



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
17 May 2015
Sermon: "Two Sides of the Sea"
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Exodus 14:10-22
Exodus 14:23-15:1-7,20-21

There is a
very
still
moment
in this story.

Amidst the chase
and the army
and the chariots
and the people crying out
after God has spoken
after Moses has raised his arms up to see the wind and the sea move in
ways that took his breath away...
after running from their lives
after the water crashes down -

but before the singing and the dancing

There is a
very
still
moment.

The people of Israel stand on the shore of the water,
And it feels as if time has slowed
And noise has faded.

Looking around, they see the shore, littered with chariots and bodies and horses

No signs of movement.
No signs of breath.

They see the water,
blocking the way between their old life
and where they currently stand.

And they turn, slowly.

And they see the desert – miles and miles of empty desert, calling to them.

The storytelling curriculum that we are using with our elementary school kids
introduced our children to the desert two weeks ago.

They sat around a big box, filled with sand
as the storyteller described what the Israelites saw...

“This is the desert,” she said as she ran her hand over the sand
“It is a dangerous place.

People do not go into the desert unless they have to.
There is no water there, and without water we die.
There is no food there.
Without food we die.

When the wind blows, it changes the shape of the desert.
People get lost.
Some never come back.

In the daytime the sun is so hot
that people must wear lots of clothes to protect themselves from
the sun and the blowing sand.

The sand stings when it hits your skin.
The sun scorches you by day.

At night it is cold.
You need many clothes to keep warm.

The desert is a dangerous place.
People only go there if they have to.

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The Israelites stand, with the ominous desert on one side,
the sea, littered with dead bodies, on the other.

They are trying to make sense of it all in this still moment
trying to grapple with where they came from
where they are going
and, *even more pressing*,
they wonder
how they are going to take their very next step,
their very next breath.

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I've read about a man who remembers the *precise* day he lost his imagination.

He was eleven years old, a typical fifth grader in May,
counting down to the end of the school year,
desperately waiting for the first day of summer.

What got him through the hours of practicing his cursive and working multiplication problems
were the memories of previous summers,
long days spent lying on his belly in the yard,
racing miniature cars and trucks with his friends.

When the final bell rang on his last day,
he ran out of that classroom, down the hall, jumped on the bus and watched out the
window with a smile on his face.

All afternoon he prepared everything for his first day of summer.

He found his box of cars and cleared the debris off the field so that it would be ready.

And as the sun rose up in the morning,
he ran outside, sat down in his special place,
surrounded by his special toys,
and waited for the enchanting feeling to wash over him.

But nothing happened.

He picked up his favorite truck and ran its wheels over the ground. “Vrrrrm!” he roared, as he had roared thousands of times before.

But it wasn’t the sound of an engine.

Instead, he heard the sound of a boy’s voice pretending to be an engine.

He tried again. “Vrrrrm!”

Nope. Only his voice came through.

Suddenly he was self-conscious.

One by one he tried all of his old tricks, but none of them worked.

The bridge to his old world was gone.

He no longer had access to it, and the loss opened up a hollow place inside of him.

He looked at his toys and saw what he had never seen before:

they were small and cheap, a child’s toys.

It had all been a silly game.

Standing up, he dusted himself off and left the fossils of his dream time lying in the yard.ⁱ

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Luke Powery, at Duke Chapel, says “that when we lose our imagination, **we lose our future**”ⁱⁱ

We try to fill in that void so we don’t realize what is missing

With well laid plans and structure and hobbies and addictions and obligations and business and business.

Yet it’s our imagination which points us toward future and hope

Without an imagination, we cannot have any hope.

I wonder how long it took for the people of Israel to lose their imagination during their time of slavery?

Week?

Months?

Or after the first generation died in Egypt?

Did their imagination go away once the memory of freedom was no longer a reality for anyone but a story, whispered in the night by a few wishful thinkers?

Slavery was all the Israelites knew.

They had been slaves so long, they almost believed that it was normal.

They lacked imagination to see life in any other way
and they lacked faith to believe that life could look any other way.

What they had in abundance was fear and coping skills.ⁱⁱⁱ

Their fear blinded them from seeing God,
Who had sent miracles and signs,
And a path to freedom...

Their fear blinded them from seeing an alternative for slavery,

With Egypt and slavery behind them,
They look Moses right in the eyes, and with all seriousness asked him...

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”

What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?

Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt,
‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’?
For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

The people cry out, but they appeal to Moses, not to God.

It never crosses their mind that God has anything to do with this.

*They utter the name “Egypt” five times
as Egypt is the only name they know,
the name upon which they rely, the name they love to sound.^{iv}
But God? Yahweh?
The **one** Moses has been talking about,*

*The **one** Moses has been talking to and listening to and trying to follow,
God never crosses the minds of the Israelites.*

Their imagination of God had been suppressed.

They have no reason to hope for God,
No way of imagining the character or power or love of God.
ALL they knew was slavery.

All they were able to know was the reality of Egypt.

This kind of thing happens all of the time – our imaginations become suppressed...

Late in his life, Wilbur Wright was asked what was by a reporter,

‘What was the most difficult challenge you ever faced?’

The interviewer,

expecting to hear details

about creating an engine

or the first flight that made the Wright brothers name go down in history,

heard instead about how he

almost quit before he began.

After telling his parents and friends about his idea,

they reacted with, “I’m afraid that’s all in your imagination.”

The comments devastated him enough that he nearly gave up.^v

We have taken imagination and, like the man with his childhood toy cars, restricted the experience to that of a kid in a field.

We use the word with pessimism.

A colleague shares that he is concerned about his child who is withdrawn and uninterested in school.

Oh, I’m sure you are imaging it.

Leaving church on a Sunday, you hear your friend say,
Did you see how Jennifer just ignored me as we walked through the parking lot? I think
I really offended her the other day...
No, I'm sure you are imagining it.

The person, who always seems to be sick, talks about the new ailments...
it's all in your imagination.

We may do all of this for the mental health of our friends and family,
but subconsciously we are saying **that our imagination is not to be trusted.**

430 years of slavery had taught the Israelites
that they **needed to fear** the Egyptians
and they **TRUSTED** in that **fear**.

That is a horrible statement – they trusted in their fear – but trusting in fear has the potential to
sneak up on any one of us in desperate circumstances.

The Israelites learned how to navigate their oppressors
when to pay attention
and when they could rest for a moment
they learned who would work them til they dropped
and who might give some leniency
They learned how to sleep really well on stone floors
and where to save extra crumbs where rats might not
get to them.

They figured out how to be comfortable in their discomfort,
complacent in their slavery.

And they had no imagination that something could be different
And no imagination for a God who could create something different
and better
and healthier
and more hopeful
than the life they had been leading...

Every one of us is guilty, at some point or another,
of looking at the our lives
and wondering if things could have turned out differently... **“if only.”**
 Would I have gotten a better job if I had chosen a different college?

Maybe, if only I had spent more time with my children,
our relationship would be better today...

If I hadn't broken my arm in high school, I bet I could have gone pro...

 I wonder what would have happened if I had married my college sweetheart?

None of this looking back is imaginative.
It's transactional – cause and effect.

 We wonder – if we did this one thing, could we have gotten this other thing?

Imagination is greater than the sum of its transactional parts.
Imagination is something that opens up the whole world –
 and we only have it going forward.
 We can never have it looking back.

We are people who will choose what we know until it kills us.
In this story of the Israelite and slavery,
they *literally* were willing to choose what was going to kill them.

Before the Sea opened up, before they crossed over,
the Israelites stood in terror,
wondering why they left the routine of slavery behind.
It might not have been comfortable, but they knew what to expect.

And all they could do in that moment was look backward.

Think about what they left behind.

But when we spend all of our time looking back at what we once had or where we once were,
We have no capacity to look forward.
We have no capacity to imagine.
We are not giving God any room to lead.

A wise pastor I know often reflects, that “it is profoundly
untheological to say that God
does not provide a better tomorrow than a today.”^{vi}

The Israelites, holding the memory – the nostalgia - of Egypt,
looked over their shoulders,
and saw something that didn't fit their fond memory of slavery...
Pharaoh's chariots. And army. Coming after them.
Left to their own devices, they would have died right there,
but God gave them Moses
who showed them how to look up,
and see that
the world ahead of them
had more to offer than the world behind them.

God parted the water,
And the Israelites walked
to the other side of the sea.

And then
there is a
very
still
moment.

Looking around, they see the shore,
littered with chariots and bodies and horses

No signs of movement.

No signs of breath.

The water blocks the path to their old life.

And they turn, slowly.

And they see the desert – miles and miles of empty desert,
calling to them.

Crossing the Sea did not give them great faith.

The wilderness would help with that.^{vii}

Crossing the Red Sea did not help them have great imagination,
but it gave them no choice but to walk into the future.

“We all begin the journey to freedom not because we choose it.

It is too frightening to choose.

We begin because God intervenes,

parts the waters,

and pushes us through.”^{viii}

Have you lost the size of God?

Have you forgotten how **big God is**

and **all that God can do?**

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On January 27, 1967,

during a test on the launching pad at Cape Canaveral,

a fire broke out in the Apollo 1 capsule,

killing Astronauts Roger Chaffee,

Gus Grissom,

and Ed White.

In response, NASA convened a review board

to determine the cause of the fire

and the astronauts' deaths were tentatively attributed
to a wide range of
lethal design and construction flaws of the capsule.

Congress also convened hearings
and among those who testified
was astronaut Frank Borman.

Part of the exchange between Col. Borman and Senator Anderson
went like this:

Senator Anderson to Colonel Borman: Colonel, what caused the fire?

And I'm not asking about wires and oxygen.

It seems that some people think that NASA pressured you all to meet unrealistic and arbitrary
deadlines and, that, in turn, allowed safety to be compromised.

Colonel Borman: I won't deny there's been pressure to meet deadlines, but safety has never
been intentionally compromised.

Senator Anderson: Then what caused the fire?

Colonel Borman: A failure of imagination. We've always known there was the possibility of
fire in a spacecraft. But the fear was that it would happen in space, when you're 180 miles
from terra firma and the nearest fire station. That was the worry. No one ever imagined it
could happen on the ground. If anyone had thought of it, the test would've been classified as
hazardous. But it wasn't. We just didn't think of it.^{ix}

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What are you thinking about today?

What are you thinking about your life and your future?

About this church's future?

About the world's future?

Are there places, right now,
where we feel stuck between the Sea of our past and the Wilderness of our future?

What have you shut down from imagining?
What part of your future feels closed to you?

How in the world do people like us, or Israelites in that very still place,
have the audaciousness to believe that the future belongs to God?

To see the desert, the wilderness, not as death,
but as an open world of imagination?

God is the opener of hearts,
God is the opener of minds,
More than anything else--God is the opener of tombs.
This is why we gather.
We are the church of the risen Christ.

Our past is not blocked,
it's redeemed.

Our future is not a desert of desolation;
it's the place where God is already at work.

Can you imagine that?

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, 38

ⁱⁱ Luke Powery on *Working Preacher*, "Preaching Moment 296"

ⁱⁱⁱ Craig Barnes sermon "The Call of the Desert," from the series *Insights from the Desert*, preached at Shadyside Presbyterian Church on February 21, 2010

^{iv} *The New Interpreters Bible*, 793

^v William Jackson, *Sermons at Shadyside Presbyterian*, 165, sermon on Philippians 4:1-9

^{vi} Mark Ramsey, May 8th, 2015, in a conversation at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

^{vii} Craig Barnes line from "The Call of the Dessert" – "The wilderness will help with that"

^{viii} Craig Barnes, "The Call of The Desert"

^{ix} Mark Ramsey, *Feasting on the Word*, Gospel of John, Homiletical Perspective