

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany; February 5, 2023
Exodus 14:13-22
“Stand Firm, and See the Salvation from the LORD”

Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm, and see the salvation from the LORD, which he will perform for you today. For the Egyptians you see today, you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you. You must wait quietly.”

The LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to set out. As for you, lift up your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide the sea so that the Israelites can go through the middle of the sea on dry ground. I myself will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go into the sea after them, and I will gain glory through Pharaoh and his entire army, through his chariots and charioteers. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his charioteers.

Then the Angel of God, who was going in front of the Israelite forces, moved and went behind them. The pillar of cloud moved in front of them and stood beside them. It went between the Egyptian forces and the Israelites forces. The cloud was dark on one side, but it lit up the night on the other. Neither group approached the other all night long.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all night long the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned the sea into dry land. The waters were divided. The Israelites went into the middle of the sea on dry ground. The waters were like a wall for them on their right and on their left.

He read all the statistics before he even tried it. 85% of small businesses don't last three years. Most successful business people fail three or four times before they get it right. He knew the odds were against him when he opened this shop. But that doesn't change the fact that he sunk his life savings into it, and now it's gone. And it didn't make it any easier to let his help go. He knows God will take care of him still. But this is hard.

She has tried everything she can with this boy. She always took him to Sunday School. She read him Bible stories and prayed with him when he was little. She saw him get confirmed, so he must have learned something. But now he won't let her talk to him at all anymore. And he only speaks hateful words and slams doors. She has faith in God. But this is hard.

He never had an easy time making friends. The precious few he has he cherishes. But they don't see the world the way he does anymore. And slowly the invitations have dried up, the texts have stopped coming. He spends more and more time along as his friendships fade away. He knows God is with him. But this is hard.

The night before he dies on the cross, Jesus says to his disciples, **“In this world you are going to have trouble.”** And part of us may want to reply, “Well, no kidding!” So, what's your trouble? Whatever your trouble is, you may agree that it's not quite as serious as the trouble the Israelites are in:

According to the appropriately named Old Testament book of Numbers, among the Israelites who escaped from Egypt there are over 600,000 adult males. So it is very likely that the grand total of Israelites exiting Egypt is well over 2,000,000. And all two million of them are in serious trouble. Moses writes: **The**

Israelites were going out defiantly. The Egyptians pursued them. All the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his charioteers, and his army caught up with them where they were camping by the sea...

Now the Lord's people are pinned between a rock a hard place, more specifically they are pinned between the most powerful army in the Ancient Near East and the sea. Their choices are: stand and be butchered or drown themselves.

We have trouble. Jesus said we would. We may never face the trouble of impending death by slaughter or drowning, but that doesn't mean our troubles are trivial, either. Try telling someone closing his business, struggling with a stubborn child, or suffering from loneliness that it's not so bad! "Hey, at least you're not getting run down by an Egyptian chariot! It could be worse!" Of course it could be worse. But that doesn't mean our troubles aren't that bad.

Because, in the middle of them, we feel pinned too. We don't know where to go or what to do next, and that there may be no path forward, at least that we can see. And what we do then is quite predictable. Do you know what the Israelites did when their trouble trapped them? **As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians marching after them. The Israelites were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Wasn't this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone. Let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."**

The Israelites are complaining. But it's easy to tell that their complaints are driven by fear. Moses uses the word "terror." Troubles come and pin the Lord's people down, and they complain. But it's not just complaining for the sake of complaining. We complain because the troubles bring fear into our hearts and minds.

Moses' first message to the Israelites in trouble is not to quit complaining. He knows the underlying problem is fear. **Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm, and see the salvation from the LORD, which he will perform for you today. For the Egyptians you see today, you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you. You must wait quietly."**

Even as the millions of Israelites with their backs to the sea face charging chariots, their salvation is certain. All they have to do was not be afraid, to close their mouths, stiffen their legs, and watch the Lord save. They can be quiet, without complaining. They can be strong, without fear. Because the Lord's salvation is certain.

The Lord has to save them because he is faithful to his promises. And he has made them a promise. He promised them that the beautiful, abundant land currently known as Canaan will one day be theirs. In order for the land of Cana to be theirs, the Lord must save them from this trouble. Moses's message is: Be quiet. Be strong. The Lord will fight and save you.

It is strikingly similar to the message Jesus delivered to his disciples in the raging storm. And it is strikingly similar to the rest of Jesus' message the night before he died on the cross. He did tell his disciples, **"In this world you are going to have trouble."** But that's not all he said. On both ends of those words, Jesus said, "Don't be afraid. Be strong. Be courageous. The Lord will save you." Here's exactly how he said it: **"I have told you these things so that you may have peace in me. In this world you are going to have trouble. But be courageous! I have overcome the world."**

We know the Lord will fight for us and save us from all trouble. We can stand quiet and uncomplaining, strong and courageous, because God has also made us a promise. As he promised the Israelites the land of Canaan was theirs, he has promised us the kingdom of heaven. It is our promised land.

And God is faithful; he keeps his promises always. He kept them to Israel. It took forty-two years with lots of troubles along the way, but the Israelites did finally arrive in their Promised Land. And then for fifteen more centuries they carried the promised of the Messiah. Jesus came through that nation to bring us to deliver us to our own promised land.

Jesus came into our world full of trouble, a world where he promised we would have trouble, and, in his own words: **“I have overcome the world.”** Jesus came and overcame our sin with his holiness. The root cause of all the world’s trouble is our sin. We should not try to connect specific sins to specific troubles, as there is usually no specific connection. For example, a man’s business does not necessarily go under because he is lazy or wasteful. A mother’s struggles with her son are not necessarily the result of poor mothering. A young man’s lack of friends is not necessarily the result of his rudeness or thoughtlessness. We do not need to connect specific sins to specific troubles.

But we can say this much: the world was perfect – there was no trouble – until sin broke it and made the world the place about which Jesus says, **“You are going to have trouble.”** But Jesus came and lived free from sin. He restored perfection to us with his holy life. And the night after he promised trouble, Jesus went to the cross and overcame all the trouble of the world by taking all its sin away.

Like the Israelites standing at the Red Sea, the human race only stood and watched while the Lord fought and saved them from trouble. Now, like the Israelites, we only wait to reach our promised land. We wait quietly, without complaint. We wait courageously, knowing that the Lord will keep his Word and bring us to the land he has promised in his Son.

But even after the Lord saved them from Pharaoh’s army and the sea, the Israelites still had to wade through a lot of time and lot more trouble before they reached their Promised Land. So what about the troubles we still face as we wait to reach our promised land, where trouble is gone? Yes, Jesus has overcome the trouble of the world by overcoming sin. Yes, heaven – where there is no more trouble – is ours. But we are still here. So what about failed businesses and impossible children and loneliness, and all the others we face?

First, be quiet and still. Be strong, knowing that heaven is coming. Every trouble we still suffer while we wait for heaven makes us long for it even more, and to appreciate the saving work of our Savior more deeply. In this way even troubles bless.

Second, remember that when God tells us to be quiet, he is only telling us not complain. He is not telling us to be altogether silent. He welcomes us to call out to our Savior like the disciples in the middle of their storm. They did not call out to him in perfect faith; doubt was there in their call for help. But they did call to the ruler of wind and wave. Jesus, who undoes all trouble in the end, does have the power to save us from it. Remember to ask him. St. James says simply, **“You do not have because you do not ask.”** How many troubles do I suffer simply because I do not ask in faith for relief? Speak when troubles come – not to complain, but simply for relief.

When he sends it, praise him for it. If he makes you wait for relief, remember that it is coming no later than your arrival in your promised land, because Jesus has overcome the world’s sin and all its trouble.

But besides turning you to your Savior and the promised land he won for you, God has other purposes for trouble. One of them is seen clearly as the Israelites stood between an army and the sea. As they stood in trouble, the Lord said: **“I will gain glory through Pharaoh and his entire army, through his chariot and charioteers. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.”** After the story is over, after Pharaoh’s army has been drowned and the Israelites – all two million of them – have walked between walls of water all through the night and safely reached the other side, Moses adds this: **Israel saw the mighty hand which the LORD put into action against the Egyptians, and the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in Moses, his servant.**

God wants all people to be saved. The Israelites were leaving a nation that deified a river, a Pharaoh, and cattle. In the Ten Plagues that preceded their exodus from Egypt, the Lord made an attack on all those objects of worship, so that the Egyptians would turn away from them. Now he puts his own power on display again so they will know the true God, the Lord God of Israel.

But the Israelites themselves, the nation God chose to carry his saving promises, also see the Lord working for them. The Lord uses this trouble as a way to gain glory for himself, and faith in himself.

We can say in a general way that God has his reasons for the troubles that come to us on our way to our promised land, and we may not always understand what they are. And that is true. But we do know that every trouble that comes is a chance for glory to go God, when they are handled correctly. Think of it like this: people may not think much of praise to God coming from someone whose business is thriving, or whose family is happy, or who’s surrounded by friends. Their lives are going well. It’s not too much to speak highly of God at such times.

But even in the middle of trouble God’s people remember that the promised land is theirs, and praise him still. Even in the middle of trouble they stand courageous, remembering Jesus has overcome the world with his saving work, and give glory to God.

Of course it is good to give glory to God when life is smooth. But it’s the glory and praise of those pinned in trouble that rings loudest in heaven. And it echoes on earth, too, in both the ears of those who already trust God, and those who do not. The Egyptians learn that the Lord is God because he uses trouble to his glory. He still does.

In the middle of trouble he also strengthens faith. It is in trials that Jesus’ people hear their Savior say again, **“But be courageous! I have overcome the world”** and remember his work to undo sin and all the trouble it causes. And so in the middle of trouble, our hope for our promised land, free from trouble, grows stronger.

The Israelites only needed to stand strong, without complaint. Because the Lord had promised them Canaan, and was bound by his Word to bring them through fearsome armies and raging seas to their promised land. In this world we will have trouble. But be courageous. Stand firm in your faith that Jesus has overcome the world, and you will see salvation from the Lord. He has promised a land from free trouble to you. He is bound to bring you there, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.