



**A Sermon for The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Sept 17, 2023**



The Parting of the Red Sea

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Pent 16
September 17, 2023
New Life Episcopal Church, Uniontown OH
The Rev Barbara Bond
Exodus 14:19-31

Water for life

We love spectacle, don't we? In preparing for this sermon, I watched two movies – Cecile B DeMille's 1956 extravaganza "The Ten Commandments," and the 1998 animated film, "The Prince of Egypt," both telling the spectacular story of the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, and God's giving them the Law, the Ten Commandments. Which was the better movie? Well, tastes change, and two movies, forty years apart, offer very different renditions of this famous story. DeMille's version went on for about four hours (I admit, we skimmed it), and the animated version zipped right along with lots of contemporary cultural references and wonderful music. I preferred the animated version, I have to admit.

But what do you remember about the earlier version? I'll bet it was the crossing of the Red Sea, right? I have to admit, it was impressive – a whole lot of water. I looked up the movie on Wikipedia, to see how they actually did it, and yes, there really was a whole lot of water.

Let's review the story, and find out where the water fits in. Last week, we all wrote the sermon at the picnic. We told the story about the Jews being saved from the death of their first-born through God's saving act of the Passover – the Jews marked their doorways, and the Angel of Death passed over them, afflicting only the Egyptians. We talked about the annual remembrance of Passover among the Jews ever since, and how we Christians have co-opted the story (I mean that in a positive way) by giving the liberation a much wider meaning for us than escaping the Egyptians. We noticed the similarity to our Eucharist service.

So, back to the story. Pharaoh lets the Jews go, and they leave Egypt, and they get backed into a corner – right in front of the Red Sea they come to a stop. Pharaoh has decided to give chase, and the Jews are stuck,

between the Egyptian armies and the Red Sea. Moses lifts his staff, and God, working through Moses, parts the Red Sea. The waters divide, revealing dry land, and the Jews walk through, escaping. The Egyptians follow suit, but Moses closes the flood gates and all the Egyptians are drowned. Not a pretty story, but certainly a triumph for the Jews. They celebrated with poetry, included in your bulletin as the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam, his sister. We didn't read it, but you might glance over it, to see the note of triumph. God is credited with throwing the horses and riders into the sea. The story goes on – in DeMille's movie, there's quite a bit of time devoted to the lascivious Jews making a Golden Calf while Moses is up on the mountain receiving the Law. Moses went to see God and receive the Ten Commandments (which, was the name of the movie, after all, but probably everyone thinks it was really called The Parting of the Red Sea!)

I would like to consider this story and what it means. If we dwell on HOW God (or DeMille) did this mighty water act, we will miss the point. What matters is not HOW, but WHY.

God wanted to liberate God's people. God had heard their laments in slavery, and God chose Moses as messenger to confront the Pharaoh. God's mighty acts – all the plagues, the dividing of the Red Sea, and the Giving of the Ten Commandments, are all gifts to the Jews. And notice the order of events: God responds in mercy to the Jews' laments, God liberates them from their misery, and then (and only then) does God give them the Law. Liberation first, the rules come later. God liberates God's people because God loves them, and God also gives them the Law because God loves them, so that they will have guidance for the rest of their lives. Never does God say, Obey these rules and then I will liberate you. No. Liberation first, as a gift.

So that is the WHY: God loves them, and us.

We Christians love this story, and we have taken it over, for our own purposes. Recall our liturgy of baptism. This is a water service, which names the parting of the Red Sea right at the beginning of the prayer of blessing of the baptismal water. You can't miss the reference.

Water matters to us. Baptism, of course. Also the water added to the wine for the Eucharist – echoing the water and blood that flowed from Jesus' side at his crucifixion. The water of tears – tears of joy, tears of contrition, tears of pain, emotional response to our meetings with God and each other. Water for cleansing – from sin, from grime, water for purity, water for joining us all together in community.

That is the SO WHAT. Water has come to have a central place in our liturgical observance, a gift from God. God loves us, no exceptions.

Amen!