

Crossing the sea

I don't think anyone could do justice to today's reading from the book of Exodus quite as well as Cecil B. DeMille did in the movie *The Ten Commandments*. Released in 1956, filmed on location in Egypt, with groundbreaking special effects, it eclipsed *Gone with the Wind* as the biggest box office movie in North America. While near the end of the movie Moses does receive the Ten Commandments, the crossing of the Red Sea is generally considered the greatest sequence in the movie. It remains impressive, even today.

And so it should – it reflects a turning point for the people of God in the Old Testament. Today's reading is the fourth (and the last for the time being) in a series of snapshots from the life of Moses – four weeks ago, we had Moses being saved by being put in the basket in the Nile by his mother and taken in by Pharaoh's daughter, then Marion shared about Moses and the burning bush, last week we had the story of the Passover, and today, the people of God cross the sea.

It's easy to think of the crossing of the sea as just one of series of events in the life of Moses and the life of the people of God, something that just happens between escaping Egypt and spending years wandering in the wilderness – but it has a significance beyond that. Our reading from Exodus 14 described it, our reading from the book of Hebrews 11 reminded us of it, our responsive reading from Exodus 15, part of the Song of Moses and Miriam described it over again. The assigned Psalm for today, Psalm 114 (1a,3a), tells us that “When Israel came out of Egypt [...] The sea looked and fled.”

Last week, we heard of the last of the plagues to fall on Egypt, the death of the firstborn, and how the people of God had marked their homes with the blood of the lamb on the sides and tops of their doors, so that they would be spared. Pharaoh's heart and resolve were broken, and he let the Hebrew people go.

As we read Exodus chapter 13, we find details of the route that the Hebrews took: So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.” And we learn too that, “The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle”. (13:18)

They had been allowed to leave, but they were hardly safe yet. Not only were they leaving Pharaoh and the Egyptians behind, but they didn't know what they were heading into. They may not have been soldiers, and they may not have had spears or swords, but they would have had scythes and grain flails and mallets and other tools that could be put to use as weapons... they were, as the writer says, ready for battle.

But they didn't need to fight, because God protected them: “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.” (13:21-22)

Sure enough, we learn at the beginning of chapter 14, that Pharaoh changed his mind. He'd led those people go... but they were a valuable workforce.

Pharaoh had his own chariot and his army made ready and the Egyptians - all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and troops - pursued the Israelites.

I can imagine the fleeing people looking back toward Egypt and seeing the cloud of dust that the army of Egypt would have kicked up. And then looking forward and seeing the Red Sea in front of them. What were they to do? Throw themselves into the sea? Beg for mercy from the Egyptians? Fight an unwinnable battle against a superior force?

We read that the Israelites 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? (14:10-11)

In the face of that fear, Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

And so, at the beginning of today's reading we heard how the angel of God and the pillar of cloud (14:19) that had been leading Israel's army away from Egypt move behind the people. Those manifestations of God's power that had been leading the people, now moved to protect them.

The that cloud brought light to God's people also brought darkness to their pursuers. It was a relief, but it was only a temporary reprieve: The people were still stuck between their enemy and the sea.

But God was not finished. Following God's instruction (14:16), Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided,"

It reflects the creation story in Genesis 1:9, when, on the third day, "... God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so."

By the light of the cloud that night, the Israelites saw that there was a way forward – one that was unimaginable yesterday. There was dry land where there had been a sea.

How do you think they felt? Relieved? They were witnessing something they'd never seen before – something that no one had ever seen before. How was the water held back? When would those walls of water collapse back on to the path?

But whatever fear they had, they put aside – maybe out of desperation, maybe out of faith: Verse 22 tells us that the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. They didn't go over it, or around it, or even wait for it to go down, but they went through it. A wall of water on their right and on their left. They passed through the water.

Not so the Egyptians. The Egyptians pursued the Israelites, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.

The Israelites had crossed safely – but not so the Egyptians: During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. The wheels of their chariots jammed (or in some translations fell off!). The army of Pharaoh lost its nerve: the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." (14:25)

We learn that next the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen."

The next couple of verses (14:27-29) tell us how Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

That can be a tough thing for us to contemplate: Not one of them survived. The whole army, every commander, every charioteer, every soldier, was killed. The Egyptians, who were already grieving the loss of their firstborn sons would now be grieving the loss of all their sons who had been called to serve in Pharaoh's army.

While we can celebrate the deliverance of the Israelites through the sea, can we or should we celebrate the death of the Egyptians? It was God's action that brought about those deaths, after all.

I think about the words of Isaiah 45:5-7 to Cyrus: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.[...] I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things."

The destruction of the Egyptian army did not come out of the blue.

It had begun way back in Exodus 1, where we learned that there was a new Pharaoh in Egypt who didn't know the history of Joseph and the Israelites. A Pharaoh who came to resent them, who enslaved them and persecuted them and murdered them. A Pharaoh who'd denied Moses request to 'Let my people go' ten times, a Pharaoh who'd repeatedly hardened his heart to God, a Pharaoh who went back on giving freedom to the Israelites. You'd think he would have learned his lesson – but sometimes people just don't.

We shouldn't be celebrating the Egyptians' death, but neither should we be blaming God for it – we should be blaming Pharaoh.

We need to remember the words of God through the prophet Ezekiel too, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”

If God takes no pleasure of the death of the wicked, then neither should we. But ultimately, something must be done about the wicked – they must either turn from their ways, or face the consequences of not doing so.

As the Egyptians were driving their chariots into the path across the sea in pursuit of the Israelites, they realised the truth of what was happening: “Let’s get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.” (14:25b)

They realised that Pharaoh, who the Egyptians held as a god, wasn’t in control – it was God – the God of the Israelites – that was in control.

And after the destruction, the Israelites found themselves reminded of the same thing – the end of today’s reading, “...Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.” (14:30b-31)

The next chapter of Exodus, which includes our responsive psalm today, begins with Moses’ psalm to the Lord. After that Miriam and other women join in the praise with timbrels (tambourine-like drum) and dancing - exalting the Lord for hurling Egypt’s horses and riders into the Red Sea.

The people of God had been delivered. They had been saved. They had seen their enemies destroyed. There was great celebration.

But the celebration would soon finish. It wasn’t long before the people began to grumble against God and against Moses again. It would be a repeating story of their time in the wilderness. The stories of the past – the Passover and crossing the sea – were great deliverances of the people, great demonstrations of God’s power, but over time, they became just stories. Stories to be revisited, but stories that had no lasting effect.

I think we modern Christians can be like that too. The stories of our faith, the stories of God, the stories of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, can become just stories for us too. Stories that seem so distant from us that they have little effect on our lives.

We have to take these stories to heart – they have to not just give us something to think about, but they need to change our lives. Or I should say we need to let them change our lives.

We can remember the Israelites fleeing Egypt... but do we trust God in the face of an overwhelming enemy?

We can recite Psalm 23... but do we trust God to be with us even in death’s dark vale?

We can remember that Jesus called his followers – us – to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything he has commanded ... but do we?

We may not have experienced a deliverance quite like the one that Cecille B. DeMille portrayed back in 1956, but God has brought us to where we are today... so let us trust him to lead us through the seas of trouble we may face, for he is our strength and shield, he is our strong deliverer, he is our great Redeemer.

Amen.