

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ  
September 14, 2008  
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Scripture: Exodus 14:19-31 and Matthew 18:21-22

Sermon Title: "Marching to Freedom"

(open with prayer)

It's not hard to imagine a time when we look back and see God's presence in our lives. In fact that moment may make us feel warm inside and truly filled with grace and gratitude. We hold on to moments like those and we cherish them and their sustaining value. Many of you probably even journal so that you can look back during the separate times and remind yourself that you are loved and loved by God.

Those moments are not what our Jewish sisters and brothers conjure up as they enter their High holy days with this scripture. They remember, not the sweetness of God but the violent and powerful acts of God on behalf of the people of Israel. Rabbi Murray Rothman told me this story once and I promised him that I would always remember the exodus event in this way.

The people in the story of the Exodus were strangers for the most part and acquaintances at best. They were slaves of the Egyptians for generations, they were able to live as a family, but forbidden from talking to one another lest they become organized and seek a better way of life. Any contact noticed by the Egyptian guards almost always meant death. They practiced no religion, they never prayed to Yahweh, the oral history of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and their father Jacob and his sons, had been lost to years of servitude and fear. According to the Hebrew story, the only thing they shared was a common language, but even that common language didn't allow them to know their neighbors, make friends, and live in community. Imagine their shock when the plagues came and reigned down terror on the Pharaoh and his army. They were spared the flies and frogs and the boils on their skin, and they began to be a little more open that there may be some sort of connection with others.

The story continues as Moses, his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam, begin to gather the people who have been "passed-over". They have survived and while the Egyptians are in deep grief and sadness the people gather up all their possessions that they could carry and headed toward the river. There had been a promise of freedom that was whispered throughout the towns and villages. Paradise awaits for those who follow. So, this band of strangers heads for the Sea with wide and

wonderful expectation. They have the smallest tinge of unity, but mostly they are there looking out for themselves. Moses must be wondering as they moved closer to the sea what was going to happen next? What will it take for these people to listen to each other and be truly connected? How will these strangers learn that this is God who is delivering them? What am I doing here?

Anyway, here comes the people and the estimate is that there are close to a million people who walked through the dessert on their way to the promised land. Whether it was fear or faith or some combination of the two we will not know, but here they come. Hoards of them hear they come, and closer and closer they get to the water and their path is running out. Moses can see the look on their faces turning from hope to despair.

As the first band of thousands reaches the shore, they can see in the distance Pharaoh's army. They are coming on chariots and horses and are bent on avenging their grief and denying freedom to their servants. They are powerful and full of poisonous revenge. It is in this moment that Moses hears God's voice and strikes the water with his staff. The people stand with stunned looks as the water churns and bubbles and begins to move. An opening appears, first small and then growing larger and larger. Two walls of water form with a wide soft path between them. The people have been shown a path, a new way of going, and since the alternative is going back into the swords and spears of Egypt. They begin to walk through the sea. The wall of water remains at bay churning and moving until every last one of them is safely on the dry ground.

It is at this place that they stop. They have to pinch themselves. Did that really happen? Did we actually walk safely through the Sea? Are we really free? This is what is happening when the Chariots and Horses and all their riders begin to follow on this path. But, it is not their path to choose. The wall of water breaks down on them, the chase is over. Jacob's descendants are free. They are in an unfamiliar place and many of them are still scared, but they are free. And even more important than freedom was the reality that they were not alone. They had crossed the sea together. They were a people now, now and forever. They entered the water. They felt the power. They knew God's presence.

This is the story of the Exodus, and it is one the binds millions of people in a common story over three thousand years later. This was huge. Imagine all fear and isolation being washed away in one event. Imagine knowing the you and your children and all your children's children could look back and see that this moment changed the course of human history. God chose you to be lifted up out of slavery and be free. No matter what happens you have that story and the assurance that in same ways, God hears your cry for help and will show you the way to go.

On this great fall get together Sunday here at Robbinsdale United Church of Christ, how is this story going to share our future and our sharing? How is the memory of this event going to inspire this year of learning and growing and being together? According the Rabbi Rothman, this is not just a story, but it is THE story. This is the story that describes the relationship between God and us. He also reminded me on the day he told this story is that it is not a Jewish story. It is a universal story. It is story of moving from fear to freedom. It is a story about trusting God. It is a story about the beginning of faith.

This story is our story. It is our story precisely because we are faced with an uncertain future and everyone one of us in the room has burdens. It is our story because we worry and are fearful and sometimes we feel very alone. It is our story because we have suffered, we have lost, and we are searching at the same time for our past and our future. It is our story because each of knows that when we risk the unknown, it is brings us together. It is our story because we share it with those who have gone before us and with everyone here in our midst.

Our path is clear. Justice will Flow Down. Enter the Water. Feel the Power. Know God's Presence. We are surrounded by symbols this morning, symbols of connection and grace, symbols of water parting and water coming together. We are surrounded this morning by truth, truth that sets a clear path, and truth that connects us together. We are surrounded this morning by freedom, freedom from fear and the freedom that unites us in one human family.

Remember what Peter asked Jesus about living a life of freedom? How many times must I forgive? Seven times? "No", Jesus said, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

On this march to freedom, through the troubled waters of life, we are called to do only two things in order to claim this story and claim this march as our own. Forgive one another over and over again, and remember the first thing Moses told those folks who had found freedom. Look around you. You will always have this freedom if you share this freedom. Love one another because God has first loved you. March on. March on.

AMEN.