

Red Sea Places  
Exodus 14:10-14

A poem written by Annie Johnson Flint was written decades before 2020, but for me it captures a lot of what the past 12 months have felt like. The poem is called "Red Sea Place" and the first lines go like this:

"Have you come to a Red Sea place in your life,  
Where in spite of all you can do,  
There is no way out,  
There is no way back,  
There is no way through?" -Annie Johnson Flint

The story of Exodus is an incredible story! The Red Sea was in front of them - there was no way through it or around it. Behind them was Pharoah, Ramses II maybe the most powerful autocrat of his day. Ramses brought his army with him, thousands of chariots, heavily armed, and in that moment, God made a way miraculously in the water, a road to freedom for the Israelite people. It was incredible.

Biblical scholars have debated how it happened - the amazing truth of the story is that it did happen. God is a deliverer. When the people made it to the other side, they thank God - "The horse and rider God has thrown into the sea"

If you are familiar with Jewish traditions, you know that if you attend a Seder, people will gather around the table and will sing, "we are Pharoah's slaves in Egypt and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong and mighty hand"

The Jewish people profoundly identify with this story it has become their story. My professor of Old Testament in seminary Don Gowan said it is our story as well, because the story of Exodus closely parallels the

story of the strong deliverer Jesus Christ, come to set his people free and break the bonds of death and sin.

So we are rooted and grounded in this story it is our story as well. It is the story of hopeless people with no way out of a tight spot, yet God made a way for them.

This week marks just about exactly 12 months that we have been dealing with the biggest public health crisis of our time, not since the end of World War I and the so-called Spanish Flu have we seen such a challenge to our way of life, our society has ground to a halt in some ways.

It has felt to many like we are in that Red Sea place.

Where have you experienced that place during the past 12 months?

For some it has been a head on battle with the virus itself, for some it has been a sense of alienation and loneliness during a lockdown. Many have lost ability to work, and that has brought on personal economic crisis.

A story from New York city where in spite of laws against eviction, some landlords are still evicting people whose livelihood is shut down, and with no income, they cannot find a new rental. They become instantly homeless.

However you have experienced this,

It has felt like we certainly could not go back to 2019, but neither could we move forward. And the stress and anxiety of the past 12 months was like the great Satchel Paige once said:

"Don't look back, something might be gaining on you."

There are signs of hope, but it is not quite over just yet. So how do we continue to get through this long-running crisis? Where do we turn when we are at that place? Where do we look for help?

The story of Exodus, which is our story as well, and the word that Jesus gives to those who questioned him in the temple, "destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again", both tell us that almighty God is a deliverer of staggering proportions. God is a liberator, God is a redeemer. God can lead us out of impossible places.

So just three things to keep in mind, if you would, as we continue to navigate this time:

- 1 Remember to be honest with God and yourself.

In the narrative leading up to this Red Sea event, the people of Israel were brutally honest with God. They were so frustrated and angry. They had been freed, so they assumed, only to end up trapped here with no way out, and the army behind them closing in.

Even if you are in a tough spot, that is not the time to stop talking to God. The worst thing we could do is cut ourselves off from God when we are in that Red Sea place.

The people of Israel were asking, "Why did you bring us out here to die?"

In their anger, perhaps they were forgetting what they actually had left behind. They romanticized the past. Looking back it seemed so much better to them. "Oh back in Egypt we had a roof over our heads, and something to eat."

Wait when they were back in Egypt they were enslaved, tortured, beaten, and humiliated. They romanticized the past.

I think it will be important to somehow process the anger and frustration and grief that many of us have felt these past 12 months. I finally began to feel that when on the eve of inauguration, the President held that silent memorial for all of those lost.

And by the way next Sunday afternoon some pastors in our area are holding a Zoom style service of reflection as well. We can share that information this week if you are interested.

We are going to have to be honest with God, as so many of the Psalmists write about, in how we reflect on the past.

Even as we remember how it was even this time last year, we know we can't go back there. People of God are always forward looking.

SO let God in even if you are stuck in a place you can't get out of.

A church member once gave me one of those little trinkets, a little wooden cross you carry around in your pocket. I usually don't go for that kind of stuff, but this one came with a saying:

*SO I carry a cross in my pocket*

*Reminding no one but me*

*That Jesus Christ is lord of my life*

*If only I will let him be.*

Be honest with God, when you are in a Red Sea place.

2 Remember that God works on many different levels at once.

You and I understandably are mostly occupied with what is happening on the surface. We don't realize how God might be at work.

It's is kind of like gardening in the spring. It looks bleak, brown and dead, but if you look closely small shoots are starting to appear, and if you were to look under the surface of the ground, you would see that lots of things are happening that will very soon produce beautiful blossoms in time.

I see signs of hope. It looks like some recovery aid is coming from Congress. There are at least three vaccines available. There is a promise that anyone can get one by the end of May. It appears that we have restored some level of competency in our government. Perhaps summer will be time when we can see our family members again. There is going to be a way through.

But other signs which are more subtle are how so many people have responded to the past 12 months with incredible faithfulness. Lifting up neighbors. Reaching out on Zoom. Our church has rallied together to make the best of this time. SO much more.

We will go into a future that may be changed, and may be in some ways for the better. But we can't see it yet.

3 Remember that hopeless is not a word which God's Spirit invokes.

Scripture sometimes describes situations which seem hopeless. But God does not invoke hopeless.

I love the famous quote of the legendary Marine general during the Korean war, General Lewis Puller.

"We've been looking for the enemy for some time now. We've finally found him. We're surrounded. That simplifies things."

He was telling them in essence, "The enemy is on the right flank. The enemy is on the left flank. Then enemy is in front of us, the enemy is behind us. They won't get a way this time."

How do you get that kind of confidence? We're overwhelmed by whatever confronts us - it is all around us, surely there is no escape. But remember hopeless is not a word which the Holy Spirit gives to us. God always promises to work through this suffering for something redemptive.

That poem by Annie Johnson Flint closes with this:

"When he leads you on from the place of the sea  
to a land you have not known;  
and your fears will pass as your foes have passed,  
you will be no more afraid;  
you will sing his praise  
in a better place,  
a place his hand has made."

In your Red Sea place, when you are stuck, can you believe God will help you find a way, a better place?

Be honest with God, believe God is at work, and remember the words Hopeless and Impossible are not in God's vocabulary.

Howard Thurman Dean of the Chapel at Howard University once said:

"Open unto me light for my darkness  
Courage for my fears,  
Peace for my turmoil  
Joy for my sorrow  
Love for my hate

Thyself for myself  
Open unto me O Lord."

May it be so