

“How Shall We Cross?”  
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Exodus 14:19-31, 15:20-21  
Matthew 18:21-35

If you ever talk to a commuter to New York City, you will find that a lot of thought and preference goes into how a person will cross the Hudson River into Manhattan. Some take their method, tried and true, day after day, and some change on a whim, hoping to unlock the next level of commuting excellence. Commuter, will you drive, take the bus, or carpool? There used to be a spot where you could pick up strangers, so that if you have 3 you get the discounted toll. Now that tolls are completely automated, I'm not sure if that discount exists. Will you take the closest route, the George Washington Bridge? Ah, but it doesn't have dedicated bus lanes! If you take the bus, maybe you're better off taking the Lincoln Tunnel, so you can zip past all the cars stuck in traffic and then arrive in glory... at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. But some choose to bypass motor traffic altogether, kill two birds with one stone by getting their exercise while commuting, because they *bike* to work. I hear the ferry is a great way to commute— if you figure out a way to get there and don't mind paying a bit more for 15 minutes of peaceful cruising. And there is one Leonia man who is legendary because he built a boat he could fold on the back of his bicycle, and so he'd bike to the Edgewater pier, and then boat to the city.

If you commute into the city, I'm not sure how much your commute into the city, or your commute home *changes* you. But in the Bible, the crossing over a body of water *always* changes God's people.

Jacob crossed the Jabbok river before he had a dream, and struggled with God, and was blessed by God with a new name, Israel. Moving from that river crossing, he reunited with his brother Esau, with whom he had been estranged for many years, and he was forgiven.

Moses passed through the Nile as a baby, when his mother sent him floating in a basket, and he was brought from the death of a throwaway Hebrew child, to life raised in Pharaoh's palace.

We remember the Jordan river as the place of baptism, where John the Baptist dunked believers under water, sharing with them the message that they were beginning a new life. John baptized Jesus himself in the Jordan, too, before Jesus' amazing public ministry began.

Far before that, the Israelites emerged from the wilderness, and they crossed the Jordan River into the land they believed was their promised land, their milk and honey. That wilderness wasn't *that* big. But tradition said that it took 40 years of wandering before they could shake the emotional shackles of slavery off of them. The generation that crossed the Jordan, into the land

of Canaan, had never been enslaved at all; only the generation that had been born in the wilderness was allowed to cross.

And today, we have a big story— one of the very biggest stories of Jewish or Christian tradition. Moses stretched his hand over the sea, and the waters made a wall on the right and a wall on the left, so that the Israelites could pass out of Egypt, the land of their enslavement, on dry ground.

The story of this crossing gets told throughout the telling of God's history with God's people. It serves as a metaphor for our lives. Our God is a God who liberates people from oppression and harm. Any modern day Pharaoh, who wishes to exercise dominion in a way that harms God's people, or God's earth: beware. God will find a way for God's people and God's creation to cross, and if you stand in God's way, then things may not look so good for you.

As for God's people, this story reminds us that there may be times when God calls you to cross the waters, pass through into a life made new. And it can be scary. You may find yourself complaining; this is no luxury cruise here. Part of the way through, you may look longingly at the shore you came from, making up a better story of that situation than the truth. But if you trust in God, and follow the path that God makes for you, there will be reason for joy when you reach the other side.

If that calling to cross comes, how will you cross?

Some will cross with fear. They will cross, more interested in the enslaved lives they left behind than the free lives waiting for them. A few verses before the start of today's reading, our scripture says, "As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'" They want to hold onto a mythology that their best days were in Egypt. But God wanted something more for them, and God needed them to have enough imagination and faith to hope that better can come for them.

September 17 is the day in 1849 Harriet Tubman first escaped enslavement in Maryland, along with two of her brothers. In a letter to Ednah Dow Cheney, circa 1859, Tubman wrote: "God's time [Emancipation] is always near. He set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; He meant I should be free."<sup>1</sup> Some will cross in fear. But the cost of staying is even more terrifying.

Some will cross with concern for what is happening to the Egyptians. I get that. I may wish nasty things on my worst enemies, but I hope I don't really mean it. It seems that the

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<sup>1</sup> "Theologian's Almanac for Week of September 17, 2023" in *The Salt Project* [www.saltproject.org](http://www.saltproject.org)

punishment does not come from the Israelites, though. This isn't their revenge. I would argue it is not even God's revenge. This is the response that creation has, to protest the idea that any human leader can claim dominion over creation— including God's children. When Moses stretched his hand over the sea, at daybreak, "the sea went back into its place." So maybe creation made an exception for the Hebrews, by parting the waters. But when the slaveholders followed, nature went back to its ordered place. The waters did as waters do. It just so happened that Pharaoh's armies were in the middle of it, and drowned. Further, the demise of Pharaoh's armies "shows the end result of an economy built on forced labor, exploitation, and domination. In refusing to let God's people go, Pharaoh leads his own people to their grave. The gaze of God undoes Pharaoh's vision of mastery; the waters of new creation dismantle his chariots and drown the machinery of war and abduction."<sup>2</sup>

Now mostly I don't argue that God uses things like natural disasters to punish people for doing wrong. That would be a heartless argument, especially in a week where Libya has seen flooding where 11,000 are confirmed dead, and another 10,000 are still missing. I suppose God has spent the week weeping alongside the grieving, and the Spirit has blown with the wind trying to stir up hope and a reason to go on in despairing hearts. Such tragedies seem pointless to me from a theological perspective.

But I do believe that if we humans keep trying to defy God's natural order of things, and to become our own lords in ways that harm other people and other parts of creation, there will be consequences.

When we are able to live our lives with the freedom and joy for which God made us, then we can be better positioned to talk about the things that Jesus tells us in Matthew. Like Joseph, who was better able to forgive his brothers when he was no longer in a pit but in a position of privilege, we are better able to forgive when our debts are forgiven. In Jesus' story about the slave who owed a debt to his lord, but was forgiven, that same slave turned and harassed a slave who owed him— rather than showing the same generosity the lord had shown him. It is hard to act with gracious mercy when you are still in a position of enslavement, whether your debt is paid or not. But Jesus makes it clear that we are to forgive, seventy times seven. I wonder, if Jesus had told this story, what would have happened to the Egyptian army. We can feel empathy for the soldiers who were lost to the Red Sea, and as we work to secure our own freedom and joy, we can hope that our actions bring freedom and joy for all God's creation.

Some will cross with joy. Miriam certainly did— leading the women with tambourine and dancing. She was Moses' and Aaron's sister. Scholars believe that the song that scripture records that Miriam sang after the crossing of the Red Sea might be the oldest piece of original scripture in our entire canon.

You don't wade through Overpeck Creek to come to church— although some of you pass it or other bodies of water on a bridge. But even though you don't physically pass through water to get to church, our hope— God's hope— is that by passing through this space *changes* you. That

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<sup>2</sup> Anatheia Portier-Young, "Commentary on Exodus 14:19-31" in *The Working Preacher*, Sept. 14, 2014

it moves you from fear to faith. From counting your enemies to cultivating empathy. From being joyless to being jubilant.

Pharaoh and his army had chariots, horses, and armor. It didn't do them much good. The Israelites had the clothing on their backs, and bread that didn't have time to rise. And it was enough.

You will also have enough. That is, if you pass through this space enough times that it starts to shape you— through prayer, through the inspiration of scripture, through the breaking of bread, through loving instruction, through the tambourine and other forms of music. And you will also find that you do not have to be an army of one. You can let down your defenses, because you belong to a community of many.