

So any of you know the song “Going on a Bear Hunt?” All my camp counselors in the house, yeah?

There’s a few variations, but the basic gist of it is this:

Goin' on a bear hunt,
Goin' to catch a big one,
I'm not scared
What a beautiful day!
Oh no! It's some long, wavy grass!
Can't go over it,
Can't go under it,
Can't go around it,
Got to go through it!

The song goes on to list all sorts of different obstacles –A mountain!
A river! a mushroom patch! (which I guess would be hard to travel over...)

The people of Israel would have added “the sea.”

Now, our story picks up after a lot of things have happened to the Israelites. They’ve been enslaved for hundreds of years by the Egyptians. God has raised up Moses, through some strange circumstances, to be Israel’s leader. Moses goes to Pharaoh – the Egyptian king – repeatedly and tells him that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, the *only* true God, demands that Pharaoh let the people go.

But Pharaoh does not. So God sends a series of plagues upon Egypt – water turned to blood, infestations of frogs and insects, boils, and finally, the death of the firstborn son of all of Egypt. And finally, Pharaoh relents. The people pick up their things and leave. God

goes before them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, leading them through the wilderness.

And then our story takes a series of confusing and questionable turns. God tells Moses, “Turn the people around and go back to where you’ve just come from, and camp by the Red Sea. Pharaoh will think “These people have no idea what they’re doing!” and I will harden his heart so that he comes after you.”

Now. This would make me question God’s motives a bit. When the God who promises to lead you *out* of slavery, out of the grips of Pharaoh, then says he’s going to make Pharaoh come after you...I would maybe start to question God’s purposes and intentions.

But, at this point, to Israel’s credit, they do as God commands. And sure enough, Pharaoh hears word of Israel’s escape and their wandering, and he forgets everything he said before. He forgets the pain of losing his son, he forgets the misery the Egyptians have experienced. He is overcome by pride, greed, and desire. “What have we done?!” he cries out, and he summons together one of the largest armies in all the ancient Near East.

Pharaoh’s fleet of chariots alone is enough to guarantee him victory against almost any other army. His chariots set Egypt apart as a very great nation. Pharaoh isn’t leaving anything to chance. He amasses the entire might of his army, all his power and strength, to go after Israel – a rag tag group of former slaves.

It’s not hard, with all this might and power, for Israel to see the Egyptians coming. They look up, and there over the top of a hill appears what is sure to be their downfall. Had Israel simply had the Red Sea in front of them, things wouldn’t be so bad. There are possibilities when it comes to water. They could walk all the way

around the sea. They could find its narrowest part and build a bridge, or build boats to carry them across.

But there's no time for any of that when the entire force of the Egyptian army is bearing down on you. The Egyptians behind them, a sea in front of them. In the proverbial words which arise from this situation, they are stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea.

So they cry out to the Lord, and complain – not for the last time – to Moses. “Did you bring us out here to die? We were better off in Egypt – there at least we had food and shelter and a life stretching before us!” When faced with the present circumstances, the past – even one in which the people were slaves – looks pretty good. The past is known. The past is comfortable. The past is safe. When stuck between the devil and the deep blue sea...at least they know the devil they're dealing with.

But God didn't take his people out of Egypt just to send them back. “Move on,” he says. “There's nowhere to go but forward.” “Stretch your hand out over the waters, Moses, and I will create a path for you so you can walk safely across.”

But notice what he says next! He doesn't say, “And I'll prevent the Egyptians from following” or “And while you're doing that, I'll take care of the Egyptians.” No, he says, “And I will harden Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue you.”

Well. That doesn't really solve the problem. It solves half the problem, the problem of the sea before them...but the devil behind them still looms large. “Move on,” says God. “There's nowhere to go but forward.” To which I would want to respond, “But then what?”

I wonder what our red seas are. Those things that loom before us, presenting an uncertain future. Sometimes looking down the road at

all the possibilities before us is exciting! But often it's just overwhelming.

Maybe your red sea is the desire to break a cycle of generational trauma, but the idea of confronting loved ones over the pain they've caused is terrifying.

Maybe you're feeling the pull to get involved in your school board, or council, or a committee at work, to lend your voice to the important conversations going on...but you don't know how you'll be received or how difficult the work might be.

Or maybe you're thinking it's time to branch out into a new career, or go back to school, or choose a degree program, or move somewhere new, and you're just not sure if you're actually cut out for that job or if you're actually going to like that program or if your family can take the financial hit.

It's easier, sometimes, when faced with a sea, to just stay where we are. Because even if we know there are issues in our families that need to be addressed, or we can't shake the feeling that we could contribute something, or we feel the tug towards something new...where we are now is a place we've already inhabited. We know what the walls of this place look like. Where we are might not be where we want to be...but in its familiarity, it's safe. It's comfortable. It's what we know.

Only...sometimes we can't stay with what we know. This church faces a red sea in the midst of a painful separation. How do you move forward? How do you make plans when you don't know who's actually here? You can't go back to how things were 20, 10, 5...even just 1 year ago. But facing the uncertainty of the future is daunting.

And, looking beyond ourselves, there are so many red seas facing us as a society.

The issues of the day loom large. How ought the church speak into matters of political violence? War? Polarization? Economic instability? MAID?

These aren't small questions. These are very definite, very big, very daunting deep blue seas that lie ahead of us. Perhaps it's easier to stick with the devil we know, to keep our eyes closed, to keep plodding along, hoping other people might do something, other people might take the risks, other people might step out into that sea before us and figure out a way for us to walk around it.

But a day like today reminds us that we can't stay where we are. Because in baptism, we are called into a life bigger than ourselves – a life we can only truly experience by moving *through* the waters.

You know, in many early Christian churches, baptismal fonts were made to look like a tomb, dug into the floor of the church. The candidates for baptism would renounce the devil and all his ways and would then descend into the “tomb” to be buried by the waters before rising again on the other side. John Witvliet writes that in the early church, “to baptize literally meant to be drowned, or, more freely, to be subjected to the waters of chaos.” And consider – in the first few centuries of the Christian faith, in an age of persecution, being baptized may in fact have been a death warrant. Someone moving through the waters of baptism would have no way of knowing what the future might hold.

Even after Christianity was granted legal status, the church has always understood baptism to be a means of initiation into a way of life that includes death. John Calvin wrote, “In baptism, believers

are initiated into self-denial, into crucifying the old man, and into bearing the cross...whenever there is mention of baptism, let us remember that we are baptized under this condition and for this end – to fix the cross to our shoulders.”

That’s not an idea we like to dwell on. We want to be able to promise our children a good life, insulated from pain, secure from worry or sorrow. We want to cling to that dream for ourselves. All the voices in the air tell us we deserve to be happy, and that if we aren’t, we should look for someone to blame or some new product to fix the problem. Everything is exchangeable. Friends, jobs, furniture...church.

Baptism calls us to die to this self-focused way of life. Instead, baptism unites us with Christ and his body and thus calls us into a life of sacrifice, of deep hospitality, of humility, of compassion. Baptism calls us to die to our own comforts and wants and move towards others, move towards restoration, move towards shalom, even if such a move seems costly.

So God calls the Israelites to step into the sea. And, as God does, where there once was no way, God makes a way. He causes a strong wind to push against the waters, creating a path of dry, if pretty muddy, ground. It must have been terrifying, to walk between these walls of water. But the Israelites step forward in faith, responding to the call of God.

Pharoah, of course, goes after them. You’d think Pharaoh might have gotten to the edge of the sea, looked at those swirling walls of water and said, “You know what, I give. You win, God. I can’t compete with this kind of power.” But he doesn’t. His heart is so gripped by his own pride and greed that he plunges on after his former slaves. His pride is his undoing. The very chariots that gave

him his military might now break down, their wheels getting stuck in the mud of the sea bottom. And God closes the walls of the sea overtop of them and destroys them. The devil behind was persistent, but in the end, God was the victor.

This is the promise of baptism. We are called into the waters, called to die to ourselves, called into a life of sacrifice and uncertainty...but with the promise that such a death leads to life. With the promise that God goes before us in this life, making a way where there seems to be no way. With the promise that we are united with Christ.

And it's Christ who, just before he dies, tells his disciples that the life ahead of them will be a difficult one...but encourages them to cling to the promise. "Very truly I tell you," he says in John 16, "you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy...I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

The devils we know and the seas that loom up before us...God has overcome them. They have lost their power to vanquish us. For even if we suffer, even if we face troubles, even if it seems there is a long way to go until restoration and shalom, we are finally and ultimately held and protected by the God who passed through the waters of chaos and rose again victorious on the other side.

And this is what the Lord says -
he who created you, Jacob,
he who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

This is what the Lord says -
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
“Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
The wild animals honour me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,

to give drink to my people, my chosen,
the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.”

Would you pray with me?

Faithful God,
you made a way for the Israelites where there was no way.
Help us to move through the waters of our own baptismal callings,
responding to the call to die to ourselves that we might live by faith,
trusting that you hold us and protect us.
Go before us to guide us,
behind us to protect us,
beneath us to support us,
and beside us to befriend us.
And we will sing with Miriam,
that you are our God,
our strength and our salvation.
We will proclaim your praise.
Amen.