

September 13, 2020

Year A: Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost; first Sunday of
experimental hybrid worship during the Covid-19
Pandemic of 2020

I'm Not That Person

A Sermon Expositing Exodus 14:19-31

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

I could never be that person and few among us could - by definition. The story of the liberation of the Hebrew people from their dehumanizing, enslaving captors has, for good reason, become a kind of paradigm for liberation movements around the globe and throughout time. Wherever you find injustice on mass scale and rulers and leaders unwilling to do what is necessary to cultivate a society marked by equity and justice you will find allusions to Moses and his calling and his activities and his success in forcing Pharaoh, Pharaoh to let his people go. I could never be *that* person.

There's something obvious about what I'm saying, but I mean something more. If I were just saying, "I could never be Moses," you would all have no problem quickly agreeing. A hapless Hebrew who stumbled upon becoming the figurehead of the Exodus, the most iconic liberation story of all time, the one who stared down a King and ran from an army and convinced his people to go along. I'm just not that charismatic and as a straight, white, cis-gendered male living in the United States you may have noticed - my people aren't exactly in need of liberating anyway. So, of course I could never be that guy.

But I mean something more. You may have noticed that we're in the middle of a movement for liberation right now. I don't mean in the middle of as in timing, I mean our city, we're in the epicenter of a movement that is at least national in scope that seeks to point out that though we are formally rid of slavery and formally rid of Jim Crow that racism, real racism that has significant and detrimental impact on people's lives is alive and well and seeks to eradicate it from the face of the earth. The time of asking what you or I would have done during the Civil Rights Movement is over. We're living in it and the question is no longer past tense, but present. What role is yours, what role is ours in what is happening around us? And therein lies what I mean. Never mind Moses as a figurehead of the most storied human liberation movement, for a moment I want to think about Moses as just a guy who God called to get involved.

There are plenty of reasons that we could give God, should God come to us in a burning bush, that we should not be involved in a liberation movement. Somehow despite a global pandemic there seems to be no shortage of things that need doing in our world. Life is busy and getting involved would take time and energy. It's controversial. For some reason even proclaiming that Black Lives Matter draws the ire of many and those who support that movement and the movement itself are often characterized as violent or labeled with scary sounding political terms. Being part of all that could get you labeled a radical supporter of change to the status quo and a fair shot for all people - you know like Jesus. Another reason we might offer God for not getting involved is that it's difficult to know how. We know that people in powerful position have to be held accountable for rapidly changing and even dismantling particular social systems, but which systems and which people and how do we hold them accountable? This information is readily available, but getting it would be another thing to do and might get you labeled - you see how these reasons link together to make a stronger case

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

for inaction? But there is a foundational reason that I think gives weight to all the others and freezes us in our tracks. The end goal of this ongoing liberation movement is difficult enough as to seem impossible.

Systems, as you can see in your local papers, do not change willingly or simply. The political will of the people has a truly remarkable stasis, a staying power, a default setting stuck on “status quo.” You’ll recall won’t you, the amount of determination and grit and activism and suffering that had to be endured in order to make it legal for black persons to be allowed to choose their own seat on a bus don’t you? And how much more will it take for us to finally begin to be able to expect equal outcomes in housing, in employment, in encounters with criminal justice, in education for everyone!?! It seems some days that moving the needle is impossible and we need to do more than nudge the needle. We need systemic change. That’s all worrisome enough if you’re thinking of this challenge as someone else’s, but how oh how does one respond if the burning bush is speaking to *you* asking *you* to get involved. It feels a bit like asking the impossible. It feels like being asked to part the sea.

I’ve always been amazed at the scope of the impossibility of what Moses did while the Egyptian cavalry were bearing down on he and the folks he was trying to lead to liberation. They’d found themselves trapped by the topography, surrounded by impassible land, the oncoming Egyptians, and the sea. And you know the story: Moses parted the sea making a way for his people to go through closing as the Egyptians were giving pursuit after them. You’ve heard the joke about how impossible such a feat is. The boy from Sunday school reports what he learned that day to his parents. The military swooped in with jet planes and helicopters to hold the Egyptians off while the engineers constructed a bridge and Moses led the people across. His parents said, “That’s not how the story goes,” and the child replied, “I know, but if I told you the way my Sunday School teacher did you’d never believe it.” It is inconceivable. So inconceivable is what happened at the edge of the sea that day that biblical interpreters hard-bent on clinging to a literal interpretation have spent decades trying to find a way to demonstrate how the parting of the sea happened, but by explainable phenomenon. It happened in a shallower place they say. The waters parted weren’t so deep, so God bent the rules of nature, just not as drastically as it might’ve seemed. Or there’s the explanation of a strong wind having risen to reveal a hidden reef upon which the Hebrews crossed and the wind stopped just as the Egyptians began to cross. These interpreters mind you, are the same ones who see no problem with a literal interpretation of the talking animals in other parts of the scripture, who understand a man having been eaten then vomited by a large fish as literal, who don’t worry much about the math of every living creature fitting onto a single hand-built boat. These things happened, but as for the parting of the sea, “Well, we can explain that one.” That’s how impossible parting of the sea was. That’s how unlikely the survival of that iconic liberation movement was. That’s what God asked Moses to do – and I’m just not that person – how about you?

That’s one of the most powerful underlying reasons we have for not getting involved in the movement for liberation going on around us – that it seems like such a long shot. We might be willing to wade into (pardon the pun) controversy, we might be willing to give of our time now more precious than ever, we might be willing to overcome all the other reasons not to be involved, but if it’s an impossible goal anyway, why bother? Moses parted the sea, but I’m no Moses, so why bother?

Well, I don’t know if this next part is going to be good news or bad news to you, but Moses never parted the sea. I don’t mean that I’m asking you to apply a literary interpretation to the text rather than looking for God in its historicity - I mean I am asking that of you, but that’s not my overall point. I mean Moses isn’t the one who parted the sea. Read it. “Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. *The LORD* drove the sea back...” Moses didn’t part the sea. God did. Moses didn’t save the movement toward liberation, God did. We’ve been right all this time when we’ve been saying, “I’m not the person that parts the sea.” None of us are. The work of liberation is God’s even to this day, but....But...we’re not off the hook.

God did call Moses to be involved. God did call Moses to be a visible sign of God’s presence and to do the work of liberation even as God was enacting the liberation itself. Think about what God asked of Moses that day – not to part the sea, but with the Egyptian cavalry bearing down, his own people mired in fear, wondering why they’d followed this guy into the wilderness in the first place – God asked him to walk to the edge of the

sea and hold his hand out. He risked looking a fool, not that it mattered. If nothing came of it they would all be dead or back in slavery within the day anyway. With the cost of liberation on the line God asked Moses to be involved – by stretching out his hand.

We may not have within us the power to part the seas, but we do have the power to stretch out our hands in testimony to the thing God is about to do don't we? We can show up can't we? We can use our voice can't we? We can get educated on the oppressive systems around us and on how to make sure that our voice makes its way to city hall, or the town board, or the county legislature, or the governor, or congress can't we? I know that's all murky and ill-defined. I know it seems unlikely to do anything. I know we've got other important things going on, but hey it's not like we're being asked to part the sea.

Amen.