

BETWEEN MIGDOL AND THE SEA¹

Exodus 14: 19-31

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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While Ike might have been a spiffy sounding campaign slogan for Eisenhower back in the 1950s, but mention the name Ike today and it brings up a different set of images. Even while Hurricane Hannah was roaring through the country, we could see Ike out in the Atlantic gaining strength. Then we saw it sweep through the British owned Turks and Caicos Islands, destroying over 80% of the homes, leveling the trees and utility poles, and generally reaping havoc on a resort island.

I

But that was nothing compared to what it did in the Dominican Republic and especially Haiti, both of which were already saturated and reeling from flood waters from a succession of storms named Fay, Gustav, and Hanna, and now Ike was the fourth major storm to hit them in just three weeks. The suffering and death in Haiti alone is enough to cause us all to weep and reach out to assist a people in dire need of clean water, food, health care, and emergency shelter. And there are now our neighbors in Texas who are also in immediate need of support.

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Yes, we could see it coming, headed straight for Galveston and Houston, gigantic in size and promising just what it delivered on Friday night and Saturday morning. For those who were spared, meteorologists predict that there will be seven more named storms during this year's Atlantic hurricane season, with at least one of them being a category 3 storm.

And then, as if on some kind of divine cue, you come to church, and lo and behold, the scripture read is about a flood of water devouring the Egyptian army, allowing Moses and the children of Israel to escape from slavery. But in this biblical story, instead of CNN reporters broadcasting the destruction— instead of FEMA doing its best to help the survivors— instead of politicians trying to position themselves as the best hope to meet such natural disasters— instead of the Coast Guard and Army Reserves mobilizing to give assistance to those whose lives were endangered— instead of churches collecting money and supplies to help rebuild the devastation— what do we find?

We find an image of waves lapping up on dead soldiers, dead horses, and broken chariots, symbolic of dead power and dead arrogance. And if we listen closely in reading the scripture, we hear the eerie sound of a woman's voice on the sand dune overlooking the beach. She is a barefoot

woman with a timbrel in her hand. She is dancing with all her might, and behind her is a whole chorus of women dancing with glee. And from her lips comes a song that has come down to us in a form of Hebrew so archaic that scholars have concluded that it is the oldest hymn in the entire Bible, maybe even coming from that very time. She keeps out the words of the song:

*Sing to the Lord, for he has
triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.²*

The singer's name is Miriam, none other than the young girl who years earlier had peered through the bulrushes in the hope of guarding her baby brother who was floating in a little hand-made boat on the Nile. Now she has grown up to full womanhood, and she is the professional singer of the people.

I am fully aware that the English translation of %Red Sea+was probably a mistranslation, and that we should think instead of the %Reed Sea,+a marshy land subject to tides, over which the Israelites traveled at low tide, and the Egyptians were unlucky enough to try to cross when the tide was coming in, something like being caught at the wrong time in the

² Exodus 15: 21.

Bay of Fundy. The Israelites saw this as a great miracle of God, and celebrated with exaggerated claims of triumph.

But I want to understand this story in the way the writer meant the story to be understood. I want to get at what the writer was trying to communicate for all time. And here is what I conclude: this story, as written, is not about a marshy ~~Reed~~ Sea, but is about a miracle so enormous that the writer means exactly what is written: *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.*³ That is what the text actually says, and that doesn't sound like a marshy, ~~Reed~~ Sea to me. No ordinary wind ever blew water in two opposite directions at the same time, so that water is heaped up much like we shovel snow in the winter on the right and the left of a sidewalk. Regardless of what actually happened historically, the writer wants us to envision a miracle taking place when all seemed lost.

³ Exodus 14: 21-22.

II

So what is this story really about? It is about not being able to see a way out. The writer of this account is very careful to say that they were encamped *between Migdol and the sea*.⁴ Of course, no one expects us to know where a place called Migdol is, but it doesn't take a genius to see that they were caught between the sea on one side and Migdol on the other, and if the enemy closed in on them, there was no place to go! They were boxed in. This is the equivalent to being between a rock and a hard place, except it was between the water and the enemy, and the enemy was charging in closer and closer. It was death by the Egyptians or death by the sea. Those were the alternatives!

So it's no wonder that the people lost heart: *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.*⁵ Slavery, in other words, began to look pretty good compared to drowning!

They couldn't see a way out. And there are some of you here in this sanctuary who are in the same place. You are between Migdol and the sea! You are in that place where you cannot see a way out. You are

⁴ Exodus 14: 1.

⁵ Exodus 14: 11-12.

feeling the squeeze, not knowing which way to turn, unable to find a route through the water. Most of us have been there. And I believe the writer of this account was crafting this ancient story just for people who couldn't see a way out. In that sense, this story is great truth whether or not it is historically factual.

Now let us think together about the truth of this story. What is it that helped them out of their situation? In that time of panic, that time of griping to their leader, that time of second thoughts, there was only one thing they could see. They could see a pillar of cloud. They believed that cloud was the presence of YHWH, leading them and guarding them. But even they knew that a cloud could not stop a spear. Water vapor could not slow down a horse and chariot. They didn't know how they were going to get out of that fix, but they could look up and know that God was with them.

Sometimes that's all you can be sure of. I don't know how God is going to help me get out of this fix, but I know God is with me.+ How many times have I heard that? Here is what all too many of us are saying today: I don't know how I am going to survive when I lose my job. I used my house for collateral to start up a new business; now my business has failed and I'm about to lose my house. I don't know how I'm going to survive!+ That is the place between Migdol and the sea today. I don't know how I

am going to take pay for heating oil this winter. I don't know how to find or pay for health care. My insurance won't pay for what I need, and there is no one who can advise me. In between Migdol and the sea!+

Between Migdol and the sea is an anxious place, and most of us have been there at some point in our lives. Today, even if we are not there, we are surrounded by people who are. They stare at us across the pews, across the grocery store aisle, across the back yard, across the office, across the classroom, and from the mirror. There is a population explosion between Migdol and the sea!

III

Now let's go a little deeper into this ancient but contemporary story. Let's look at how the writer crafted this story to encourage people caught between Migdol and the sea. First, we are told that God commanded Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, and when Moses obeyed, the waters parted, giving the children of Israel a way to escape.

Walter Brueggemann, that insightful biblical scholar, has provided a fascinating insight about this story. He suggests that the writer of this account is replicating the creation story! Remember in that ancient creation account, God divides the waters from the dry land so that the land could

become usable for agriculture and ultimately for people.⁶ In this moment of liberation, says Brueggemann, God does a deed as powerful, original, and life-giving as the very newness of creation.⁷ It's like starting all over again!

Then when Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and the water rushed back onto the Egyptian army, drowning them all, it was like the flood story in which the waters of chaos almost took over the world again. But here in this story, instead of Noah safe on dry land, we have Israel safe on dry land, Miriam singing at the top of her lungs, and Moses vindicated as their indisputable leader. God wins; chaos loses!

There are times in our lives when chaos seems to be winning out! Look at how many times in the Bible and in subsequent history that water is used as a symbol for chaos. Jonah is thrown overboard into a stormy sea, representing a return to chaos, and he is saved miraculously by God. Jesus and his disciples are caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus stretches out his hand and says Peace. The sea obeys.

And remember every man, woman or child held in slavery in this land before the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War and who in their sight or their imagination knew that the Ohio River stood

⁶ See Genesis 1: 6-13.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Book of Exodus*, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), pp. 794-795.

between them and freedom. We can hear them singing out in the fields of slavery, %Deep river, my home is over Jordan.+ Who would part those waters for them to escape slavery? No wonder they referred to Abraham Lincoln as their Moses! And remember those since that time who have been held by a system of injustice or servitude in which they could do nothing to free themselves (caught between their Migdol and the sea!).

IV

And I want to remind you that with all the messiness of baptism by immersion, Baptists hold dear a ritual that re-enacts the exodus. Baptism has for centuries reminded Christians of the exodus story. To enter the waters of baptism, not just as a little sprinkle, but as a full immersion in the water, is a fitting symbol of God delivering us from the waters of chaos. We are raised to newness of life, just as the children of Israel come up on the far shore to a new life! Miriam is singing on the sand dune, rough-hewn frontier Baptists are standing on the shore singing %Shall We Gather at the River,+and even intellectuals who know the power of such a symbol stand in awe at one more soul coming up out of that water, freed from the chaos and moving toward the promised land.

Friends, I don't know where all of you are today, but I know some of you and I can guess that others of you can situate yourselves between

Migdol and the sea. The enemy is on one side and chaos is on the other. There seems to be no way out. You are boxed in. All the choices range from bad to worse. I certainly cannot divine a way out of your particular situation. But I can point to a cloud. I can remind you of an unseen friend. I can also remind you of friends you can see, a community of people who care and pray and live out their lives as a part of this church. I can point to a God who specializes in winning out over chaos!

V

And I can point to one more thing. That universal symbol of Christian faith, the cross, symbolizes One who was caught between his own Migdol and the sea. Nailed to a cross, there was no way out! The enemy was behind him and nothing but death lay before him. The reason the cross is so ubiquitous and so comforting a symbol to so many people is that we all come to that place between Migdol and the sea, and we see no way out.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is the story of God parting the waters once more. It is another way of saying that not even death can ever separate us from the love of God seen in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁸ Even in the face of death, there is a way out!

⁸ See Romans 8: 38-39.

Whenever we find ourselves in such a tight corner, our own space between Migdol and the sea, our ultimate help comes not from high-tech weaponry or clever leaders or satellite intelligence or advanced degrees or good investments. Our help comes from God's people reaching out to help neighbors in need. And ultimately, as the psalmist said, *Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*⁹

⁹ Psalm 121: 2.