

RESCUE AT SEA

PENTECOST 19

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Today, we Christians pay more attention to Genesis than to Exodus.

A partial explanation for this situation can be found in the intense focus often paid to the question of creation, which has fed a “culture war” between those who believe God created the world, and those who don’t.

Another contributing factor is the familiarity of the stories and personalities of Genesis, which we learned from our Sunday School days.

Without a doubt, Genesis is an important book, providing a foundation for much that follows.

For the ancient Hebrews, Genesis serves as the preface to the Book of Exodus, which describes how Israel escaped its captivity in Egypt, received the law that defined it as a nation, and built a mobile but central worship site — the Tabernacle — which will prefigure the Temple.

If the Book of Genesis is a book of “beginnings,” as its first words suggest, the Book of Exodus, as its name implies, is “a way out” for the Israelites from Egypt’s bondage.

Before the Book of Exodus begins to narrate an exodus, it first reminds the reader of an *eisodus*, or “a way into” Egypt by the family of Israel’s last patriarch, Jacob.

In a nutshell, the Book of Exodus is about how Israel’s God transforms an *eisodus* into an *exodus*, about how the LORD GOD, YAHWEH, changes a “going down” into a “coming up.”

WHY the Lord brings His people out of Egypt is more important than HOW God delivers Israel from Egypt.

He does it to save them from their oppression and slavery, and to fulfill the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of which Genesis speaks.

While the Book of Genesis contains a series of memorable figures, such as Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the Book of Exodus contains the greatest leader and prophet in Israel's history — Moses.

Our Narrative Lectionary readings for the next two Sundays from the Book of Exodus feature two of the important events involving Moses: the deliverance at the Red Sea, or Sea of Reeds, and the reception of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

When God acts to pave the way for Abraham's enslaved descendants to become a great nation, He chooses Moses to be the human partner in His redemptive plan.

Who was this Moses, and what made him a suitable agent for God's next steps in bringing the Israelites "a way out" of Egypt?

Some centuries have passed as the Book of Exodus begins with the word, "and," as it lists the names of the ancestors that first came to Egypt.

The first fourteen verses describe how Israel had grown so much in population, that they posed a threat to Egypt, compelling Pharaoh to command the enslavement of Israel, and the killing of their male infants.

Biblical commentators over the centuries have been taken by the lack of mention of God when the Book of Exodus opens.

When God is first mentioned, it is by the faithful Hebrew midwives, who feared God more than Pharaoh, and acted courageously to save many infant sons from being murdered.

One who was saved becomes the major figure of the Torah, the Hebrew Bible's first section — Moses.

Not only does Moses survive, but he does so in a waterproofed basket whose name in Hebrew is *teba*, also the word for an 'ark.'

The appearance of this word occurs only in two places — the ark of Noah, and the ark of the bulrushes.

One is a three-story floating zoo, and the other, a seaworthy bassinet.

The appearance of the word 'ark' ties together the lives of Noah and Moses.

These two individuals, called by God, are saved from certain death by drowning by finding refuge and salvation inside an ark.

Not only does Moses survive, but he is rescued by a daughter of Pharaoh, and he is raised in the royal household, with his natural mother serving as his wet nurse.

Upon reaching manhood, Moses kills an Egyptian overseer who was brutalizing an Israelite slave.

He is forced to flee for his life, and settles among the Midianites in the wilderness.

While Moses is living his new life as a Midianite shepherd and husband, the text tells us:

“God heard the Israelites’ moaning and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (2:24).

Rather than coming to Israel in Egypt directly, God encounters Moses in the wilderness at Mount Sinai.

There, God makes His presence known to His future human deliverer of Israel, before making it known to His people in Egypt.

God reveals Himself in the form of a bush that burns, but is not consumed. As we will observe as we move on in the story next week, God is present in the forms of fire and smoke.

Fire compels attention, but it also shrouds with smoke what stands behind it.

At this critical moment, God sends Moses as His messenger, first to Israel in Egypt, and second, to their oppressor, Pharaoh.

God wants Moses to bring Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, where God will reveal His presence and renew the covenant He made with Abraham.

This morning, we enter the narrative of God’s deliverance of Israel, as they stand trapped and paralyzed with fear as Pharaoh’s army of chariots thunders toward them.

However, the Hebrews are now changed people.

They were no longer idol-worshipping slaves, who cried out in anguish to no god in particular.

They were now free people, who were beginning to know their God, as they painted their doorposts with lamb’s blood and waited for God’s chosen moment to act and to take them out of Egypt.

Then, with Pharaoh’s army behind them and the Reed Sea before them, the Hebrews listened to their leader, Moses, and trusted God to deliver them.

At God's command, Moses stretched out his arm.
A great wind blew through the night, dividing the sea, so that all of the
Hebrews crossed through it on dry land.
But the Egyptians were still in hot pursuit.
At daybreak, God told Moses to stretch out his arm again, and the
Hebrews watched as the waters flowed back into place, trapping
their pursuers.

What a stunning turn of events!
Who could have imagined it?
But what God had accomplished in the Hebrews' hearts and minds was
no less dramatic and powerful than God's redeeming acts in the
crossing of the sea, and the Hebrews knew it.
Standing safely on the far side of the sea, they rejoiced.
In Eastern fashion, they danced and sang a praise-filled song about their
sovereign, all-powerful, one-and-only God, who had watched over
them and redeemed them from Egypt.
That day by the sea, the Hebrews — God's "firstborn son," Israel —
made a faith commitment to the sovereign God who saved them.

As the Israelites danced and sang praises to their God, they had no idea
what a great journey they had just begun.
From that point on, their lives and their culture would never be the same.
Their commitment to God's Lordship required them to participate
obediently in God's ongoing redemptive story.
God had called them to bring *shalom* to the chaos of a sinful world, to
be like their God to other people, and to learn by His grace to obey
His will.

The Jewish sages consider that day, when the Israelites danced on the
shore of the Reed Sea and sang "***The Lord will reign forever and
ever***, to be the day the kingdom of heaven was born.
Although the expression, 'kingdom of heaven,' is not found in the Hebrew
scriptures, a kingdom exists whenever a king reigns.
So, as the Hebrews sang their commitment to the God who had delivered
them, there was no uncertainty that God was their reigning King.
By New Testament times, the idea of the 'kingdom of heaven' was widely

understood and taught in the Jewish world.

As we begin a Bible study on the Gospel according to Matthew, ‘the kingdom of heaven’ was the main theme of Jesus’ teaching, and it was the message He assigned His disciples to pass on after His ascension.

Beloved people of God,

the good news of God’s kingdom proclaimed by Jesus was rooted in and shaped by the exodus experience.

If we stand with the Israelites and seek to understand and celebrate their deliverance as they experienced it, we will appreciate more fully the grace-filled message and work of Jesus.

We will also be more responsive to the challenges, responsibilities, and privileges of being disciples of Jesus, who are eager participants in God’s amazing story and are committed to obey God’s will.

AMEN