

Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place
Exodus 13:17-22, 14:5-6, 9-14, 19-31
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Have you ever found yourself in a predicament? We have a lot of word pictures in the English language to describe being in a predicament. We use phrases like, “being painted into a corner,” or “caught between a rock and a hard place,” or being “up against the wall” or “in a pickle.” At least one person has defined a predicament as being “a lawyer who specializes in suing doctors for medical malpractice finding himself in need of major surgery.” As we return to the story of Moses this morning, he and the Hebrews are in just such a predicament.

Following the final plague, the plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh had finally released the Israelites, just as God said he would. The Hebrews left in a hurry, in the middle of the night. When Pharaoh finally relents, you don’t wait around. In a somewhat strange turn of events, God commands Moses to lead the people not along the most direct route from Egypt to Canaan, but along a route off the beaten path, the road less traveled, if you will. God recognized that despite the signs and miracles the people had witnessed during the plagues, that would not immediately offset generations of being victimized. They would need time to adjust to their new reality as free people. If they were attacked along the most well-known route out of Egypt, they might not yet have the capacity to choose freedom. It is a fascinating instance in which God takes into account the human situation, and that situation makes a difference in how God chooses to act.

So, Moses leads them in a roundabout way to set up camp in front of the Red Sea. Surely everyone realized what an odd, perilous choice this was. To the east is a large body of water. To the west is Egypt and Pharaoh. If for any reason Pharaoh should come after them, they would be trapped. No doubt they hoped that would not happen.

Back at the palace, Pharaoh, upon hearing that his slave labor has camped near the sea and now regretting his decision to let such a massive workforce go free, decides to go after them, to retrieve what he sees as belonging to him. He sets out in pursuit, with all of Egypt’s military might at his disposal. Pharaoh’s army is imposing, boasting the latest and greatest in military technology. In particular, his company of elite chariots, 600 strong, struck fear in all his enemies, but they weren’t all he had. Egypt had several thousand chariots and drivers in addition to

the elite guard, and their chariots were lighter and more advanced than those of other nations. One modern engineer has described them as the Formula One racers of their time. Two horses would draw the chariot, which was piloted by one warrior while another, using Egypt's advanced composite bows, fired at their enemies from a distance. As the charioteers drew closer, swords and spears were used.

It's not difficult to imagine what the Israelites were feeling as they saw the dust from Pharaoh's chariots in the distance. As the text tells us, they "were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Weren't there enough graves in Egypt that you took us away to die in the desert? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt like this? Didn't we tell you the same thing in Egypt? 'Leave us alone! Let us work for the Egyptians!' It would have been better for us to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert.'"

You can hear and even feel the frustration and anxiety, can't you? Their worst fears have been realized. It looks like they have just been led down a dead-end: they're trapped and there's no way out. They can't go back and they can't go forward. The future looks impassible and the present seems impossible. And, they are in this predicament through no fault of their own. Since the moment they left Egypt, God's very presence has been with them, leading them along the way they should go. God's presence appears to them as a cloud with a fire burning inside it continuously. During the day, the fire is not visible. It doesn't need to be because the cloud is constantly there. But at night, the fire can easily be seen in contrast to the surrounding darkness. Israel is not stumbling through the wilderness by themselves. If they keep their eyes on the cloud and the fire, they will get to where God wishes to take them. And right now, that appears to be quite a thorny spot.

Think about how different the Hebrews' perspective is of their situation than God's perspective of it. God knows there is a plan and God knows its ultimate purpose. From the human perspective, we can't always see the plan. Things seem random. There appears to be no logic, no pattern to what happens, to whom or why. But, God is not making a mistake in leading the Israelites by this way, to this location, into this predicament. This isn't something half-baked that God cooked up in a panic, as if God is caught off-guard that Pharaoh is chasing after his slaves. God knows the plan, God knows the outcome, and God has been preparing for this moment since the foundation of the world.

The Hebrews' fear is understandable. As slaves, they've been living at the edge of subsistence and are easily given to fear, as those who have been victimized

often are. But, I think there's more than fear at work here. The truth is that we really struggle with the notion that God's plans sometimes remain hidden to us. We want to know; maybe we even think we're entitled to know the whys and wherefores of God's actions. In our hubris, we think God's plans ought to pass muster with us for fairness, for timeliness, for logic. If left to our own devices, we'd write faith right out of the equation and out of our lives.

The Hebrews are making the classic mistake, the mistake they've made countless times before, the mistake we, too, struggle mightily with. They have set their eyes on the Egyptians instead of on God, on their problems, instead of on their savior. That leads them to distort the truth, to be ruled by doubts and fears.

Nightfall comes, and the Egyptians make camp opposite the Israelites. God commands Moses to lift his staff over the water. That night a strong east wind comes blowing across the water toward the Israelites, and when morning comes they find the water pushed back by the wind on either side of a path that has been cleared through the middle of the sea. Using the path, the Israelites walk through the sea as if on dry ground. Pharaoh's chariots try to follow, but they get bogged down, their wheels stuck, which gives God's people time to get safely across. Once the last Hebrew has climbed up the opposite shore, Moses stretches his staff over the waters again, which fall crashing back into place, completely covering Pharaoh's men. The finest army in the land is utterly destroyed, and the Hebrews never lift a single weapon.

As the Israelites stood watching this scene unfold, they were undoubtedly filled with awe. They had been delivered from Pharaoh and the greatest military power of the day. In response, Moses and the Hebrews composed and sang a song as part of their worship of Yahweh. It's recorded in Exodus 15 and here are some of the words:

I will sing to the Lord, for an overflowing victory!
 Horse and rider he threw into the sea!
 The Lord is my strength and my power;
 he has become my salvation.
 This is my God, whom I will praise,
 the God of my ancestors, whom I will acclaim.
 The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name.
 Pharaoh's chariots and his army he hurled into the sea;
 his elite captains were sunk in the Red Sea.
 The deep sea covered them;
 they sank into the deep waters like stone.

Left to human wisdom, Israel would never have placed itself in such a predicament. Conventional wisdom would dictate that they follow the most well-worn path leaving Egypt, the path that gives them the best shot at making it to the Promised Land alive. But, think about what would have been missed. God had a plan to deliver them safely but that would simultaneously begin to form them as a people. They weren't yet ready or able to take on the identity of being a covenant people. They didn't yet know how to trust God or why it was in their own best interests to obey God, to live God's way. Too much of their knowledge of God was still in their heads. They didn't have that lived experience with God, of seeing God do the impossible, that moves faith from the head to the heart. They didn't yet have the kind of relationship whereby the next time trouble appeared, they would know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God was *for them*.

And then there's the glory that God receives for delivering his people. Remember, God's ultimate goal is not simply to save a people so that they can know God and be blessed, as if all God is interested in is creating a spiritual bubble for Israel. God's ultimate goal is to save creation, an action for which God's name will be known and praised by all the people of the earth. As slaves with Egyptian dirt still stuck to their sandals, the Israelites don't yet get that. They're still too concerned about themselves. There's work to be done to shape them for their calling as a covenant people. Passover and the Exodus are two halves of God's divine act of deliverance.

A Jewish rabbi has noted that, "This is our defining story. If you are a Jew, you've got to get this. It defines who we are as a people. We were slaves. God saw our suffering. God delivered us and made us his own. This is our story."

When God chose a people with whom to have a special covenant relationship, God selected a group that was oppressed and enslaved. God delivered them by his "mighty right hand." There was nothing they could do to deliver themselves. There's a word that describes this kind of salvation: grace. It was salvation that the Hebrews did nothing to deserve. It was purely an act of God's kindness, mercy and love.

The exodus tells us that God cares about the nobodies, the people who are easily overlooked and often discounted as "less than". It says to us that God will ultimately defeat the arrogant, prideful, and cruel. It announces that God sees our suffering, and God will deliver us. It tells us that we don't have to remain enslaved to the things that bind us. God wants to set us free. The question is: are we ready to follow God out of our slavery, even if it means traveling through the desert?