

Dancing in the Wilderness

Scriptures texts: Various verses from Exodus 14 and 15 that tell the story of God delivering the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. The final texts read were **Exodus**

15:20-21: *“Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider thrown into the sea.’”*

Imagine this scene with me. Over a million people—hot, exhausted, terrified, carrying all their belongings and their babies—everything they owned. Smelling like they haven’t had a bath in a long time, because they hadn’t. Low on food. On the run. They were being chased by a well-trained army, well fed, powerful men covered in armor riding on chariots.

They were trying to find their way to freedom and they got cornered. They wanted to go farther but they ran into a big body of water—the Red Sea. If they went forward, they would drown. They couldn’t go back because the chariots and the swords were awaiting them. They were stuck.

And what made matters worse was that God seemed to lead them to this point. God was the one who softened Pharaoh’s heart. God was the one who sent all the plagues on Egypt—the lice, the frogs, the water turned to blood, the death of all the firstborn of Egypt—to help set them free. God seemed to set them free—for what? To get killed in the desert?

Now, we are not Israelites in the wilderness by the Red Sea with chariots on the way to kill us. We are not Israelite slaves who bear scars from the task master on our back or the memory of being raped by the overseer in our hearts—though some of our relatives know that brutality.

But we are people who have tasted the wilderness in our lives. To be an adult in this life means that, at some point, we've most likely been in a wilderness of hopelessness or on the brink of despair. You had the money to pay for that medical bill, but your car broke down and you had to fix it so you could go to work. Now the bill collector is on your doorstep. You worked hard for your company for many years and then, without notice, you are asked—no, you are told—to leave. And at your age how do you find a new job to help make it through to retirement? You raised your children to do the right thing, to pray, to treat their elders—and especially law enforcement—with respect. For the most part, you modeled right living. But your son is in jail and your heart is in despair.

Someone you love has died too early, or someone you love struggled with an illness that has taken them from you. And the grief is more than you can bear. We work hard for justice in this world so that people have what they need, just to find ourselves stuck in political mire and in a time when many of the things we have fought so hard for seem to be just wiped away with the stroke of a pen.

Caught Between Pharaoh and the Red Sea

Oh God, we are cornered and don't know the way out! Yes, we know that feeling, my friends, don't we? We know what it is like to be caught between the Red Sea and Pharaoh—to be stuck and to wonder why God would lead us to such a place at such a time. Or to even wonder if God is around at all or even cares.

Yes, you know. We know. I know.

And so we understand when the people cry to God! And Moses, as their mouthpiece, understands and cries to God. And God says, "Tell the people, do not be afraid! I will fight for them; and they have only to keep still!"

Gee, that is easy for God and Moses to say. There are a bunch of chariots with swords up on the mountain being held back by a pillar of fire. In a flash, they could be down here killing us and our children. You want us to be still, God? Do nothing! God will fight for us? Really!?

It reminds me of those times when we are sharing our deepest fears or pain with someone and they say something like, “Just have faith, God will turn this to good!”

Yeah, right!

But then, God did what God always seems to do—God made a way where there was no way. God showed God’s glory and did the impossible. God parted the waters of the Red Sea and made the land dry enough for the people to cross. It must have been exhilarating and terrifying to cross the sea with big walls of water on either side. It is often exhilarating and terrifying to follow God, isn’t it?

Alleluia! God did it again. God made a way when there was no way!

And we can look back over our lives as individuals and as a congregation and see how God has made a way when we thought there was no way in our lives. The death of that loved one still leaves a hole in our lives, but we have moved forward in ways we couldn’t have imagined. Our child, who we thought was lost, is finding their way. Our finances are still not flourishing, but we surely have not starved!

Yet, truth be told, there are some times when we are still caught between Pharaoh and the Red Sea—year after year. Generations of poverty, mass incarceration, that addiction that will not let us or our loved one go, injustices in education in this country. Oh, the list goes on. And we as God’s people are called to be those who help God part the Red Sea so all may walk through. That’s our call and our mission. We could spend the rest of the sermon talking about that, but we will go onto the next part of the story.

Miriam Dances!

The people of Israel do make it to the other side and watch the destruction of the Egyptian chariot riders. Then, in my opinion, comes one of the best parts.

The center of action shifts to Miriam, who is Aaron's sister, which means she is Moses's sister, too. Notably, Miriam is identified as a prophet here. This Miriam, the prophet, grabs a tambourine and starts to dance. To celebrate. To mark this miracle of God with celebration. To mark this time by letting joy burst forth from her being!

God has done an incredible thing—freed them from the hands of the Egyptians. God has parted the Red Sea!

But, my friends, what we fail to remember is that this was only the beginning: They were still in the wilderness and they still had a very long way to go.

This is like getting a Hail Mary touchdown in the first quarter of a big game. Yes, it is great, and that throw may be shown on replays for years to come. Just like the Red Sea parting has been replayed for millennia—it is one of the replay hits of the Bible.

But the game is far from over. In fact, in the next few verses of Exodus 15 we will learn that they find themselves in the wilderness for three days without water! Yes, stand up and cheer. Rejoice for the moment. But pull out a tambourine and do a dance that lasts an entire chapter? A little premature maybe? A little over the top? Shouldn't this kind of celebration wait until the END of the game, to the time when they cross over into the Promised Land?

God had done a great thing, but why take time to dance when there is still so much work to be

done to get through the wilderness?

A Child's Foretaste of Victory

A number of years ago, when I was a school counselor, I had a student who really struggled with focusing on tests. He was able to take the MEAP test in my office due to some special accommodations made in his education plan. He was so easily distracted, and we had permission to let him be alone in this quiet space to work.

Even with the quiet, it was tough for him, and he strained his little face, took deep breaths and worked so hard for the first 20 minutes—which really was a miracle for this little guy. He still had over an hour to go. He stood up and asked if he could pull out a snack. His mom had given him his favorite kind of granola bar to eat after the MEAP was over to celebrate. He pulled out the granola bar and started eating it. I congratulated him on getting the first part done but reminded him that he had an hour to go and may want to wait to eat his treat till after he was done.

He said, “No, Mrs. Hartzell, I’m proud of myself and am eating it now so I can taste what it feels like to get it done!” Yes, he really said that. So often children have much to teach us, don’t they?

And you know what? I think that celebration did fuel him for the rest of the journey. His ability to mark his achievement, celebrate his progress fueled him for the road ahead. He hunkered down and finished the test. He needed a little redirection from time to time from me, but he did it. I do think the celebration helped him make it through. He and I celebrated by splitting a big juicy orange when it was all said and one.

Celebration. Dancing.

In our keep-our-nose-to-the-grindstone culture, we don't always know how to celebrate. We might know how to celebrate at the end of something—but surely not in the middle of something. Now, we maybe know how to “veg” after a long day. We know how to put our head on our pillows at night and ponder what we will do tomorrow. We know how to check things off our “to do” list without stopping to ponder how cool it is to even get ONE thing done in a day, especially if we are a young mother. But stopping to really celebrate what God has done for us? Stopping to weave celebration and dancing into our busy lives? Do we know how to do this?

The Lesson from a Bus Trip

Many years ago, my son Nathaniel and I were able to visit my friends, Rev. Dr. Robert Wierenga and his wife, Helen, my lifelong friend, in their home in Caracas, Venezuela. Pastor Bob and Helen served as missionaries in Caracas for the Presbyterian Church USA for about 10 years. Helen, their youngest son, Jeremy, who was 3 at the time, and Nathaniel, who was about 15 months old, and I were able to book a bus trip from Caracas, the capital city, to a place in the Andes Mountains called Merida with a bunch of other Presbyterians. It was a wonderful opportunity. We piled into a bus and started the two-day long journey from Caracas to Merida.

In the middle of the trip, in the middle of the country, in a place where another car or vehicle might not come for hours, at a time when there were no cell phones—the bus broke down. There I was in the middle of Venezuela with a 15-month-old child. I spoke no Spanish and, except for Helen, the people around me spoke very little English. I panicked. What was going on? How would I get my baby to a safe place?

Well, in the middle of my panic, the Venezuelans pulled out some coolers and started drinking beer and wine, put on a boom box and started dancing in the middle of the highway.

The bus breaks down, what else should you do but have a party, right? Celebrate life! Celebrate that we made it this far. Celebrate each other and the gift of this time.

It blew my mind. PARTY at a time like this? Really? I was willing to party when the journey was over, but not then! I was willing to celebrate when I knew my child and I would be safe. But then? In the middle of nowhere?

I think our sister, Miriam, and those Venezuelans have a lot in common. They know how to celebrate the life along the way. Miriam, of course, was rejoicing with her sisters after a HUGE miracle—but the wilderness lay ahead of them. The unknown lay ahead of them. The text tells us that only the women danced. I wonder if the men were trying to figure out the next steps of the journey.

As you know, we have received a sabbatical grant from the Lilly Foundation, and I will be taking time this summer for renewal and prayer and rest and play. There have been moments when I have wondered if this is a crazy time to do this. We are in the middle of a lot of things right now. We are in the middle of a capital campaign. We have just applied for a grant so that the Overflow Church can join us in doing our summer youth leadership program and will be sending at least 14 youth to camp this summer. Summer is a time when people are out in our neighborhood, and there are many people to meet and much work to be done.

But, if I am wise—and I hope you will pray for me that I will be wise. If I am wise, I will celebrate. Celebrate all God has done among us. Celebrate that we are God's children and are loved beyond measure. Celebrate that I get the chance to pastor such a cool group of God's people. Take some time and grab my tambourine and dance and give thanks to God for all God has done. Even though our work is far from done.

And we are ALL invited to celebrate, too. To DANCE. I'm not going to take time to go over the letters for the acronym DANCE that I shared in my first sermon this Lent. But you have the

handout. I invite you all to DANCE a little each day this Lent.

As I look out over our congregation, I know that there are some of you who are caught between Pharaoh and the Red Sea right now in your lives. We are grieving the untimely loss of David Brady and Gary Harmon. We are in the middle of a building campaign that has been both miraculously successful and also feels stalled at the moment. Politically, there is much upheaval

and chaos and fear in our culture, and it seems to many people that we are losing the progress we have made.

And in our beloved community, our schools are showing progress, but we are also at a “make it or break it” season. As always, in our beloved Benton Harbor, there is so often a feeling that we have come such a long way, but also that there is a long way to go!

Let's Celebrate Amid Our Trials

Amid it all, let's pull out our tambourines. Yes, let's keep working hard and pushing forward, but let's also take some time and dance a little—or a lot! One of Ted's fraternity brothers at the University of Michigan is Jewish. He sums up Jewish history with the words from a funny song you can find on YouTube: “They tried to kill us. We survived. LET'S EAT!”

We only need to live a little to know that life will put trials in our path this coming week. But our invitation here is to learn to celebrate amid the trials and uncertainties of life. This doesn't mean we don't face trials—we must. But it does mean that we learn to give thanks and dance a little amid them. This dancing, this feasting—like my friend who ate his granola bar early—can give us a foretaste of the feast to come. That, actually, is what the Lord's Supper is meant to be too, my brothers and sisters.

Our song of response is not about dancing, but about singing. History tells us that it was written

by a Baptist pastor back in the 1860s. We can use dancing and singing interchangeably here. It is a song that invites us to dance—to sing, like Miriam and those Venezuelans—no matter what life is throwing our way.

Listen to the words:

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation

I hear the clear, though far off hymn that hails a new creation

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging

Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

Let's sing this together! Amen!