

The End

Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29

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5When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?” 6So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; 7he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.

10As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. 11They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? 12Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” 13But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. 14The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

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.

Good morning, Church! It is good to be back with you in the sanctuary and to join with you in the virtual space. I spend a lot of time looking for and creating places where our individual bodies and collective body can harmonize...can settle...can

find some space and grace, and breath. I believe this is one of the most important reasons that we gather—harmony, settling, space, grace and breath. This morning if you are open to that possibility for yourself, I’m going to ask you to turn and look behind you, over one shoulder; notice the stretch. Now turn and look behind you over the opposite shoulder. Look up. Look down. Look right. Look left. Tilt one ear towards your shoulder...and then the other. Wiggle or massage any part of your body that needs a little more attention. We are living in anxious times and what we are doing is creating a little room in our bodies/minds/spirits for what we are about to receive. Feel free to come back to this as we enter the sermon this morning. It’s going to be a little heavy, but God’s got us, amen!

Let’s pray. Creator and creating God, in whom we move and live and have our being, we thank you for the thrill of new beginnings, for the electricity that sizzles even now as we start a new season together at the Riverside Church. We know that with beginnings there are endings, so be with us on the way as we honor the past, grieve our losses, and walk together to *your* promised land. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

“Before you can begin something new, you have to end what used to be. Before you can learn a new way of doing things, you have to unlearn the old way. Before you can become a different kind of person, you must let go of your old identity. Beginnings depend on endings. The problem is [we] don’t like endings.”¹ Take a deep breath, Church. Those are the words of Dr. William Bridges, considered one of the preeminent authorities on change, and I’ve been thinking a lot about change, Church, since we were last together.

I moved, a few weeks ago, to a beautiful new home and...I am unsettled there. I had to keep the lights on the first night because I didn’t know my way around in the dark. It is a big change. It does not have the familiarity of the home I have lived in for six years. I’ve lost my home, but at the same time, I couldn’t stay there. It was time to move on.

Like the Hebrew people fleeing Pharaoh this morning, there comes a time when we all must leave home, leave the familiar, and always, always, we leave home with mixed feelings. I don’t care how ready we are for change, how exciting the new beginning is, how much milk and honey we’ve been guaranteed in the promised land: We. Don’t. Like. Endings.

The people Moses is leading don’t like endings either. It didn’t matter that they were enslaved. It didn’t matter that they were the property of another human being. It seemingly didn’t matter that the Pharaoh had decreed, way back when Moses was born, that all Hebrew boys, age two and under, should be thrown in the river and drowned. None of that mattered. They did not want life as they knew it to change. And they let Moses know that they would rather be enslaved than embrace *the end* of life as they had known it. Think about that! They say to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Moses is thinking “I think I’m

setting you free,” but the people, in their fear—and we have to be deeply compassionate with fear—in their fear, the people continue to berate Moses. They say, “Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been *better* for us to serve the Egyptians (to do the thing we knew) than to die in the wilderness.” So be very clear, the people were afraid that they would die, and they would rather be enslaved than have life as they’ve always known it, life as they’ve always done it, come to an end.

Sound familiar? We don’t like endings, Church! We will stay in harmful spaces because we think *the end* will kill us. Here’s the thing: what kills us, what wrecks us, us and our families and our churches every time, is our failure to honor the past, to grieve out loud, and to mark *the end*. How many funerals and memorial services didn’t happen because of Covid? And how many families and communities were wrecked and remain wrecked because of our inability to mark the end? Like the Hebrew people at the Red Sea, we have to go through the end, not around it. And like the Hebrew people, God will part the waters.

This Exodus story is pivotal to so many cultures and communities. It speaks of liberation, emancipation, freedom. Women see themselves in this text, the LGBTQ+ community locates themselves here, African descended people certainly take our images of God *directly* from this story, Palestinian siblings, indigenous folk and other marginalized groups look to Exodus as a blueprint for God’s liberating activity in the world, but it never struck me until now to pause in the Red Sea and look back, with an enormous wall of water to our left and another humungous wall of water to our right, with the promised land ahead of us, with the wild cacophony of noises behind. What if we were to pause and look back? What do you see? What do you hear? What do you experience? Crying babies, screaming parents, the clatter of horse hooves on the shore, and the churning of chariot wheels. All that adrenaline to get mama and “dem folks” probably lost things, dropped things. Maybe a shoe got stuck in the mud, maybe you see an Egyptian face regarding you with hatred and disgust. Often we imagine the people moving quickly forward, forward to the new beginning. But what if we paused and looked back? Take a deep breath, Church. It rarely strikes us to look back does it? Because we’re *supposed* to be happy, right? Moving forward is good, forward ever, backward never, onward and upward. Don’t look back; someone may be gaining on you. Forward there is no more slavery. There are new beginnings, a promised land, milk and honey.

We’re supposed to be happy. But forward is also unfamiliar and scary. It’s scary because change, no matter how welcomed, comes with grief, the grief of *the end*. You have a brand-new shiny job, but you don’t know how things work yet. Your auntie died, and she’s gone home to be with Jesus, but you loved her, and she ain’t here with you. Reverend Adriene is here. We did it, we got us a pastor, but that means all those other pastors we loved are *not* here, and they *aren’t* coming back, and we’ve lost their humor, their sermons, their smiles, and their songs. And what do we do?

We keep it movin', Church, onto the next season before we've said goodbye to the last one or the one before that or the one before that. We move on before we've honored the past, grieved out loud, and marked the end. It would behoove us, Church, to pause and look back. Life is changing, and we have all lost things.

Church, you'll learn before long that I *really* believe in the power and wisdom of the body. I'm going to ask you do something that is simple and not so simple. Whether you are in the sanctuary or the virtual space, take a chance with me now and stand up if you are able. If you are unable, do what you can from your seat. Stand and turn around. Face the back of the sanctuary—symbolic of where you've come from. I know it probably feels silly, but humor me and give this moment to yourself and to the honoring of anything or anyone you have lost. Call the names of your people. Call to mind the events that need honoring. Speak these losses out loud or whisper them in your heart. On behalf of the Riverside Church, I call the names of our former senior ministers as a way of honoring them, grieving the loss of them, and marking the end: Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rev. Dr. Robert James McCracken, Rev. Dr. Ernest T. Campbell, Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Rev. Dr. Brad R. Braxton, Rev. Dr. Amy Butler.

Church, for whom and for what else shall we honor, grieve, and mark the end? When you have called your names and brought to your remembrance all those people and events that you have lost, I invite you to turn back around, Church, and have your seats. Recognize that we may need to do this a few times before we are ready to move on to our new beginning. When my big brother died, I was on the phone a lot with my family—making plans, setting dates, comforting those who were in shock. The most powerful thing that was said to me in the flurry of moving/forward/fast was said by my youngest sister, who I thank God is here today. Her words forced me to pause and look back and remember that we had lost someone. Her words invited me to honor the past, grieve out loud, and mark the end. She simply said, "Adriene, I'm sorry for your loss." Riverside, to each of you individually and to us as a collective body, hear me say "I am sorry for your loss."

Riverside has changed. These United States of America have changed. The children in our lives are growing up and growing older every day. I am sorry for your loss. Bodies and minds don't do what they used to do. Some have loved ones in prison. Some have dreams we weren't able to realize. I am sorry for your loss. Many face racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and other marginalizations. We've lost years of academic instruction. God *has* vowed to bring us to a promised land, but right now, we are still running through the water. And we haven't even gotten to the wilderness up ahead. Take a deep breath, Church: this is the end, and I'm sorry for your loss. God has a promised land for us, but first, we must honor the past, grieve out loud, and mark the end. It took the Hebrew people 40 years. We must respect that grieving takes as long as it takes. We must respect that tomorrow cannot come until today is over. And today, this morning, this moment, we've

made a good start marking the end. Like the Hebrew people, we are who we are because of what's behind us. We pause and we look back so that we can have a new beginning. May it be so. To God be the glory. Amen.

Note

William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2016), 27.