who were effectively slaves of Rome.
2. Both Moses and Jesus were hidden away at their birth to escape the slaughter of the newborns by an evil king (Pharaoh and Herod).
3. Both Moses and Jesus worked great miracles by the power of God.
4. Both made a miraculous crossing of the sea, Moses walking through the waters, Jesus walking on the water of Lake Galilee.
5. Both Moses and Jesus fed a multitude in the wilderness with a miraculous supply of bread and meat.
6. Both were great teachers of the Word, and each powerfully manifested the presence of God, Moses through the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, Jesus through ten new commandments in the Sermon on the Mount.
7. Both were savior figures, leading their people home; Moses of the Hebrew people, Jesus for the whole of humankind. By this, Jesus becomes the one greater than Moses.

As the meaning and power of God through Jesus is demonstrated in the resurrection, so the Exodus shows the power of God for Israel by giving new life to a conscripted, sentenced people. Israel was a powerless people, a slave nation without organization, or skill in battle, or even fitness for battle. They might have stayed to the north and escaped easily into the Philistine plain along the coast, but strangely they head south only to face an impassable sea, and beyond it an unforgiving desert. They were a people running

for their lives from the cream of the best and the swiftest army on earth. It was a hopeless situation. They even begin verbally beating up on Moses, the stuttering shepherd who led them into such a pitiful trap at the edge of the sea.

A more hopeless situation can hardly be imagined. Yet this not principally their story, it is *God's* story. It demonstrates God's power to bring life out of certain destruction and death. It matters not whether the waters were heaped up or were driven back by the wind. It matters not, in the final analysis, whether this was the Red Sea or the marshy, inland Sea of Reeds. A people who were once no people annually remember at Passover that they were shown the way home, freed not by their own skill or guile or military might, but in the *complete* absence of these, and against incomprehensible odds, by the power of the living God. A God who did exactly as promised. 'Trust me,' God said, 'and see what my power can do'.

The contrast between the beginning and the end of the story is as dramatic as the power of God itself. What begins with the Israelites crying out to the Lord in great fear, ends with those same people singing a rousing song of adoration and thanksgiving to the Lord in Exodus 15.

If there is a single tragedy that touches our churches, it is that our God is so small. I mean, of course, that our perception of God is so small. The God we grant a little room in our selves is so cramped by other powers. I read somewhere that there is enough residual atomic energy in a drop of water to power a family car for a whole year; or enough energy in a flimsy business card to drive the Staten Island ferry across the Hudson for a year. God's extravagant power is likewise concealed, a subdued but available power which, when invited by faith, can turn a shattering defeat at the edge of annihilation, or on the cross, into a magnificent triumph.

Imagine that power invited into the common fabric of the day, perhaps some sudden emergency. I think of driving north with the family on Interstate 85 just south of Atlanta some years ago. It was incredibly dense three lane traffic. The right shoulder was closed, everyone swept up at a breakneck 70 miles per hour, like driftwood in a torrent. I felt an urge to maneuver to the outside lane by the meridian—just to be safe. Distracted by an Accord easing beside me in the middle lane, when I look ahead again, three cars ahead an SUV was upside down in the air like a shot from a Hollywood trailer. I hit the brakes and careened the car onto the grass. Within seconds I was out of the car and racing toward the upturned SUV. Fuel was dripping onto the asphalt. Three other good Samaritans appeared. The driver's door wouldn't open, and a very large, terrified young woman pleaded with us through the glass us for her life. The window scrolled down and somehow the four of us got her out of the door window—how, I don't know, *God alone knows*. Then we knew we had to move her away from the vehicle and fuel dripping onto hot asphalt. I prayed. When we lifted and carried this very large woman for thirty yards it was as though she was levitated on our finger tips. We all felt that most extraordinary sense of someone else taking over.

Perhaps you pray to rescue a cherished life from self-destruction, from making a very wrong turn. Perhaps you sense someone at work making a foolish decision stemming from ego that will impact whole families, and pray for some reversal that will rescue confidence and wellbeing. As I look at what our texts say, it strikes me that two things are necessary for God's power to be at work in us. The first is simply to stand still in awe. I remember seeing that wonder-filled intoxication on the face of my Auntie Ethel in her Liverpool row house years ago. They lived, my Uncle and she, in one of those industrial row houses that were spawned as a grim by-product of the industrialization of northern England. After World War II, electricity was finally made available to their street, but my Uncle Bob, a lifelong railway worker, otherwise a man of extraordinary generosity, given his meager income, insisted on keeping the old gas light that hissed endearingly in the center of their tiny living room. So, Aunt Ethel cooked everything, as she had for fifty years, on a tiny gas cooker in the kitchen, or on the gleaming black and polished brass fronted coal fire in the only living room. I never saw that great black kettle, which leaned toward its coals, when it wasn't emitting a faint and welcoming trace of steam.

When Uncle Bob died, and after a suitable time of mourning, Auntie Ethel called the power company and had electricity installed. It must have been about 1965. I think they were the last house on the street to be so visited. And I recall with what elation my normally demure little Aunt stood by the pantry door, and

like an excited schoolgirl flicked the light switch on and off repeatedly to demonstrate to all who came the awesome source of power. It was her spirit of wonderment that captivated me; her childlike awe that made her so alive to something we all take for granted.

Awe like that can translate to a courage in faith that can do almost anything. And that's the second point. First we have to stand still and take God's power in. Then we move. The whole point of Israel's journey was to *get home*, spiritually and really; to get out of bondage and get home. Everything depended upon the people's willingness to walk through that dark and swollen heap of water, *and at night*. As the text puts it so paradoxically: "that the people may go into the sea on dry ground." Do you see how it was a baptism, like a re-birth, surrounded by waters, just like in the womb, but not overwhelmed by them? Then the angel of the Lord, who was before them, went behind them to face the threat. And the pillar of cloud that was in front, leading, also moved behind to shield them. Moses, too, stood behind them, his hands outstretched, his staff quivering over the waters until his people were safely passed through. There was no one and nothing ahead of them except that awful darkness hiding the massive, threatening waters, and the vast desert beyond. They are on their own, hand gripping hand, with nothing more tested than a promise to guide them as they struggle on. That's the way we face adversity—in *faith*, with everything behind us to protect us (that's where faith was formed, in the past!), and nothing in front of us except the courage of new faith.

The courage of our faith can have extraordinary impact, even beyond death. At Temple University in the city there is a remarkable memorial called The Chapel of the Four Chaplains. During World War II the troopship *Dorchester* was torpedoed in the night off the icy coast of Greenland. Four chaplains, two Protestant, one Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi helped to man the lifeboats while passing out lifejackets to the crew. When all the life preservers were gone, one of the chaplains took off his own and gave it to a crewman. The other three immediately followed suit. The four chaplains were last seen on the sloping deck, in a row, arms locked, singing hymns and saying prayers as the *Dorchester* slipped beneath dark waters.

There was nothing in the regulations book that required chaplains to give up their life jackets, but there was another Book in which they all believed. Each understood that whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. And that secured them in their trust in God to save.

Tell the people, says God, that if they will trust me—not making their own agenda then ask me to endorse it, *but trusting me*, then I will show them the way home.

Amen.