

“Nature’s Sanctuary”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Mini-Retreat at Camp Johnsonburg

Who among you never went to camp growing up? I’m guessing some of you were only introduced to camp by coming here with your church. Who among you grew up going to camp? I went to camp High Harbour as a kid, on Lake Burton, in the North Georgia mountains. You may have heard of it because they actually held camp this past summer, and turns out, hundreds of children and counselors got infected with COVID-19 while they were there. But I have fond memories of that camp.

One memory I have from that camp comes from nights we would play Capture the Flag. After dinner, we would start getting ready. The Israelites may have had unleavened bread for their journey, but we had Deep Woods Off. You would think the smell of it would give us away to the other team, except *everyone* wore it, so we were all a little smell-blind. Most of us wore dark clothes, and the more enthusiastic would smear green grease paint on their faces. There were two flags: the blue flag, and the white flag-- each a bandana, one going to each team, to be hidden in their territory of the camp. The boundaries went far: if it had been Camp Johnsonburg, it would have gone from the Labyrinth in the woods on one side, to the Leap of Faith on the other side, and with the jails-- used for anyone tagged on the wrong side of the line-- set in the meadows in between. I wasn’t one of the older kids, or one of the best athletes, so no one ever expected me to be the hero who would bring the other team’s flag to my side. The advantage to that low expectation was that I could slink by, without people really noticing me; they may have even been unsure what team I was on. One night I got so close to the flag, that I could hear the other team murmuring to one another their strategy for guarding the flag, and from their movement I could tell it was hanging from a tree branch on the other side of the trail from where I was crouching-- just a few yards away. As this realization dawned on me, I felt the bushes near me move as someone rushed past me, leapt up to the tree branch, grabbed that blue flag, and ran for the boundary between our sides, while the other team charged after him, hollering insults and signaling to their teammates what was happening. My dreams of glory were dashed, but I was glad my teammate had captured the flag, and sure enough, he made it safely to the other side.

Today’s Exodus story also speaks of moving from one territory to another, crossing a boundary into freedom. But this was no game. At stake was life or death; freedom or captivity; following God or following Pharaoh. And the most extraordinary thing happened. Moses stretched out his hand, over the waters. A pathway formed, right through the waters, and the ground was dry as dust. The waters made a wall on either side. Can you imagine it? Even if it was the lake at Johnsonburg, stretching from the shore of the boat dock, to the other side where the herons nest, I have a hard time imagining a dry path from one side to the other. How do you think

those first ones felt, stepping out into what was the Red Sea? We know what nature does. We know what nature doesn't do. Here was an event that did not fit anyone's expectations of the natural order of things. And yet, those Hebrews stepped out in faith.

Psalm 114 echoes the wonder of how nature aligned with God's plan in the days of the Exodus: "*When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion. The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back.*" We see how nature lines up in participation with God's intentions for justice, right when Israel is lining up to become faithful followers of God.

But so often, it seems like nature's intentions and our human intentions are in opposition. We are fighting a deadly, viral pandemic. The west coast is battling a raging season of forest fires, the worst this country has seen. Last month marked the 15 year anniversary of my ordination to Christian ministry, but the way I was reminded of this milestone was that it happened the same weekend as the 15 year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. These days, hurricanes and tropical storms are coming earlier and more frequently than ever before, and I just learned that La Nina-- the female weather counterpart to El Nino-- is likely to bring an even more drastic storm season in the next year. All this makes it look like nature is not our friend.

In the seventh grade, I learned in my Language Arts class about different kinds of conflict found in literature. There was character versus character-- for instance, Alexander Hamilton's contentious relationship with Aaron Burr in the musical *Hamilton*. Another kind of conflict I learned about was character versus himself or herself-- an example of that would be the dog Buck in *Call of the Wild*, as he struggled between the pull between domesticated life and the call of his wild instincts. And then there was the conflict of character versus nature-- as we see in *Moby Dick*. Certainly other kinds of conflict show up in literature: character vs. society, or character vs. God. One reason Exodus makes such a compelling story is that each kind of conflict emerges in its telling. And yet, at the climax of the story, every threat-- from Moses' self-doubt to Pharaoh's murderous rage, to the waters in which the Hebrew babies were supposed to have been drowned-- gives way as the Israelites simply walk their way towards freedom and towards their God.

In that moment, Israel became a sanctuary-- along with the sea, the dry ground, the night and its blanket of darkness... all came together in response to God's call. And even as we remember how that happened in a big way, we can also remember it in small ways too. Because we are also Israel. Israel, as we learned in Genesis, was the name given to Jacob, and it means "struggles with God." And as God's people, we will have our struggles too: with God, with the earth, with one another and the societies we have made, and even with ourselves. You might have come here today with such a struggle weighing heavy on you. Sometimes it's right there on the border between the way things were and the ways God may be calling us toward change. We may lack the courage to do as Moses and stretch our hand over the water in command. But if we can think of our lives, our bodies, as a sanctuary, just as this canopy of trees is a sanctuary, maybe we can find the kind of faith where what we want lines up with what

*God* wants. We can discover that wherever we are— whether in Egypt, or in the wilderness, or in some kind of promised land, or even at the border between these, God can make a way out of no way.