

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster

Faith and Fear: Storm Surge

In nomine...

Sometimes the events of the Bible feel very remote to me. I have never been to Egypt. I have never seen God in a pillar of cloud. I have never seen the waters split and people walk across on dry land.

Except this week I did. Have you been watching the news about these hurricanes, Harvey and Irma? Those were some amazing storms and they did some amazing things. Hurricanes generate lots of wind moving in a particular spiral pattern. That wind pushes massive amounts of water around. I saw photos of a couple manatees stranded in the mud in Sarasota, Florida, because the water and been pushed away from the shallows in which they had been swimming. I saw a photo from Long Island in the Bahamas, with the water all pushed far out to sea, out of sight from the normal shoreline. All you could see was dry sand. I watched a video of people and their dogs playing in Tampa Bay. Not in the city. In Tampa Bay. There was no water there: it was all mud flats. Tampa Bay had become Tampa Meadow. This phenomenon is called storm surge: the water gets pushed around and piled up someplace, only to return once the hurricane has moved on. Officials in Tampa Bay were urging people to get out of the Bay: that water was on its way back and would re-fill the Bay quickly and violently!

Listen:

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. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.¹

¹ The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. (1989). (Ex 14:21–22). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

*At dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The 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. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.*²

I grew up reading this story. This is the central story of the Hebrew Bible. Of all the great things God did, of all the times and ways that God expressed God's love for God's people, *this* is the story Israel held on to as emblematic of who they are and who God is. This is the story they refer to throughout Scripture, a defining moment in their self-understanding. So this story is layered with lots of theological and emotional content.

But what do you think was the experience of the Israelites in the moment?

As we look back through the chapters immediately preceding today's reading, we can see what the Israelites were experiencing. They had stayed up all night packing and preparing to flee from a racist regime that was bent on genocide and ethnic cleansing. Their doors were all marked with blood. The people fled their homes, the only homes they had known for many generations: they were refugees. They found themselves in the desert without resources or destination or even a clear path forward.

Then things got worse. Egypt sent out a professional army in hot pursuit. A tornado sprang up and pinned everyone to the ground. Then came the hurricane: winds blowing all night, upsetting children and livestock, carrying away anything in the people's bundles that wasn't securely fastened. The storm surge piled up the waters and the people ran across that dangerous plain, with the waters poised to return at any moment and Egyptian chariots rumbling behind them.

Can you imagine the terror of this dark night in Israel's life? The hand of God wasn't looking too friendly at this point.

Have you ever had an encounter with the extremities of life like this? I look around I know most of you have. As we look inside and consider our own experiences, the joys and tragedies of each of our lives, we too have had these low times, when evil seemed especially present and we

² Ibid. (Ex 14:27-29).

felt helpless, tossed about, buffeted by a world that was utterly beyond our control. What do we do with experiences like that?

There are two basic responses to evil in the world, to trauma in our lives. One of those responses is based on fear.

Earlier in the same chapter from which we read today in the book of Exodus, we find this:

In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. They 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?”³

As we encounter trauma, and all change is traumatic, one of the most natural reactions for us is to look back to what came before, to the familiar. Maybe it was a painful familiar, but it least it was *my* painful familiar. A bottle, and abusive spouse, a job that is killing our body or poisoning our spirit. We fear the unknown and cling to the familiar.

And then, on top of these things come the storms and hurricanes of life, threatening what little equilibrium we had and tossing our lives about into disarray. Maybe we’re talking about illness or financial upheaval, changes in family dynamics, disappointing election results, or, like residents of the gulf coast in recent weeks, actual storms.

We can respond to all these storms of life with resigned cynicism, wallowing in hopelessness. We can ask, with the Israelites, *Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?* Were things not bad enough before? Or we might respond with magical thinking, waiting for things to change and go my way so that I can finally be happy. These are common responses to tragedy. And they both give the final word to whatever circumstances happen to be at play in my life. These are both the response of fear.

But as we worship and bring our concerns before God in prayer, like we’re doing this morning, there is opened to us a second way to encounter trauma. That is the avenue of faith.

Faith opens us up to a new understanding of the world. Faith does not ignore evil. Faith recognizes evil in the world: sin, tragedy, calamity, and natural disasters. But *faith* is the

³ The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. (1989). (Ex 14:10–11). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

capacity to remember that, even in the midst of the hurricane, there is a bigger truth, a bigger story.

Faith is to remember that while evil can touch us, evil cannot break the image of God that each of us bears inside.

Faith is not about wallowing in loss, or waiting for things to go my way, but about seeing what God is doing here and now – and how we *are being transformed* by it.

Faith gives us courage to build new relationships, even as we mourn the loss or change of old ones. Faith gives us openness to new ways of being in the world when shame and failure bring to light the inadequacies of how we've lived before. Faith gives us the humility to let God be even more mighty than we thought.

Faith does not ask, Who are the winners and who are the losers? Faith does not ask, How I can come out on top? Instead, faith asks the bigger question, What is God doing in this time? Faith keeps us in touch with a bigger perspective and keeps an eye open for God's marvelous activity even in the midst of tragedy.

There is evil and loss and change in the world. Those things are always with us. But God is bigger than these things, God is constantly turning them around, finding avenues of redemption, and making the world a better place today than it was yesterday.

This is what the Israelites did at the Red Sea: they spent one night running in helpless desperation. But they have spent the next 3000 years reflecting on how God was, after all, present during their time of fear and doing God's redemptive work even in the winds of the hurricane.

As we worship together week by week, we are practicing the art of noticing, acknowledging, and participating in that redemptive work of God. We are facing the hurricanes in our own lives and learning to say, "God is at work even in this." We are crossing dry sea-beds at midnight in desperation, going where no sane person has any business placing her feet. We are learning to trust that God is at work in our lives, even and especially in the midst of trauma and tragedy. Living by faith, not fear, is what it means to live in the Kingdom of God.

Sermon Questions:

1. When you encounter difficulty in your life, what is your typical fear response?
2. When you encounter difficulty in your life, what is your typical faith response?
3. Which of these responses leads to better outcomes for you?