

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year A

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Exodus 14:10-14, 21-29

Title: “A Way Out of No Way: Delivering”

The highlight of our vacation last month was spending an afternoon on a 28 foot O’Day. The boat belonged to a friend of a friend who lives on Lake George in New York. Jim, the boat owner, gave Lynn the wheel to begin with but after a short stint at the helm she turned it over to me, and I was in my glory for the two hours or so as the wind pushed us from one side of Lake George to the other and we tacked back and forth, zig zagging our way to the south end of the lake. The wind was so stiff I put both rails in the water on the respective tacks. It was beautiful! A real gift of God—and Jim!

Not everyone thinks sailing is a gift, however. My friend and colleague, Bob Harvey, told me he’ll never set foot in one again after he went out with Phil Rice, another UM pastor. Phil had a 23 foot O’Day on the Saginaw Bay when he served St. Luke’s in Essexville. You may remember this story because I’ve told it before, but one day Phil invited Neil Sheridan, then a retired UM pastor, and Bob to go sailing. So they’re out there--sails full of wind--when they notice dark clouds in the western sky, but Phil thought they had plenty of time to prepare so they kept sailing. They could reduce sail later, but before they knew it the storm was upon them and the winds were so fierce, Bob said, they put the mast in the water, the boat actually laid on its side and the main sail filled with water. Bob said he thought they were dead. Turns out that storm resulted in a tornado somewhere out in the thumb and thankfully my sailing friends somehow managed to survive their ordeal. But it ruined Bob for sailing. It was his first and last time for him.

I remember my friends’ story when I listen again to the story of the Israelites as they are freed by Pharaoh who later changes his mind. They are making their way to freedom after years of enslavement and oppression only to find their lives are threatened by water in front of them and an army behind them. Here’s how it’s told in the book of Exodus:

10 As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. 11 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? 12 Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it

would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” 13 But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

Fear has a way of motivating some people to ask for help AND--in others--looking for someone to blame. In reference to fear, the “foxhole confession” came out of the experience of war when a soldier was in the midst of heated battle and the enemy was approaching at an alarming speed. Faced with the prospect of certain doom, the soldier prays something like this: “Lord, I know I haven’t always lived the way I should have but if you’ll just get me out of this mess, I promise I’ll serve you the rest of my life.”

Have you ever found yourself approaching God in such a way? Try handling things completely on your own but then a situation arises that appears overwhelming. You can’t do it alone and you know it. It’s beyond your power to change the situation and so comes the foxhole confession. It can come when our lives feel threatened and we don’t know what to do or what the outcome will be because what we’re facing is so overwhelmingly beyond us we can’t do it alone—and we know it.

*In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" they cried to Moses (Exodus 14:11).* They cried out earlier to be free but now that they are free their fear shifts what they cry out about. Now that God has freed them, they face another danger. How they might have wished in that moment they could have been like their neighbors, the Phoenicians, who knew how to handle water. They were experienced navigators and sailors, seafarers who sailed the waters of the Mediterranean and even into the Atlantic down the coast of Africa.

But at that moment, at the edge of the Red Sea, the Israelites had nothing. No vessel, ship, boat, canoe or raft. They were stuck with no apparent way out. All they had was a foxhole prayer for God and blame for Moses who would hear from them more than once that their struggles in freedom were entirely his fault. Yet, Moses had enough experience with God to trust that God’s ways are not our ways and that with God there were always alternatives we just cannot imagine.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. 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. 22 The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. 23 The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. 24 At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. 25 He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.”

26 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, so

that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.” 27 So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. 28 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. 29 But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. (Exodus 14:10-14; 21-29 )

When I was taking history classes at Northern Michigan University, I decided to take a class titled “Hitler’s Germany” because I wanted to know more about that period of world history. Our professor warned us at the beginning of the class that the material we would be studying may very well affect us as it did him whenever he taught the class. The subject matter was dark and troubling. It wasn’t just the war material that would trouble us but more the genocide, the systematic process of taking human lives as if they were chattel, as if they meant nothing, as if they were waste to be disposed of: that would affect us as we studied how it came to be that one person with a twisted mind could collect enough powerful people around him and so mesmerize a nation that such a thing could be possible. One person who proclaimed that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich would last 1,000 years. One person who believed his race was supreme above all others. One person who might be considered a pharaoh of sorts pursuing the Israelites yet again.

But God will not tolerate the powerful who oppress the vulnerable. God is a God of justice. And in this, I so appreciate a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, ...but that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’”  
(<http://www.thedailybeast.com/obama-loves-martin-luther-kings-great-quotebut-he-uses-it-incorrectly>.)

The freed Israelites experience the power of the God of Justice who later works through Jesus as he proclaimed in the synagogue in Luke’s Gospel at the beginning of his ministry:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”  
(Luke 4:18-19)

God is a deliverer. It is clear, though, from our life experience that we can’t always count on a miracle to come along and get us out of a jamb. We find ourselves from time to time with a sea in front of us and an army at our backs. At least it can certainly feel that way. When that is the place in which we find ourselves there is no promise that the sea will part and dry ground

appear, that our enemies and opponents, our pains and our problems will be swallowed up and disappear before our very eyes. No, more often than not we find ourselves rowing our own boat, and in the process God makes a way when there seems to be no way. It's then that we are invited to trust the promises of God. Promises like that found in the prophet Isaiah:

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (Isaiah 43:2).

Promises like that heard through the voice of the apostle Paul:

<sup>31</sup> ... If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?... <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So when we face our own sea crossings, count on God's power and God's presence born out of God's steadfast love. The God of love and justice promises to be with us when we face:

- The sea crossing of a fresh school year, with unfamiliar teachers, classmates and subjects.
- The sea crossing of a new job, with unexpected challenges and responsibilities.
- The sea crossing of a lost relationship, with feelings of regret and uncertainty and self-doubt.
- The sea crossing of a serious illness, with sadness and fear and exhaustion and pain.
- The sea crossing of a death in the family, with shock and anger and confusion and grief.
- The sea crossing of a new relationship, with feelings of excitement and hope and ever-present anxiety.

These are good questions for us, as we face our own sea crossings. Do we have faith that God will preserve us from destruction? Do we trust that the Lord will give us courage and victory in the middle of our struggles? Do we believe that God will see us through the storm, and deliver us safely to the other side?

The sea is large and our boat is small. But with God we never sail alone.

Sea crossings are not just casual events. They usually result in feeling afraid, but in the midst of fear God invites our trust. In the midst of fear God's persistent command is "Do not be afraid!" And in these days in which fear is being used as a weapon in so many ways, I'm reminded of another sea crossing. Jesus and his disciples were in the boat when a storm like my friends experienced on the Saginaw Bay came up, threatening their lives. The boat was being swamped and the disciples were panicking so they wake Jesus up and he says to the sea "Peace! Be still!" Then Jesus asked his disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:35-41)

In this period of great anxiety, I leave you with some questions to ponder:

1. Do we have faith that God will find a way to deliver us?
2. Do we trust that the Lord will give us courage in the midst of our own struggles?
3. Do we believe that God will provide what is needed to get us safely to the other side?