

So, I have a hard job this morning, and I hope that you can help me. My job is to convince you that this story – the story of the Exodus of the Hebrew children and their deliverance at the Red Sea – is your story. None of us have been slaves in Egypt as far as I know. None of us have made bricks for Pharaoh, felt the sting of lashes, or stood over flesh pots to cook supper. This story is over 3,000 years old. But somehow I'm supposed to tell it like it's your story, our story. How on earth am I going to do that?

Well, we could start by talking about all the times we've been up against it, every time we were backed into a corner, but God opened a door, knocked down a wall, provided escape when it was clear there was no way out. When Malala told her story it was a lot like the sea being on one side and the enemy on the other. You may remember this Pakistani teenager who stood up to demand her education. She believed that girls had the right to learn as much as boys. But tradition was on one side, and the Taliban on the other. Malala was shot as she was traveling home after taking an exam. She should have died, but somehow she was saved on the operating table, and she got out of there. Today she continues to advocate for the education of girls everywhere. Deliverance! God made a way when Malala was at a dead end.

I have a friend who was up against it. All of his crimes were catching up with him, and there was nowhere to go. That

was several years ago. I'm glad to report he survived the divorce. He found the help he needed. He's even started a new career that fulfills him in ways his previous career did not. My friend made it! I didn't know if he could, but God made a path through the high waters. He did not drown.

Those stories are hopeful, and no doubt many of us could tell our stories of against-the-odds deliverance. But this morning we're not looking for stories that parallel the story of the Red Sea parting. We're not trying to find connections between that story and our story. We're claiming that story as our own. This is us in spite of all the distance and difference between then and now. I know this is hard to swallow, but it seems to be the way scripture works. We are brought in so that this story becomes ours.

From time to time, the local paper will post an article on new citizens who are taking their naturalization vows. I'm not sure how anyone could be unmoved by these stories. People from all over the world, all colors, ages and sizes, who have gone through the process gather at NPAC to declare their loyalty to the constitution and express their desires to be citizens. Some have been working for that moment for decades, others for a few years, but the length of preparation doesn't matter. To see their faces as they pledge allegiance and take their vows stirs the heart. And from then on, they are us. They become part of the story called

'America.' Our lives are no longer running parallel to theirs. They become one with us as United States citizens.

Well, baptism was your naturalization process. I know it sounds peculiar to talk this way, and I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't believe it. But whether you were a baby, full grown or somewhere in between, when you were baptized, your life linked up with God's special people, the rag-tag Hebrews, later known as the rag-tag church. When you stood up and said your church vows, all other associations became relative. Naturally, you are still Johnsons or Joneses. Yes, you're still a Tennessean. You're also still a member of this country. But mostly and primarily, we are the liberated people of God, who know for a fact what it means to be alive only by God's grace. This is our story out by the Sea. We've been baptized into it. We wouldn't exist without this God who stretched out his hand to save us.

Of course, there are a lot of stories out there that we could be a part of. Hitler had a story, all about a master race that is white, blue-eyed, superior and justified in its violence. That story was a lie. There was no room in his story for the Hebrew children. So, he tried to get rid of them, but they have endured in spite of him. Unfortunately, Hitler's story has endured, too, in small pockets across Europe and North America.

As we already said, America has a story. But I'm afraid we're fighting over who gets to tell it. Will it be the blue version or the red version? And dear neighbors, how much is lost as we bear tooth and claw. What a shame. Friendships ruined. Families rent asunder. Churches de-spirited. Whole communities have become enclaves of group think: prideful, defiant, unrepentant, self-protecting. What a shame.

Pharaoh had a story, and it was hard to argue with him because he had the gold and the chariots to back it up. He was a god more or less. He could do as he pleased. Who was going to resist? If you think his story is dead, follow the gold and the chariots, the money and the weapons. Look for crowns and princes not too far from Egypt.

Then, there's our story. If we're brave enough to claim the Red Sea deliverance as our own, it will free us from all sorts of foolish belief that we can save ourselves. Who were we up against the grinding wheels of Pharaoh's chariots? Clearly, we needed God for salvation. If we're brave enough not only to claim this story but also to tell it, it will be powerful testimony to those still in bondage and to those who bind them. Our story posits a power let loose on earth that is greater than oppression, saving power against all the odds. I can understand how we could feel light years away from oppression. I mean we live in the land of Target

and the NFL. Why would we ever identify with the desperate?

Well, certainly not to nurture overblown feelings of being hurt and mistreated. I'm not proposing that we take on a martyr complex.

How about we let the Hebrews adopt us, how about we believe we're them so we'll have what they discovered: strength when we're weak and confidence that whatever is squeezing us will not crush us?

I'm talking big now, I know. But I believe our story is true. I believe it only became truer when Jesus came along to fulfill it. Originally, he didn't fare as well as our Hebrew brothers and sisters. He had no pillar of cloud to protect him during the day, nor a pillar of fire to guard the night. Eventually, the enemy did catch up with him, and what they did to him on a cross was cruel. Our Lord, on first try, did not make it through the sea. He drowned in his own fluids. But the death of Jesus only gave God another chance to show out. God parting of seas was something. But how about the resurrection of the dead? That was the last enemy to be destroyed, death. Jesus, dead no longer, is alive forevermore, running the show in our favor. And now, whether we live or whether we die, whether we're up against the sea or grave, we have hope. This is our story. This is our song.

I don't know if I've been successful this morning or not. It's such a long shot for modern people like us to allow the ancient

story of scripture to adopt us. Such a long shot that Presbyterian folk have usually called it a miracle. It actually takes an act of God for us to believe. But hey, the Spirit has been poured out everywhere, and is wooing everyone toward the gospel. So, you never know.

There will be signs if we come to believe that Exodus 14 is us. We'll live differently in the world. If we carry this story with us, we won't be the same.

We'll have the strength to wait, just as we did when the horses and chariots were breathing down our necks. God said, "Wait. Be still. Don't run away. Don't rush to arms. I'll take up your cause. Be still in the swirl." And I can't think of anything that would be more refreshing on the face of the earth right now than a community of believers who are still, who aren't rushing to defend themselves or prove their point against all accusers, who refuse to get caught up in the whirlwind that goes nowhere, who instead, trust that it can be a holy thing to be quiet, who stand close together and wait to see where God will lead on the other side of the current mayhem.

There will be signs when we've accepted the Hebrew story as our story. Look for an end of middle class pity among us. Instead of feeling sorry for the poor and oppressed, the homeless and desperate, we'll see ourselves in them. That is us who is

wandering around in the desert without a homeland. That is us who is hemmed in by rent on one side and a broken down car on the other. That is us who is at the mercy of large, uncaring, slave making forces. That is us whose body is used and abused for the profit of another. When people come into the office for help, I feel the distance between their circumstances and mine. That's why I need to be adopted by the Hebrews. Then I know the people I'm helping are my brothers and sisters. They don't need my condescending pity. They need my understanding love.

There will one more sign: the fear of the Lord. A return to everyday awe and reverence toward the Almighty. Our relative prosperity has numbed us. Our technology has distracted us. Who needs God anymore? Who believes that if it weren't for God's deliverance, we'd all be washed up on the seashore? I've never been a part of a church that taught one false step equaled doom. I'm glad we don't live under the constant threat of an angry, punishing God. But there is a proper fear of God. When we let this story be ours, we take nothing for granted. We acknowledge our total dependence on God. We fall to the ground in worship, and tremble before our salvation.

Waiting before the Lord in trust, loving instead of pity, the fear of the Lord. These are the signs of those baptized into Red Sea story. Let this be us.