

The word “chains” does not occur anywhere in our reading about the Crossing of the Red Sea, the central story of the Exodus event. But one cannot understand the significance of this miraculous event without recognizing that “chains” underlie the entire story of the people of Israel in Egypt. Furthermore, the message of this story for us today will be amazing good news for those of us who recognize the presence of various types of “chains” in our own lives. Let’s start with the chains of the Israelites and then explore our own.

As we continue to follow the working out of God’s promises of land, descendants, and blessing to Abraham that we read two weeks ago, we are now many generations into the story. Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, is also known by the name Israel. Jacob’s twelve sons are therefore known as the sons of Israel and their extended families are known as the people of Israel, or the Israelites. The book of Exodus begins by stating that Jacob’s family numbered only 70 people when they all moved to Egypt at the invitation of Joseph. After the generation of Joseph and his brothers dies, the text says, “But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” Perhaps a couple of hundred years pass by, and then “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.”

Chains. Slavery. Bondage. Oppression. Captivity. This was the new reality for the Israelites. They became slave labor. They lost freedom of movement. Their hope for the future was stolen from them. Chapter 2 ends with these words: “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out...God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”

Then follows the epic story of how God continues to work out his promises to Abraham, this time through the leadership of a man named Moses. I would guess that most of us have seen the movie *The Ten Commandments* or the animated version, *The Prince of Egypt*, so we know the basic story line – The LORD God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush and tells him to go to Pharaoh with the message, “Let my people go.” Moses in effect replies, “Are you nuts? The Pharaoh is king of the most powerful empire in the world. He’s not going to listen to me!” Moses has a couple of other excuses to try to get out of this assignment, but this is the main one. What follows is portrayed as a struggle between the power of Pharaoh and the power of the LORD God. The struggle goes ten rounds. We call them the Ten Plagues – water turned the color of blood, frogs, flies, boils, grasshoppers, darkness.

The tenth and final plague leads directly to our reading today about the crossing of the Red Sea. The LORD God instructs the Israelites to prepare a lamb for the evening meal and to take the blood of the lamb and smear it on their door posts to indicate that this home is inhabited by Israelites. The LORD God then sends a plague of death over the land, so extensive that it strikes every household. But the homes marked by the blood of the lamb are not affected. The Israelites are safe. Pharaoh surrenders, acknowledging that the LORD God is more powerful than he, and he finally relents and allows the Israelites to leave. They set out to return to the land promised to Abraham, several thousand in number. The chains of slavery are finally broken and they are free.

They had not been gone long when Pharaoh changed his mind, deciding that he was not ready to give up his large supply of slave labor. Pharaoh’s army pursues and catches up with the Israelites at a very inopportune spot, on the shores of the Red Sea. Water in front of them. An army behind them. What to do? Moses gives unexpected directions. Instead of “Prepare to fight” he says “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today.” And sure enough, the Lord does everything while the people watch in awe. The waters of the Red Sea part, allowing them to cross on dry ground, and when the Egyptians pursue, the waters return and the army of Pharaoh is wiped out.

In my sermon last week about the story of Joseph, I noted that the Lord God did not act directly or miraculously in moving his promises forward. In that story, God works quietly behind the scenes, using Joseph’s talents and skills to bring about his purposes. And my conclusion was the old saying, “Pray as if everything depends on God, and act as if everything depends on you.” So it is rather distressing to me that the very next week I have to preach on a text that seems to contradict what I said last week. In this desperate situation I would have expected Moses to say, “Pray for God’s help and get ready to fight for your freedom.” But the message of this story seems to be, “Pray as if everything depends on God because everything does depend on God and you can trust God to act on your behalf.” Doesn’t that seem to be what this story is telling us? Remember that song we sometimes sing at the

end of worship that says, “The angels are not sent into this world of pain to do what we were meant to do in Jesus’ name; that falls to you and me and all who are made free. Help us, O Lord, we pray, to do your will today.” I love that song. But based on the story of the Red Sea, perhaps we should rewrite the song and say, “The angels ARE sent into this world of pain to make everything right. Sit back in a comfy chair and watch as the Lord frees the captive and oppressed.”

So which is it? Do we count on the Lord God to do everything or does it dependent on us to bring about God’s will on earth? You know what I’m going to say. Yes, it’s a dialectic, an either/or question that is answered by a “yes.” You see, there are some situations where the chains that bind us are so strong that we are unable to remove them no matter how much effort we exert. There are two powers that bind each of us over which we are powerless to free ourselves. We call these powers “sin” and “death.”

You may have noticed that I had us use an older version of the Confession of Sin as we prepared for worship today. I appreciate the no-nonsense way it describes our situation – “We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” That is hard for us to say, because it is natural for us to think that we can break the power of sin ourselves. We often think that to repent of sin means to say, “I can do better” or “I can try harder.” But to repent of sin means to say, “I can’t.” I can’t do this by myself, no matter how hard I try.

The only way to be freed of the chains and bondage of sin is to be forgiven, for forgiveness breaks the power of sin and gives us freedom to live as children of God. And because sin is always sin against God as well as others, God alone has the power to ultimately forgive us, to say to us, “Your sins are forgiven, I don’t hold them against you anymore, you are free.” When it comes to the chains of the power of sin, we can do nothing but hear the words of Moses to the Israelites, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you this day.” When I or any other pastor announces to you by the authority of Jesus that your sins are forgiven, there is nothing you can do about it but gratefully receive what God has done for you.

The other power that holds us in chains is death. This is the one thing that we have in common with every other person who has ever lived – we are going to die. Death is a power that we can curse, we can rail against, that we can fight against, but there is nothing we can do in and of ourselves to withstand its power. Here again, the LORD God steps in and does what we are not able to do for ourselves. God becomes incarnate in Jesus, willingly accepts rejection of his love as we put him to death, but breaks the power of death in his resurrection on Easter morning. The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that once again God has acted for us to do what we can not do for ourselves. By showing that ultimate power belongs to God rather than death, we are freed from the chains of the fear of death. As Paul writes in Romans 8, we know that nothing in all creation, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We are now freed to live as Easter people, people of hope, people who can confidently confront the other powers of injustice, poverty, illness, and hunger in our world, for we know who has ultimate power – the One who created us, has redeemed us, and continues to sustain us day by day.

Every year at the Vigil of Easter, we read several long stories tracing the history of salvation, how God fulfills the promises made to Abraham in the resurrection of Jesus. One story we always read is this one about the crossing of the Red Sea. And after reading the Easter gospel about Jesus’ resurrection, we sing this hymn which ties the two together:

Come, you faithful, raise the strain of triumphant gladness!
God has brought forth Israel [the church] into joy from sadness,
loosed from Pharaoh’s bitter yoke Jacob’s sons and daughters;
led them with unmoistened foot through the Red Sea waters.

Then we have the Sacrament of Baptism, and we dwell in the image of how going through the waters of baptism is a metaphor of going through the waters of the Red Sea, for both are about God freeing his people from bondage.

The Crossing of the Red Sea is a resurrection story. It is a story of God breaking the chains that bind us, whether they are chains of slavery or the chains of sin and death. In the face of all such chains, we heed the words of Moses, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you this day.”