

*Prayer of Illumination*

Holy God, Word of God made flesh and blood,

May we come to examine part of our faith story today with our hearts open to being surprised. Help us to put aside our assumptions and look instead for you to challenge our expectations. As we seek to learn more about Your Loving Grace, may the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29

“When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, ‘What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?’ So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, ‘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.’ But Moses said 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.’

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord 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. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.’

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.’ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.”

Y'all, I love a good prank war.

You have *not lived* until you have been in a prank war.

When I was in high school, I was involved in several long-lasting prank wars. And we were pretty serious about it, too. There weren't any lengths we weren't willing to go to for a laugh. One year, a friend group of mine ended up in a mini-civil war, and our pranks got intense enough that we were resorting to asking each other's parents for copies of keys to break into each other's houses and cars. I distinctly remember this being the year when I learned that putting shrimp tails inside of a hollow curtain rod was a long-game prank, but totally worth it. I also remember this being the year that I learned never to forget a rain jacket...because when I went to my car in the pouring rain, I discovered it had NO ROOM for me. It was filled with packing peanuts.

That particular prank war lasted the longest – and had the widest geographical range. You might walk into Barnes and Noble and come out to find your car covered in post its or the handles lined with Vaseline. You might look outside and discover peanut butter and jellied bread slices stuck all over your mailbox. You might wake up soaked in the stench of sour milk because you unknowingly slept all night on powdered milk, sprinkled underneath your sheets. It was a good year...

...until it wasn't. You see, at some point, the fun and games became a little less fun. One of the groups participating had more people. They were able to invest more in the pranks. And slowly, but surely, the scale of power tipped in their favor. What started as harmless pranking became relentless pranking, until it finally crossed the line to bullying. Because we were all friends, you might think apologies were swift and immediate. They weren't. Because this behavior still seemed fun to the bigger, more powerful group. They weren't ready to admit that maybe the pranks had gone too far. They weren't ready to confront the fact that they had a power advantage that was costing their friends' their feelings and dignity.

It's a hard place to be, when you discover that you have power. It's even harder if you can't confront it. But power is very real, and whether we want to admit or not, it pervades all of our relationships, for better or for worse.

We've been working our way, for the past few weeks, through the pre-history of Israel. Last week, Dr. Matt preached on part of Joseph's story – Joseph, an Israelite, had been taken into Egypt as a slave and ultimately ended up in jail.

Now I'd recommend you read Exodus chapters 1-14, but here's the cliff notes version: Joseph was a dream interpreter, and while jailed, he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. He became Pharaoh's second in command and helped prepare the country for an impending famine. As the famine approaches, Joseph's fathers, brothers, and their families – come to Egypt as refugees, where they are welcomed and well-treated for Joseph's sake. This is how our faith story – the Bible – brings the Israelites into Egypt.

But then, a generation passes. A new Pharaoh, who does not know Joseph, rules Egypt. This Pharaoh doesn't understand how the Hebrew people came to be a part of their nation. This Pharaoh feels terrified because the Israelites have multiplied and grown strong. Out of fear of the Israelites, this Pharaoh enslaves them all. In slavery, the Israelites groan and cry out...until God responds by calling Moses. Moses – it takes years, but eventually, God tells Moses to confront Pharaoh. And Moses says to Pharaoh, "The Lord says to let my people go." Ten times, the Pharaoh refuses and a plague comes. But finally, Pharaoh relents. God's people, the Israelites, are free.

And that's where we find ourselves today...standing with the Israelites, after they have been brought out of the land of Egypt. They're free. Sort of. Mostly. Well, to be honest, they're running like their lives depend on it because...well, they do. They've got a body of water to cross in front of them and heavily armed Egyptians at their back. They're terrified. They don't know that, in a moment, Moses will raise his hand and God will part the sea.

Whether this is a new story to you or not, this is an iconic faith story in the Christian tradition. Later biblical texts read over and over again, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This is a part of our faith story. The Israelites are the fore-fathers and mothers of our faith.

Now, the problem with reading our iconic faith stories is that often we approach the story with a pre-understanding. We approach the story, maybe having already sanded down the rough edges, having sewn together the pieces that don't fit so well, having tamed the story into domesticity. And this story? It's not tame. It's rough and jagged and hard to understand.

On the one hand, we have a story of great liberation, of God who will fight for God's people, of God who brings God's people up out of what enslaves them and leads them safely through the waters. On the other hand, we must acknowledge: we also have a story of God seeming to pick sides. We have a story of people who are not saved from death.

...this story is a powerful story of liberation. If we identify with the Israelites.

Now, don't get me wrong. There's value in looking for our connection with the Israelites, and tonight, your household should consider doing so with the Faith5. The Israelites are the underdogs here. We probably all know what it has felt like to be an underdog, right? Maybe we've been underdogs in silly places: a fan of that sports team that never wins. An easily tongue-tied Jeopardy-lover trying to yell out the answer before the contestants on screen. The least coordinated competitor in a round of Ninja.

Maybe we've been underdogs in more serious ways. The shy person who struggles to make friends easily. A "can't find my niche" student who doesn't exactly fit into the high school-college-stable job track. A bullied employee, who just wishes he could work in peace.

It would be much more comfortable focus on just the liberation of the underdogs. But while we might have been the underdogs in parts of our lives, I have to wonder, how many of us really know what it's like to be as completely powerless as the Israelites? I'd venture to guess...that while most of us can name times we have been an underdog...most of us can also name times we have been in positions of power.

Maybe we've held power in silly ways. As the master chess player in your family. As the first of your friends with a fully functional driver's license. As the person who owns the Netflix account, and therefore, controls the password.

Maybe we've held power in more serious ways. As a parent or guardian. As a financially stable person. As manager or leader at a job. As a trusted and relied upon community leader.

Most all of us have the experience of holding power. That's why it's important for us to pay attention to the Egyptians... (squirm) *I know*. It's uncomfortable, isn't it? Comparing how we hold power to how the Egyptians do? After all, don't the Egyptians, like, die at the end of this text?

In fact, doesn't the text go out of its way to clarify that *not one Egyptian remained*? This is one of those rough-hewn edges of the parting of the Red Sea. But just because it's hard to examine doesn't mean that we shouldn't.

At the start of this text, the Egyptians have the power. They've had the power for quite some time, and they've wielded it against the Israelites...denying the Israelites their humanity.

For one brief, shining moment, they release that power. They let go of their control and release God's people. But almost immediately, they retract. "What we have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" These powerful people just can't let go. Pharaoh gathers up his army and gives chase, to reclaim the lives of the Israelites.

Which maybe doesn't seem that crazy of a mission, at first. He's just chasing the slaves he's freed, right? Well, not really. You see, Pharaoh knows exactly what he's up against. He's seen the power of the God of the Israelites, through plagues reigned down upon his people every time he refused to let God's people go. He knows that *same* God will fight on behalf of the vulnerable and powerless.

Pharaoh probably wasn't surprised, then, when he comes upon the Israelites and sees that they are passing through a parted sea. Now we could get caught here on the details of the supernatural in this story: but I don't think the historicity is the point. What it demonstrates, though? That's vital. The images of a sea parted, a pillar of fire raining down: they show God's power on full display and working on behalf of the vulnerable and powerless.

But Pharaoh refuses to accept God's love of the vulnerable. Instead, he chooses to battle against it. That seems to have been the pattern of the Egyptians: when the Pharaoh before began to fear the Israelites who had taken refuge in his land, he used his power to strip them of theirs and enslave them. When this Pharaoh feared a loss of control over his slaves, a loss of control over the lifestyle their slavery gave him, he responded with an army's worth of anger and violence. Pharaoh chose to use his power for domination, instead of partnering with God to liberate the vulnerable and powerless.

I wonder how often we see this in our world: people using their power to dominate the vulnerable and powerless. How often do we see power that ignores the plight of the poor, of the vulnerable, of the victims, of the abused? For Pharaoh, those people were his slaves. For us? Most visibly, the vulnerable among us are the one in six children who are food insecure. The most vulnerable among us are the one in three women and one in six men who will experience sexual violence in their lifetime. The most vulnerable among us are the estimated 40 million people living in poverty. The most vulnerable among us are those who are crying out in despair and finding that they are ignored, forgotten, or simply not believed.

When we are confronted with the pain, held in the bodies and hearts of the powerless, what will we do?

When I read this text, I imagine that there are two ways this story might have ended. It actually ended with a powerful and heartbreaking image, of God wiping out the people who use power for domination and abuse...this is not the first time the Bible has used the image of God taking the abuse of power so seriously that God drowns it in the waters. It will not be the last instance where God confronts oppression and does not remain neutral. Here, the Egyptians refused to confront and retract their dominating power. They doggedly held onto that power, they ignored the cries of the people they had abused, they said "No! We will rule over you!" Then they found themselves, weighed down by their armor, caught in the mud of their decision, and it was too late. The waters closed over them.

But I have to wonder...you know, there was one brief, shining moment when the Egyptians decided not to wield their power to dominate the Israelites anymore. There was one brief, shining moment when the Egyptians let go of their control, of their fear, of their abuse of power. I wonder how the story would have ended if the Egyptians had chosen to partner with God in liberation? If the Egyptians had used the power of their resources to help, rather than harm?

Maybe the first step for us, is just figuring out where we hold power. If you didn't know, I'm a little sister. My brother's name is Josha. He knows I'm using him in my sermon today – I kind of asked permission, but also, we're not above blackmailing each other, which maybe I shouldn't admit in this sermon. I do always say that I'm preaching to myself first.

Anyway, Josha's a BIG GUY. Seriously, he's a Navy man, and he's a heavy weight lifter. I'm pretty sure his bicep is bigger than my head. Not only that, but he is covered from neck to toes – literally, his toes are also covered – with all of these tattoos. Some of them are really creepy looking. So when you see my brother, and you don't know him, he's actually kind of scary looking. But what you find out about three minutes later is that he is just a massive Teddy Bear. Well, to everyone else. He and I have our moments.

But one day, Josha and I had to get on an elevator. One floor up, another woman boarded. Now this woman was tiny. I'm not exactly tall, but I had a good foot on her. I watched Josha kind of step in front of her. Like, that's not great elevator etiquette to block the door...but we got off a couple of floors later, and I turned to ask him why the heck he did that. This is what he said, "I know I'm a big dude, and my size scares people because I'm a body builder. Because women get hurt a lot, I try to be especially aware of how I can scare women. So when I'm in a small place like that with a woman I don't know, I try to put myself in the most vulnerable position possible. If I'm standing in front of her where she could get in a good neck chop or something, maybe she won't have to feel as scared to be stuck in a small space with me."

My brother did some hard work to think about what power he had. He decided to let go of that power and to make himself vulnerable for the sake of someone else. It might seem like a small use – but it's important. He saw how he could make a decision that would positively impact others, and he followed through. What if we did that kind of work to figure out where we hold power? It might not be immediately evident to us, where our circles of influence are. In fact, it might take some serious reflection to figure out: where do I have power? Over whom do I have power? Who do my decisions affect? Whose cries can I hear and respond to?

One of the most striking quotes I've ever come across was an anonymous quote from *A Hole in the Gospel*, written by Richard Stearn, who is the President of World Vision. It went something like this: "Sometimes, I think I'd like to ask God why God allows poverty, suffering, and injustice in the world when God could do something about it. But I'm afraid that God might ask me the same question."

That quote gets me in the gut, every time. But it reminds me: I think we have more power, sometimes, than we want to admit. Studies have shown there's enough food in the world to feed everyone – but still people go hungry. Studies have shown we have the room to house almost all people – but still there are people experiencing chronic homelessness. Studies have shown that, across the world, we have the power and the resources we need to take care of each other.

If step one is doing the work to figure out what power we have, then step two is discovering how to use that to *love* our neighbours...our brothers and sisters...instead of dominating them.

What would our world be like, if we took seriously the call to let go of our power? If we took seriously the call on our lives to be as vulnerable as the Israelites before God, walking between the waves out of trust instead of a desire to dominate?

We can't read our text today in isolation. On the surface, it appears that God is choosing sides, and indeed, I think this is one of many clear images of God working against oppression. But the Egyptians are God's children, same as the Israelites. The God of this text is the same as our God who sent Christ, the Son of God, to tell the world that we are to love God *and* love our neighbours. This is the same God who rent the temple veil a symbol of God's inescapable redemption that embraces the whole world. God will accomplish God's purpose, with or without us, making all things new. Any power we cling to, was never really our own to begin with. But while all things are being made new, and are not yet new, may we let go of control and make ourselves vulnerable, living out the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila.

“Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours. Amen.”