

The Start of Something New: "No Turning Back"

September 14, 2008

Year A: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Today we follow the journey of the Hebrew people. We learned last week that these slaves, these oppressed people in Egypt were told to start packing and they needed to do it quickly, urgently, for the Angel of Death was coming. God tells these people to prepare for the Pass Over – literally do these ritualistic things and this Angel of Death will Pass Over their dwelling place.

That's what happened in last week's passage. Before we can get to today's passage we have to know what happened in between. The tenth plague occurs next. The first born of every living creature – except those under the protection of God – die. The Egyptians are so outraged that they scream at the Hebrew people to get out. This is what they wanted all along. They cried to God for help and God responds and with it this rag-tag group heads toward their dream of the Promised Land – the homeland of their ancestors. But not everything is rosy, there are some problems brewing. This group is not all united. 12.38: "A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds." They were not all Hebrew people. There is a problem, so to rectify this we have this passage (12.48-49): "If an alien who reside with you want to celebrate the Passover to the Lord, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it; there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you."

Problem averted for now – this mixed group of people begin the process of becoming one. They all share the mark of circumcision, they all celebrate the Passover the time when God protected them, and they have one goal in mind – to reach the Promised Land. Now another problem (13.17-18): "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, 'If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.' So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea." These poor people are out wandering around in the desert and Pharaoh hears of this and changes his mind and decides to get his slaves back. That leads us to today's passage.

[Exodus 14:10-31 \(NRSV\)](#)

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. ¹¹They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

¹³But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

¹⁵Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers."

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

²¹Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Today is the start of something new. Last week it started with some packing and today we continue with No Turning Back.

A newspaper photographer in Los Angeles was called by his editor and told of a fire that was raging out in Palos Verdes. That's a hilly area south of Los

Angeles. His assignment was to rush down to a small airport, board a waiting plane, get some pictures of the fire, and be back in time for the afternoon edition.

Breathlessly, he raced to the airport and drove his car to the end of the runway. Sure enough, there was a plane waiting with all the engines revved up, ready to go. He got aboard, and at about 5,000 feet, he began getting his camera out of the bag. He told the fellow flying the plane to get him over the fire so he could take his pictures and get back to the paper.

From the other side of the cockpit there was a deafening silence. Then he heard these unsettling words: "Aren't you the instructor?"¹

Well, there's no turning back now! Especially in today's passage, with the water rushing in, and the death of their enemy, any hope of returning is closed up with the Red Sea returns to normal. It reminds me of any time that I have started a project and realize there's no turning back. Several years ago I had a full beard. In fact, both Emma and Cora had never seen me clean shaven. I was on a Mission Trip with our youth group and one morning I got up before everyone else did and decided to shave it off. I remember when I first took the razor and shaved off part of it, I thought to myself, "I have to keep going, there's no turning back now."

This Fall our theme is The Start of Something New and already a few of us are taking advantage of it. 16 families have started the process of understanding and controlling their finances by taking our Dave Ramsey course. Last week we had about 40 kids start the new Sunday School season. And if you've missed out with those opportunities just wait. In a couple of weeks there will be no turning back for you as well. In a couple of weeks we start our Family Nite again and highlighting that even will be our exciting Alpha Bible study. This will take place on the same night as our Adult Nite study, our Kid's Nite, and our College Nite activities. And maybe its not Wednesday night that is calling for you. Maybe you've always wanted to give blood and didn't know how or where. Folks, these are just a few of the opportunities that we have coming up to start something new.

Now as I said last week I believe we all want to try something new some time in our life even if it is as easy as trying out a new cereal for breakfast or buying a new car. Maybe it's something new in your life like improving your finances, or exercising, or renewing your wedding vows, or even re-committing yourself to God. We can all start somewhere. But try and sustain it, that's when it gets difficult. Just listen to the Hebrews: ¹¹They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

These were the same people that cried out for something new. They wanted to leave the slavery and oppression of Egypt, however, when things got

¹ Dan Safarik. "Aren't you the plane instructor?" *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part V*. 30.

tough, when Pharaoh was bearing down on them that's when they cried out to go back.

One of my favorite movies of all time is *The Hunt for Red October*. As I read this passage I kept thinking of this scene from the movie. A little background here for you. *The Red October* is a Soviet sub during the height of the Cold War. The Captain – played by Sean Connery – has gathered his senior staff (they are all in on the defection) to talk about a recent murder, something that most didn't know was going to happen. In this scene these lieutenants are arguing and afraid that the crew will find out that they are defecting and cause a mutiny. One of the lieutenants has a solution. Just watch and listen:

<*The Hunt for Red October* scene>

In great Sean Connery fashion he says there's no turning back. Now obviously, things are very different between the movie and this passage. The Israelites are quite fearful because the Egyptians were right on their heels. They needed God to act and God did with quite a show. In the movie the fear did not come until they knew the Soviets would hunt them down. But in both instances it becomes quite clear that they only have one option – that is to move forward.

The late United Methodist bishop, Gerald Kennedy, told of a commencement at a large university where he was the graduation ceremony speaker. After his speech, Kennedy was seated near the table piled high with diplomas. The graduates marched across the platform as their names were read to receive their diploma and a handshake from the president of the university. As each graduate passed, the president would say, "Congratulations! And keep moving!"

The president was, of course, mostly trying to keep the reception line moving.

"In a deeper sense," Bishop Kennedy observed, "the president spoke a great word. This is a high place you have attained, he was saying, but do not forget you must keep going on into the future. The education they had received would give them the assurance and confidence to commence their life's work -- to keep moving."²

I believe God nudges us in this direction. Folks, when we start something new this is an opportunity. And we have opportunities all around us to make significant changes in our life and in the lives of others. Often these are opportunities that require us to change the way we see the world, the way we practice some habits, even the way we treat other people. The hard part is – we do have a choice in many instances to turn back. But I believe God doesn't want us to. You see you walked in these doors today as an acknowledgment that today was going to be different. Now I realize that it may have started off bad. You may have yelled at the kids trying to get them ready for church. Your week may have started with all kinds of stress. Maybe you are just in a time period with all kinds of burdens – the burden of guilt, the burden because you can't be forgiven, the burden because you hold on to something you can't let go of. But today you walked in these doors ready to start something new. There is no turning back.

² Gerald Kennedy. "Keep moving." *Seth's, Part III*. 49.

Once upon a time, twin boys were conceived in the womb. Seconds, minutes, hours passed as the two embryonic lives developed. The spark of life grew and each tiny brain began to take shape and form. With the development of their brain came feeling, and with feeling, perception – a perception of surroundings, of each other, and their own lives. They discovered that life was good, and they laughed and rejoiced in their hearts.

One said to the others, “We are sure lucky to have been conceived and to have this wonderful world.”

The other chimed in, “Yes, blessed be our mother who gave us life and each other.”

Each of the twins continues to grow and soon their arms and fingers, legs and toes began to take shape. They stretched their bodies and churned and turned in their little world. They explored it and found the life cord which gave them life from their mother’s blood. They were grateful for this new discovery and sang, “How great is the love of our mother – that she shares all she has with us!”

Weeks passed into months and with the advent of each new month, they noticed a change in each other and in themselves.

“We are changing,” one said. “What can it mean?”

“It means,” said the other, “that we are drawing near to birth.”

An unsettling chill crept over the two. They were afraid of birth, for they knew that it meant leaving their wonderful world behind.

Said the one, “Were it up to me, I would live here forever.”

“But we must be born,” said the other. “It has happened to all the others.” Indeed, there was evidence inside the womb that the mother had carried life before theirs. “And I believe that there is life after birth, don’t you?”

“How can there be life after birth?” cried the one. “Do we not shed our life cord and also the blood tissue when we are born? And have you ever talked to anyone that has been born? Has anyone ever re-entered the womb after birth to describe what birth is like? NO!” As he spoke, he fell into despair, and in his despair he moaned, “If the purpose of conception and our growth inside the womb is to end in birth, then truly our life is senseless.” He clutched his precious life cord to his breast and said, “And if this is so, and life is absurd, then there really can be no mother!”

“But there is a mother,” protested the other. “Who else gave us nourishment? Who else created this world for us?”

“We get our nourishment from this cord – and our world has always been here!” said the one. “And if there is a mother – where is she? Have you ever seen her? Does she ever talk to you? NO! We invented the mother when we were young because it satisfied a need in us. It made us feel secure and happy.”

Thus, while the one raved and despaired, the other resigned himself to birth and placed his trust in the hands of his mother. Hours turned into days, and days into weeks. And soon it was time. They both knew their birth was at hand, and they both feared what they did not know. As the one was first to be conceived, so he was the first to be born, the other following.

They cried as they were born into the light. They coughed out fluid and gasped the dry air. And when they were sure they had been born, they opened their eyes – seeing life after birth for the very first time. What they saw as the beautiful eyes of their mother, as they were cradled lovingly in her arms. They were home.³

Folks, the Hebrew people were being led home – to the Promised Land. There was no turning back. When we start on a journey that betters our selves, betters our community, betters our church we are following a path directed by God. We've already packed our bags, there's no turning back now. We must march forward to home. Amen.

³ Wayne Rice. *More HOT Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 MORE attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1995.) 105.