

Lenten Midweek 3 • March 7, 2018

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Exodus 14:13-31; Mark 1:9-13

“Return from Exile – Out of Egypt: Through the Water”

Water, water everywhere. It's almost like the Bible is drenched in water: from the opening words of Genesis, running through Revelation, water flows through the narrative of the Scriptures. Look at Moses' life. He was born into a time when the Hebrew people were enslaved by a pharaoh who had forgotten what had come before. The land of Egypt, which once had been a place of deliverance and provision and security for the people of Abraham, was now a place of enslavement. In his fear of the Hebrew nation, the pharaoh commanded their baby boys to be thrown into the Nile. The river which fed this great land and gave it life had now become a place of death. And yet God used the waters of the Nile to spare Moses' life and deliver him to a home and an upbringing that God would use to deliver His people from slavery.

Water flows again as Moses and the Hebrew people stand at the edge of the sea. The Egyptian army has pursued them, cutting off any hope of escape. And yet, God works a miracle through the water to bring rescue. Moses didn't know what God was going to do when called the people to watch God's mighty hand at work, saying, *“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work 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 be silent.”* But he knew that God would keep His promise to deliver His people from slavery and death. And God did.

Two obstacles stood between the Hebrew people and their deliverance from Egypt: the most powerful army of the ancient world and a big body of water. Moses and the people are right in between the two – until God removes both obstacles in spectacular fashion. He divides the waters of the sea so that the whole of His people might pass through on dry ground. The pillar of cloud and fire by which God was leading the Hebrews now moves behind them and stands between them and the Egyptians, until God allows them to pursue His people into the midst of the sea.

Why would they do that? Sure, they've got chariots and armor and all their military expertise, but why did the Egyptian army follow the Hebrews *into a sea that was miraculously split to effect their escape?! It's always been a part of this bit of history that's confused me. God Himself tells us: “And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”* God hardens their hearts. Why would He do it?

Have you ever seen farmland in a time of severe drought? Or the shores of a dried-up riverbed? The ground cracks and fragments into shards, even taking on the appearance of curled rolls of parchment, near to turning into dust. That's its natural state without water, subjected to the scorching heat of the sun. What if that's what a hardened heart looks like? If God were to hold back from pursuing someone with His grace, giving them over to their own will and the sin that lies in each and every one of us, wouldn't that hardening of heart be the natural consequence?

God lets the Egyptians have their way. It goes very, very badly for them. Pursuing the Hebrew people, the Egyptian army chases its own doom. God throws horse and rider into a panic, turning their chariots, their mighty machines of war, into anchors as He closes the water of the sea over them. God has delivered His people from slavery and delivered a message to Egypt and all the nations that might be unwise enough to oppose them.

Water brings life and water brings death. The same waters that destroy the enemy's army save the people of God. The Egyptians are drowned, and the Israelites walk away alive. But God isn't done using water to destroy the enemy and give life to his people. This will not be the last time the Lord uses water to bring His people back from exile.

Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by John, not to be washed clean of sin – he had none – but to take all the world's sin – all *our* sin – onto himself. He took your place and my place to fulfill all righteousness for us people whose hearts would naturally be hardened and dried out without his gracious love. The obstacle to our return from exile has been removed: the dividing wall of hostility that was raised between us and God by sin, death, and Satan, has been washed away.

Jesus has prepared the waters of Baptism for our rescue. It is there that God drowns the old Adam and brings us up out of the water a new creation, His child. The water brings death, and the water brings life. Though the waters, we are returned from exile, set free from a land of slavery and brought into the arms of God.

Amen.