

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”

Exodus 14:19-31

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We’ve all been there. We know what it is like to be sandwiched between two choices, neither of which we find very attractive. This is often referred to as being between a rock and a hard place. Not comfortable, is it?

Our text says this is where Israelites were. With God’s help and under Moses’ leadership, they left Egypt in pursuit of a better life. They lived there for over four hundred years, having migrated South during a famine. You recall that they were welcomed with open arms by Pharaoh because of his association with Jacob’s son, Joseph. He was one of Pharaoh’s most trusted advisors and administrators.

As time passed, though, and the number of Jacob’s descendants grew, the Egyptian leaders became concerned. They feared a revolt or takeover. As a result, the Israelites were forced to become slaves and perform difficult manual labor. The demands placed upon them were unreasonable and exhausting.

As I mentioned in last week’s sermon, the straw that broke the camel’s back actually was straw. The Israelites’ workload was increased when Pharaoh instructed his foremen that they were no longer to supply the straw needed for making bricks. The Israelites were to secure their own straw while at the same time making the same number of bricks each day. If they did not meet their quota, they were beaten.

Moses knew it was time for his people to leave Egypt and appealed to God for help. God heard his request and responded. He promised to help the Israelites leave Egypt and begin a new life. The journey would not be an easy one and it would require a lot of courage, determination and cooperation. Moses understood and agreed to lead what we now refer to as the Exodus.

In today’s text, their journey has begun and all goes well until they hear the sound of chariots behind them. Pharaoh changed his mind about releasing his slaves and sent his army to bring them back to Egypt. It appeared this would not be a difficult task because the Israelites were stalled on the edge of the Red Sea. It would be fairly easy to round them up and take them back into slavery.

You know what happened, though. The water of the Red Sea parted, allowing the Israelites to cross safely to the other side so they could continue their freedom march. When Pharaoh’s army chased them, the water was no longer held back and the soldiers drowned.

What’s the message for us in this story made familiar to many of us by Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 movie, “The Ten Commandments,” starring Charlton Heston, Anne Baxter and Yule Brynner? For me it is this. Change is never easy. When you decide to leave bondage in pursuit of a new and better life, you will face resistance from without and within. Be prepared for it and learn how to deal with it.

When I introduced this story a couple of weeks ago as we examined Exodus 12:1-14, I talked to you about bondage. Each of us has our own Egypt just like the Israelites did. We need to identify those things that are controlling and destroying us and make every effort to overcome them.

“Are you in a bad place today?” I asked. “Are you in an abusive relationship or struggling with a crippling addiction to drugs, alcohol, food, pornography, ego or possessions? Are you running with the wrong crowd and headed into some dangerous places? Are you in bondage to a faulty way of thinking that is contributing to low self-esteem, inferiority or depression? Are you in an unhealthy religious environment that does not lift you up and empower you to achieve your potential but holds you down and tells you what you cannot do? Are you experiencing burnout on your job or are you trapped in the prison of poverty?”

Must you stay where you are forever? Is change possible, and if so, how can you head in a new direction?"

I told you I believe change is possible, even radical change, and outlined steps to be taken to leave your Egypt. Admit that you are in a bad place, draft a strategy for leaving, reach out to others for help and always remember why you left your Egypt and who helped you. Today's text adds more to the conversation.

When you leave a place of bondage in pursuit of a new and better life, more than likely two things will happen. People from your old life will come and try to drag you back and demons inside you will do their best to convince you that you do not have what it takes to pull this off. Both of these happened to the Israelites. Pharaoh's soldiers came to retrieve them and fear of the future threatened to paralyze them.

Why would people from your old life try to get you to return? Perhaps they are dependent upon you or want to control you. They could be jealous of the fact that you are doing something constructive with your life and want to undermine your efforts. I suppose there is no shortage of reasons for why they want to tell you how to live your life.

Is this happening to you now? Are people from a previous life trying to pull you back? How well are you handling their pressure?

On the other hand, demons inside you will do their best to convince you that you do not have what it takes to pursue a better life. The demons of fear, uncertainty, doubt, insecurity, inferiority, despair, cynicism, hopelessness and even complacency will attack you, and as all of us know, they are powerful and persuasive.

What do you do? You must make the decision to go forward and not look back or go back and not look forward. You cannot ride the fence; you must decide.

If you choose to move forward and pursue a better life, it will require an all out commitment on your part. You must say no to those that want to pull you back and, to borrow an image from our text, you must drown the demons that attack you from within.

When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea that day, they did more than move from one shore to another. They moved to a new level of commitment to the God that led them on this freedom march. They decided to trust Him more than Pharaoh and listen to His voice more than their fears. This was a life-changing decision for them. It can be for us, too.

There are times when we'll stand on a similar shore and face a comparable choice. **Are you there now?** Have you started on your freedom march and come to a point where you are between a rock and a hard place? Are you trying to decide between returning to Egypt and crossing that river to a new and better life? Which will you choose?

Do you want to move forward and continue your journey? How do you do it when you are facing so many intimidating challenges? I believe you must have help from family, friends and faith.

There are many images of God throughout scripture. The image that is portrayed in our text is that of a warrior. He stands ready to help us say no to those that want to harm us and undermine our transformation to a new and better life. He is not elusive or timid in this story. He is engaged and assertive because much is at stake.

Are you relying upon Him to help you on your freedom march? Is He helping you fight this battle? Are you looking to Him daily for wisdom, discernment, confidence, courage and strength? I certainly hope so. I do not believe you can make this journey without Him.

You also need help from family and friends. They are God's gifts to you along your journey and I don't believe you can make it without them, either.

The Israelites' journey was a communal one. They did not travel alone. They needed support and encouragement from one another and knew it. No doubt this was one reason for their success.

Have you let other people join you on your journey toward liberation? Are you allowing others to support and encourage you? Again, I hope so.

If you need a support group that will listen to your story and love you unconditionally, I invite you to travel with us at Smoke Rise. All of us are on a journey toward health and wholeness and we would be glad to have you join us.

On what shore do you stand today? What dreams beckon you? Who or what is trying to pull you back from your journey toward wholeness? What are the biggest challenges you face? Whose help do you need? On behalf of this church, I offer you what you need for this journey: faith, family and friends. Come and travel with us.