

“Be Still and Move On”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Exodus 14:5-31
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
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The Israelites are rather notorious for their love-hate relationship with Moses, not to mention their finicky loyalty to YHWH. They are not so unlike those of us who sing God’s praises on Sunday and worry ourselves into gloom and doom on Monday. Like us, they are practiced at coping and complaining with sarcasm: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have brought us to the desert to die?”

It is this panicked, pregnant moment—trapped between Egyptian chariots and the raging sea—in which a new nation is about to be born. For many years of my life I have returned to this place in the sacred story for comfort and assurance. As the relatively safe, mostly privileged woman that I am, it is a scene I can hardly imagine—being chased down by armies of soldiers having just barely escaped the chains of slavery, my newfound freedom—not to mention my life—now in sudden and serious jeopardy. On the other hand, feeling stuck between an oppressive past and a seemingly impossible future feels awfully familiar. Feeling overwhelmed, feeling lost, feeling betrayed by God’s own promises, feeling afraid, feeling helpless, feeling stuck, feeling doomed, feeling frantic and panicked—these feelings are not foreign to me, and in that sense I can relate to the Hebrew people, stuck between an army and a hard place. I can relate to a future path that looks like a sea and not a boat in sight for me, which is why I have long been fascinated by what Moses says to the people: “Do not be afraid. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

The Lord will fight for you. You need only to be still? What in the blue moon is Moses talking about? If I were there, I’d be forming a strategy—“Okay, children and babies nearest the sea, able-bodied persons between them and the chariots. Who has anything on them that can be turned into a weapon or used as a shield? I need a team of people over here building a blockade of our possessions. I need the rest of you gathering rocks and heavy objects we can throw at the Egyptians and their horses.”

I’ve never had to fight in a war, thank goodness, but I do know how I tend to respond in chaos, and that is I start creating order, forming a plan, and delegating the jobs so stuff gets done. I know that I respond to problems by brainstorming solutions and putting them quickly into action. I respond to things that feel out of my control by doing what I can control.

But Moses doesn’t want me organizing the Hebrews into forces of resistance. Moses wants me to be still. He doesn’t want me to fret or to plan or to get busy. He wants me still.

Friends, I wonder where in your life God might be inviting you to stillness? Have you made an idol of your scurry, a necessity out of worry? Is there some segment of life where God might be calling you to stillness?

When I cannot see the way out or the way ahead, I remind myself that God's imagination is bigger than mine, and there's a good chance I'm about to be surprised. I don't want to be so busy forging my path that I miss the miracle, the opening God provides.

I wonder though, what does it really mean to *be still*? "Be still and know that I am God," we like to quote the psalmist. I find some irony in the fact that as soon as Moses tells the people, "You need only to be still," God tells Moses, "Tell the Israelites to move on." The combined message is, "Be still and move on," which, frankly, I think is perfect advice. Because sacred stillness does not mean, do nothing. Sacred stillness is not passive or limp. Sacred stillness is not a cop out or a fancy-sounding excuse to disengage. Sacred stillness is not denial, avoidance, or the act of giving up. Sacred stillness is clear-eyed presence. It's an electrifying sort of stillness. It is a way of showing up that is awake to God and open to God's magic. Sacred stillness is a stillness that eventually stirs you, moves you, prompts you. If it doesn't move you, you aren't still. You're dead.

For the Israelites, the stillness moved them forward into the sea and into their fear. They had to step out. Stillness and trust weren't stationary. The stillness, the reliance on God required something of them. In one Midrash tradition, the Israelites had to walk into the sea up to their noses in water before the waters began to part in two.

Imagine that. First one foot, then the other. You're up to your ankles. The water is cold. You take a few more steps; the sea splashes against your thighs. You pause and brace yourself. One more step, and it feels like ice on your midriff. Your chest is pounding as the water reaches it. Your shoulders, your neck go under. You've got a child atop your shoulders. Water hits your chin. Instinctively you take a big inhale in case the water covers your face.

Friends, if you've had it up to here, if you are up to your noses in chaos or pain or fear . . . it's not too late for you. According to our sacred stories, the seas might be just about to part.

The Rabbi Ruth H. Sohn wrote the following poem called, "I Shall Sing to the Lord a New Song," and the song is in the mouth of Miriam. Listen to her words.

I, Miriam, stand at the sea
and turn
to face the desert
stretching endless and
still.
My eyes are dazzled
The sky brilliant blue
Sunburnt sands unyielding white.
My hands turn to dove wings.
My arms
reach
for the sky
and I want to sing
the song rising inside me.

My mouth open
I stop.
Where are the words?
Where the melody?
In moment of panic
my eyes go blind.
Can I take a step
Without knowing a
Destination?
Will I falter
Will I fall
Will the ground sink away from under me
The song still unformed—
How can I sing?

To take the first step—
To sing a new song—
Is to close one's eyes
and dive

into unknown waters.
For a moment knowing nothing risking all
But then to discover

The waters are friendly
The ground is firm
And the song—
the song rises again.
Out of my mouth
come words lifting the wind.
And I hear
for the first
the song
that has been in my heart
silent
unknown
even to me.

In the ancient world, the Sea represented chaos, and the Israelites are called by God to walk right out into the middle of that chaos. They do not know the way forward. They cannot see where this is going. No one has been this way before. No one can tell them what is coming next.

This is how freedom feels, and they are not so sure they like it. They must step into the unknown; they must enter the chaos without trying to control it, not knowing where these steps will lead them or if they will be safe.

Interesting, the whole story of the Bible begins with chaos in the book of Genesis. As it is written, the earth was formless and void, darkness was over the surface of the deep. What was to come next was unknown, but the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters, about to create something new. Into that primordial chaos, God spoke, “Let there be a vault between the water to separate water from water,” and eventually, dry land appeared. God called it good, and we call it an act of creation.

In the book of Exodus, as Moses stretched his hand out over the surface of the deep waters, the water separated from the water, and dry land appeared in the middle. Moses called it, “God fights for you,” God called it “Glory,” and God’s people called it, “The Great Exodus out of Egypt.” We also call it a New Creation. For they were no longer slaves; they were free. They were no longer bound by fear; they were walking in the light of God. They were no longer lost; they were found. No longer trapped; they were uncaged. No longer oppressed; they were saved. God had created a new identity, and by walking out into the chaos with the God of creation, the Israelites participated in this stunning act of re-creation. Not fully knowing what was to come, they took a risk marked by stillness and by seawater, marked by the resolute determination to LEAVE that which had confined and constricted them even if it first took them right into the heart of the sea, even if it meant uncertainty, even if it meant labor pains. As Rabbi Rachel Barenblat writes,

“[I]f you wait until you feel fully ready
you may never take the leap at all
and Infinity is calling you forth
out of this birth canal
and into the future’s wide expanse.”

Beloved of God, may we put one foot in front of the other until we *all* reach freedom together. I am reminded of the song, “Lead with Love,” by Melanie DeMore, which I first learned at a protest in front the Waco courthouse when Kris Cervantes, pastor of Waco’s UU congregation, led us, and we sang together:

You gotta put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.
Put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.
Don’t give up hope.
You’re not alone
Don’t you give up.
Keep movin’ on.
You gotta put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.
Put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.
Lift up your eyes
Don’t you despair.
Look up ahead
The path is there.
You gotta put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.
Put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.

I know you're scared.
And I'm scared too
But here I am.
Right next to you.
You gotta put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.
Put one foot in front of the other and lead with love.
Lead with love.

Beloved, let us take heart in knowing that we walk out into the chaos, not alone, but together.
Take a deep breath. Be still. Soak up God's goodness. Take comfort in the communion of saints.
Now move. Walk with us in the light of God and don't look back. Your chains are behind you;
your future awaits you. The waters are parting; it is time for new birth. Do you hear the sound of
the rushing wind moving the seas? This is the sound of God creating, the sound of God
eliminating barriers, the sound of God calling you forward. Together, let us move. Amen.