

Exodus 14:1-29 – March 20, 2019 (Lenten Midweek)

When I was in high school, I attended a men's conference with a group of guys from my church. The conference was being held at the Pittsburgh Pirates stadium and none of the men in the group had ever spent much time in Pittsburgh before. But, at the time, that didn't seem like it should be a problem. Our hotel wasn't far away. Surely, we wouldn't have too much trouble finding our way around.

Little did we know what we were in store for. You see, Pittsburgh is a city built around two major forms of transportation: the rivers and the railroads. And automobile traffic takes a backseat to both of these.

We drove around that city for more than an hour, trying to get to our hotel. We knew exactly where it was. We just couldn't find a way to get there. Maybe we can turn here. Nope, dead end into a river. Maybe here. Nope, dead end into a railroad without a crossing. Maybe here. Nope that's a one way street. Maybe here. Nope... another dead end.

Have you dealt with something like that while traveling? When you know where you need to go, but it sincerely feels like you cannot get from point A to point B? When there might as well be a wall between where you are and where you want to go?

That's a bit how the Israelites felt in our Old Testament lesson today. They are on their way to Canaan. To the Promised Land. To the land God had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A land flowing with milk and honey.

They already know they'll need to cross the wilderness of Sinai. That's bad enough. But first, they just need to get out of Egypt. Away from Pharaoh who has finally, miraculously, allowed them to leave, at the cost of his own firstborn child.

But they're trapped. Trapped in a dead end road. Trapped against the very really wall of the Red Sea.

And to make matters worse, they're trapped in this dead end road because God led them there. *"Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea."* It may seem like an obscure bit of ancient geography and hard to pronounce names, but this is actually quite important.

You see, the Israelites knew that the only way out of Egypt was to the north. Through the strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea where the Suez Canal was built. But that's not where God takes them.

No, after already traveling north, God tells them to turn around and go south. Back the way they came. Back further along the Red Sea. Away from the only rational place where they could get to Canaan.

And then he tells them to camp there. Camp and wait. And it is while they are waiting that they hear the news. Pharaoh is coming. Pharaoh has unleashed an army of 600 hundred elite chariots to chase the Israelites down and bring them back to Egypt.

It's hard to underestimate how powerful and fearsome the Egyptian chariot was. You might as well say that they're being chased by 600 tanks and helicopters, because that's what chariots were. They were fast and terrifying and deadly.

And God wants the Israelites to simply sit at the end of their dead end street, trapped in a corner against the Red Sea... and wait. Wait for the chariots to come. Wait for Pharaoh to take vengeance for life of his firstborn. Wait for them to be rounded up and taken back to Egypt. To likely work in even worse conditions than before.

But God has a plan. He had a plan all along. When he first told Moses to turn back and camp by the sea, he had a plan. *“For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, ‘They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.”*”

The dead end was part of God’s plan. It was part of God’s plan to gain glory over Pharaoh and all his host. These were people who proclaimed their king to be a god. And the one true God would teach them how wrong they were.

It was part of God’s plan to teach the Egyptians that he is the Lord. The only Lord. The creator of heaven and earth. These Israelites that the Egyptians mocked and belittled and enslaved were not the forgotten worshippers of a foreign god. But the beloved children of the one true God. And they would be wise to worship him too.

It was part of God’s plan to save his people. *“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today.”* Moses declared. *“For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”*

And that was the very best part about God’s plan, I think. You see, the Israelites didn’t know it, but God hadn’t led them into a dead end. He had led them into the path of victory.

Had the Israelites gone north, like they wanted, they would have been easily chased down by the Egyptian. A crowd of men, women, and children, young and old, traveling on foot, would be easily chased down by the Egyptian chariots. Once Pharaoh decided to chase after them, they were sitting ducks no matter where they went. Leaving Egypt was always going to be a dead end.

But by traveling to the Red Sea. By walking on dry ground through the Red Sea. By watching those walls of water come crashing down on the Egyptian army. They hadn’t just escaped Egypt. They had been given victory over Egypt.

They would never need to worry about the Egyptians coming for them ever again. The Lord had fought for them. And they had only to be silent and watch him work.

The Old Testament is full of examples like this. Abraham and Sarah, promised to be the father and mother of a great nation. Led straight into the dead end of old age. And then given a new way through the birth of Isaac.

The armies of Israel, promised victory over the Philistines. Led straight into the dead end of Goliath. And then given a new way through a shepherd boy named David.

The people of Judah, promised to live in the land of Canaan forever. Led straight into the dead end of Babylonian captivity. And then given a new way through God’s chosen servant Cyrus.

God likes to lead us into dead ends. He likes to free us from those dead ends. He likes to give us victory in the midst of those dead ends.

But there was no greater dead end that any man faced than the literal dead end of Jesus hanging on a cross. Because when his disciples saw that, they were absolutely convinced that it was over.

That God had led them south when they should have gone north. That God had told them to camp when they should run. That they were trapped against the sea and there was no hope.

But it was all part of God’s plan. His plan to gain glory over the devil and all his host. His plan to teach even those who crucified his Son that he is the Lord. The only Lord. The creator of heaven and earth. And those who mocked, belittled, and enslaved his beloved Son would be wise to worship him.

But best of all, it was part of God's plan to save his people. Because there is no running from death. Like an Egyptian chariot, it will chase you down, no matter where you go. You are a sitting duck. Your life of sin will always be a dead end.

But fear not. Stand firm. See the salvation of the Lord. For the Lord has fought for you, and you have only to be silent.

You have only to pass through the waters of Holy Baptism. You have only to pass through the valley of the shadow of death on dry ground. You have only to watch those walls of water come crashing down on sin, death, and the devil.

See them drown and die and be washed away. And know that you haven't just escaped death. You've been given victory over death. On the cross of Christ, the Lord has fought for you. And you need never worry about the power of the devil ever again.

So come, all who labor and are heavy laden. Come, all who feel like you are at life's dead end. Come and wait. Come and be silent. For the Lord has done a great work for you today. Amen.