

Wade in the Water
Exodus 14
July 23, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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For the rest of this summer, we will be hearing the story of some American Spirituals, songs of faith that grew out of the terrorism of enslavement, songs that spoke of God's love and care for those who are oppressed, and of God's will for freedom for all of God's children. Today, the song is the beautiful and moving "Wade in the Water," which we sang a moment ago. It takes us back to the Exodus story.

So, listen now for the word of God, from the 14th chapter of the Book of Exodus, reading from The Message. Following a series of terrible plagues, the king of Egypt has at last told Moses that the people of Israel may leave, and they have escaped out into the wilderness, toward the sea. Exodus tells us ...

When the king of Egypt was told that the people were gone, he and his servants changed their minds. They said, "What have we done, letting Israel, our slave labor, go free?" So, he had his chariots harnessed up and got his army together.... The Egyptians gave chase and caught up with them where they had made camp by the sea.... The Israelites looked up and saw them—Egyptians! Coming at them! They were totally afraid. They cried out in terror to GOD.... So, Moses spoke to the people: "Don't be afraid. Stand firm and watch GOD do his work of salvation for you today. Take a good look at the Egyptians today for you're never going to see them again. GOD will fight the battle for you."

GOD said to Moses: "Why cry out to me? Speak to the Israelites. Order them to get moving. Hold your staff high and stretch your hand out over the sea: Split the sea! The Israelites will walk through the sea on dry ground. Meanwhile I'll make sure the Egyptians keep up their stubborn chase—I'll use Pharaoh and his entire army, his chariots and horsemen, to put my Glory on display so that the Egyptians will realize that I am GOD." Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and GOD, with a terrific east wind all night long, made the sea go back. He made the sea dry ground. The seawaters split.

The Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground with the waters a wall to the right and to the left. The Egyptians came after them in full pursuit, every horse and chariot and driver of Pharaoh racing into the middle of the sea. It was now the morning watch. GOD looked down from the Pillar of Fire and Cloud on the Egyptian army and threw them into a panic. He clogged the wheels of their chariots; they were stuck in the mud. The Egyptians said, "Run from Israel! GOD is fighting on their side and against Egypt!"

GOD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea and the waters will come back over the Egyptians, over their chariots, over their horsemen." So, Moses stretched his hand out over the sea: As the day broke and the Egyptians were running, the sea returned to its place as before. GOD dumped the Egyptians in the middle of the sea. The waters returned, drowning the chariots and riders of Pharaoh's army that had chased after Israel into the sea. Not one of them survived. But the Israelites walked right through the middle of the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall to the right and to the left. GOD delivered Israel that day from the oppression of the Egyptians. And Israel looked at the Egyptian dead, washed up on the shore of the sea, and realized the tremendous power that GOD brought against the Egyptians. And they were in awe before God.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

"Run toward the sea," Moses orders. And so, I wonder, what does it take to make that first step toward the water—water that is the source of life and also a place of death, where fearsome creatures live and children drown, dark water, water that could swallow you up and never spit you back out again—what does it take to make that first step, weighed down by everything you own in the world, everything that you will need to keep you alive in the wilderness beyond, what does it take?

It takes sheer terror, I imagine—the certain knowledge that death is chasing you down, that there is no life left for you in Egypt, where enslavement steals your labor and your culture and eventually your soul. You have to be desperate to fling yourself out of Egypt, where at least there is food to eat, and into the wilderness, and then into the sea. The people of Israel meet God in that moment of desperation, in that unwilling baptism, fleeing death, praying for life. The Bible tells us that God is on the side of the oppressed, and that God's power and protection are there in that water. But you have to be willing to run toward the sea before you know for sure that the waters will part. You have to be willing to wade in the water to get to freedom on the other side. The chariots are coming! Wade in the water, children.

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It should be no surprise to us that this story of the miraculous escape from slavery resonated with enslaved persons in America before the Civil War and Emancipation, before Juneteenth. This story resonates today with people in liberation movements everywhere. God is on the side of all who get the short end of every stick. It is God's will that all God's children enjoy life and liberty and equality. God will make things right, this story says. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it a little differently: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." So, we must have faith and courage. Take that first step.

Author Alexandria Scott tells of a trip she took to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge of Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. She was doing the difficult and frustrating work of tracing her family tree, knowing that records for her enslaved ancestors would be few, or missing altogether. One day she took a small boat out onto the water. She writes:

Flecks of Kelly-green wild grasses and golden-brown cattails enliven ribbons of slate-blue water. The tidal wetlands of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge off Maryland's Chesapeake Bay hold secrets. Blackwater is still. I glide on a watercolor palette in the setting sun, dipping my paddle into a patchwork sea of peony pinks, magentas, and dusky blues. The bow of my boat cuts through a decrescendo of gold gouache ripples. Everything is moving, yet everything has stopped. It could be 1855. A great blue heron emits a series of croaking cries. But the past, murkier than the marshland, cries louder. The seasons and tides flow in reverse, past the marches of the 1960s, the Jim Crow laws of the 1920s, the Civil War of the 1860s — all the way back to about 1820, when a baby named Araminta Ross was born with a destiny none could have foreseen....

As I rock on the water and gaze at the low, late-August sun, my mind wanders to the history of this coastal maze. One hundred and sixty years ago, Harriet Tubman plied these waters as she led her people to liberty. Born in 1820 as Araminta Ross, enslaved off the Chesapeake Bay in Dorchester County, Maryland, she eventually took her freedom by slipping across the Mason-Dixon line. Known as the "Moses of her people," Tubman returned to the Eastern Shore of Maryland more than 15 times to lead others to liberation. Now, these waters and woods bear her name.

Perhaps it was a day like this humid summer one that envelops me with a deafening orchestra of cicadas, when, with sweat beading on her brow and breath bursting from her lungs, Harriet Tubman parted a curtain of cattails, making her move for freedom. Perhaps the sky was an expansive yet almost-touchable purple-pink when she asserted her humanity and her personhood. Perhaps, like now, a hot red sun hung low in the sky on the day when she escaped slavery forever.<sup>1</sup>

Scott paints a beautiful scene, and I can feel the heat and humidity she describes. I can see Araminta Ross hiding among the cattails, wondering what was crawling up her leg in that murky water. But I imagine that escape was made at night, not in the beautiful afternoon that Scott imagines. It would be too easy to notice her absence in the daytime, too easy to spot her dress in the distance. Night was the time for escape, and the water was the route to safety. No boat. Just taking your life in your hands and stepping into the water. That is a desperate move, but it is the only way to safety because the dogs are coming after you now, and the water will throw them off your trail. Wade in the water, children.

Araminta Ross – Harriet Tubman – spread the song "Wade in the Water" to the enslaved people of the south, teaching them to get off of the path and into the water that would lead to safety. That is a desperate move. I doubt many of them had been taught to swim. If they tried to cross tidal wetlands at high tide, they could be literally overwhelmed and drowned. But there was no going back. Certain death lay behind. At some point many of the escaping slaves must have thought, like the people of Israel, "At least back there we had enough to eat." But it is too late for that now. The dogs are coming and black water lies ahead. Step into the water. It is your only hope. Pray for God's power and protection out there in the water. Take the first step.

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Sometimes it is hard to hear these stories of terrible oppression – of the people of Israel or of enslaved African descendants in America – from the position of our own privilege. We are not enslaved. And we are not enslavers. Thanks be to God! When we hear these stories, we have to acknowledge that God is acting in the world on behalf of people whose lives are so different from ours. There is a challenge for us here. If we want to be on God's side in this world, we have to be about ending oppression. We have to be on the side of people seeking a living wage. We have to be on the side of those who fight human trafficking. We have to work for justice for those who are dispossessed, incarcerated, hungry, those who are fleeing gang violence and killing poverty. We have to fight racism and antisemitism and homophobia wherever they rear their ugly head. That is where we belong, because that is where God is. That message pinches us a little, because we don't really know how to do most of that work, and I am not going to make that pinch go away this morning. I hope our Mission Board will continue to lead us not just in the direction of helping those who are in need but in working to change the conditions that cause that need in the first place. Wade in that water, children. It's murky and deep, but that is where God's power and protection lie.

Sometimes God calls us into the water for our own protection, too, not just to fight for others. Sometimes we are trapped between Pharaoh's chariots, rushing up behind us and that dark water ahead. At those desperate moments, we want to say, "Wait, I changed my mind. I think I'll just stay home this morning and not come out into the wilderness." But it is too late for that and here we are, with the chariots racing down upon us anyway, and nowhere to go but into that unwilling baptism of the sea, where death could await us—or life, and safety, and freedom. And in those moments, God says, "Trust me. Follow me. Wade in the water, children, and I will be there for you." Thanks be to God!

Amen

¹ Scott, Alexandria. (2019). Wade in the water. Hidden Compass, Legacy Issue. <https://hiddencompass.net/story/wade-in-the-water/>