**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

 **United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon September 13, 2020**

**FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

Prelude *Ricercar* | Girolami Frescobaldi Katherine Crosier

Announcements Lori Yamashiro

Opening Sentences Aria Chock

 Once again, we hear again the story of the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. As Moses, trusting in God’s promises, led the Israelites to freedom, may our time of prayer and worship open our souls to God’s Holy Spirit, and free us to rejoice in the freedom we enjoy as we put our trust in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Call to Confession Rev. Jeannie Thompson

Our God is eternal, yet one who promises a new thing among us. And we are in need of that newness. Our sins and shortcomings are old news. We repeat destructive patterns, promise to do better, and revert to our old ways. The cycle of brokenness repeats itself again and again. But God breaks into the cycle with the gift of grace. Let us bring our prayers of confession to the God who is gracious to hear us.

Unison Prayer of Confession

 Gracious and loving Spirit, who moves freely and gracefully through this world, transforming and mending the broken pieces, we confess that we stumble through life, trying to survive on our own power. We feel paralyzed—numbed by fear, by old habits, by the effort we expend in trying to impress others. We try to earn your grace through our own awkward endeavors, forgetting that all that we are comes from you. In your mercy forgive us. Fill us with your liberating Spirit, that our souls might run, leap, and praise you, so that all the world would know your grace and truth. Amen.

A Moment of Silence

Assurance of Pardon

 Friends, our Lord Jesus suffered death on the cross. In that act, the God of grace and glory said No—No to the powers of death, No to the sin that tries to hold us captive. And Christ said Yes to God’s promises throughout the ages—Yes to new life, Yes to hope and transformation. The Spirit of God anoints us with that hope and power. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

Passing the Peace

*In the safest way possible, please pass the peace of Christ to those who are with you.*

A Reading from the Hebrew Bible Cheryl and Daxson Chock

**Exodus 14:19-31 *The Escape***

*19The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. 20It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.*

*21Then 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. 22The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. 23The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. 24At 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. 25He 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.’*

*26Then 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.’ 27So 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. 28The 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. 29But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.*

*30Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.*

SERMON *“Dry Land”* Pastor

For several Sundays, we have been with the Hebrew people, their plight under Pharaoh, and God’s decisive actions to bring them into freedom. Today’s story, this foundational story of the parting of the Red Sea, this epic, is nothing less than God’s reminder to us of what enslavement and violence can do to people who are forced to live under such conditions, as well as what these things can do to the very people who create and perpetuate systems of injustice and brutality. All lives are impacted. No one is left unscathed.

However, our Good News is that God is listening to the cries and moaning of the people who are suffering, and God is waiting to open-up whole country-sides of dry land for life to begin again and flourish. Our Good News is also accompanied by the warning that the sea that parts will close again, taking with it what has hindered life, and frustrated justice.

And so, we remember that just before today’s passage, we have heard of the horrors of the Hebrew people’s life in Egypt. They have been treated with suspicion, distain, injustice, and cruelty. Pharaoh has placed heavy quotas of work on them, and has encouraged his overseers to accomplish this demand through beatings and other harsh treatments.

We have also heard how Pharaoh’s fear and distrust has caused him to attempt a kind of genocide on the Hebrew people when he declares that all newborn male babies should be cast into the Nile to drown.

Through these policies, it is his hope to normalize bigotry toward the Hebrew people by making his Egyptian subjects party to his violence—this is how such prejudice is always perpetuated. This is also how a grotesque kind of nationalism is instilled and made mainstream and acceptable.

Pharaoh’s main objective, of course, was to deplete the Hebrew population. Such brutality would have had the added bonus of causing the people to become demoralized and to give up hope. Thus, Pharaoh hoped to dominate them physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

What Pharaoh did not count on was that God was listening. What Pharaoh did not know is that God *always* listens, and so, God heard every cry and moan from the lips of the Hebrew people, and God was not going to leave them in their misery.

Enter, Moses, the child who lived (despite Pharaoh’s best efforts).

Today’s passage picks up the story after all the drama with Moses, and the horror of the plagues that have been visited on the Egyptians. Pharaoh has given up and let the Hebrew people go. In fact, after the tenth plague, Pharaoh wanted them out of his country as quickly as possible.

Incredibly, shortly after their departure, Pharaoh changes his mind again. So, he gathers up his army—one of the largest and best equipped in the world at that time—and they set off after the Hebrew people.

By contrast, the Hebrews—despite being described as an army—they are little more than fleeing families of men, women and children. Their journey to freedom has brought them to a natural barrier in the landscape. Unfortunately, this means that they now have their backs to the Red Sea—the Egyptians are advancing from one side of them, and the sea is on the other. They have no place to run. This, thinks Pharaoh, is hardly going to be any kind of a challenge!

What do you suppose the Hebrew people were thinking at that moment? As they watched the cloud of dust churned up by the advancing Egyptians’ horses pulling their six hundred chariots, what would we expect them to be thinking and feeling?

Oddly enough, even though we often hear a lot of the Hebrew people complaining in *other* parts of their wilderness journey, in *this* passage, they are wonderfully quiet. Indeed, this particular passage reads like an action movie where there is no dialogue, but things happen fast and furiously.

First, the angel of God places itself between the Hebrew people and Pharaoh’s army, creating an impenetrable wall of separation that shields them. Then, after they are safely hidden from the Egyptians, Exodus tells us that “the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land” [v. 21]. God parts the Red Sea.

As several Bible scholars have pointed out, this story should remind us of God’s very first activity in the Bible. It should remind us of Genesis in which God creates the earth and all that is in it. In the first story of creation, God gathered aside the waters all across the earth to create dry land, to create an environment suitable for life to begin and to flourish.

Here, in the Exodus story, the creation of dry land preserves the life of the whole people of God, the Hebrew people. This is because God’s efforts will always preserve those who turn to God and depend on God’s faithfulness, and God’s desire to preserve life. Indeed, God will always confront death and death-dealing with God’s preserving power.

This is why Pharaoh will lose, because this is what this Pharaoh’s whole relationship with the Hebrew people has been. It has been about Pharaoh’s belief in his own power, and his fear of the growing power among the Hebrews by their sheer numbers. Finally, Pharaoh refuses to believe that there is any force on earth greater than his own. To make this real and true, all his actions toward the Hebrews focus on control, supremacy, and oppression.

Pharaoh has been the destructive antithesis to the God whom the Hebrews worship. Theirs is the God who creates and preserves. Pharaoh’s objectives and strategies, based on his fear of the Hebrew people, have been the complete opposite of God’s purposes and God’s very nature which is creative, filled with compassion, and justice.

In a commentary on this passage written by Prof. Michael J. Chan of Luther Seminary, Prof. Chan observes that:

“From the outset, this pharaoh’s policies of enslavement, domination, and violence have been anti-creational (1:8-22), threatening God’s fructifying promises to Israel and its descendants. God’s decision to confront Pharaoh represents a decision to give the forces of creation a chance again to flourish, bringing them out from underneath the suffocating chokehold of pharaonic oppression.”

With Pharaoh, everything is control and devastation, people are treated without any kind of compassion or care, even his own soldiers.

Indeed, one of the things this story makes us notice is that there is always a cost to the very ones with such oppressive ambitions like Pharaoh, and all other tyrants who put themselves above God. And so, on the morning after the parting of the Red Sea, the writer of Exodus makes sure that we notice that something more has happened besides the preservation of the Hebrew people. This is what he writes:

*the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained…30Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.* [vss. 28b, 30a]

This is the cost. This is the consequence.

Through the impact of Pharaoh’s policies on the bodies of his own Egyptian soldiers, the story shows that the Hebrew people are not the only victims of Pharaoh’s hard(ened) heart. The Egyptian system of domination and violence also drew *Egyptian* soldiers into its grasp, as enforcers of the pharaonic will.

No one escapes the harm created by cruelty, violence, fear and injustice.

I do not suppose it is any surprise for us to know that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew this, and even preached on this passage. His sermon is called “The Death of Evil upon the Seashore.” For Dr. King, the parting of the Red Sea to save the Hebrews, and the closing of the sea that kills the Egyptians is nothing less than a demonstration of God’s desire to save. It is also a demonstration of what happens to those who will align themselves with anything less than God’s justice and desire to preserve life. They, too, will be swept up in the very oppression and violence they perpetuate on others.

First preached in 1954, King called out all of the evils of violence, cruelty, and injustice he could see in his own time. They included greed and war, “high places where [people] are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of their self-interest,” and “imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with the iron feet of oppression.”

King names nations and numbers. And he describes racial desegregation as God’s work of ending, reordering, and beginning something new in his own day. And so, he saw the Red Sea open in the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education which brought the beginning of equality in the education of *all* the children in our country.

When the Red Sea closed, it took with it the notion that such discrimination and prejudice would be quietly tolerated ever again.

And so, we are not. We are not quiet. We do not look the other way and pretend we cannot see the brutality, dishonesty, injustice, and oppression in our own time, or that it is somehow justified.

What this story teaches us is that we cannot turn away or remain quiet because God is waiting on us. God is waiting to part yet another Red Sea in our lives so that *all* life on earth will continue and prosper.

God is still listening and waiting to lead us up on the dry land of justice and freedom, and God is waiting for us to realize that all lives are impacted—for good or evil—and that, indeed, *our* lives, too, are touched, and so the choices we make are as personal as they are wide-ranging.

And so, my prayer for us is that we will truly embrace and have faith in this amazing God who listens for us, and that we will respond to God’s listening with our decision to follow God on the dry land of freedom, righteousness, and life.

May this be so. Amen.

MUSIC FOR MEDITATION *Jordan* - The Sacred Harp Katherine Crosier

PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD’S PRAYER

*We thank you for your faithfulness to the ministries and mission of our church.*

*Please send your offering directly to the church.*

DOXOLOGY Aria Chock

**BENEDICTION**

Almighty God, provide light for us in times of darkness, joy in times of sorrow
and peace when life seems chaotic and troublesome. Most of all, stay by
us as we encounter the challenges of the world that we will face as we leave
this time of worship. In our Savior's name. Amen.

***POSTLUDE Prelude and Fugue in G Major* | J. S. Bach (\*)** Katherine Crosier

 **\*This piece is considered spurious, meaning they haven't confirmed who is the actual composer.**