

## Road Blocks and Detours

### Exodus: 14: 1-25

On any good road trip, we know that there is always one thing we can count on...things will never go as planned. Something will always come up to delay the trip. Either someone left something important at home and we have to go back to get it, or we are not able leave at the time we wanted and so now we are stuck in traffic. And of course, no matter where the journey may lead, there will always, always be road construction with its orange barrels decorating the scenery and detours sending us out of our way just so that we can save five minutes. It is just a fact of life. Every proper road trip will always have road blocks, surprises for which even GPS cannot account. These road blocks always seem to find us. No matter how much we plan and try to avoid them, they are always there. It is just a universal truth. Every journey is filled with road blocks and detours. And for the people of Israel, their journey to the Promise land was no exception.

Just two chapters after being told to get up and go, we find them already wandering in the desert, encountering their first detour. We are told at the beginning of our text today that God tells Moses to have the people turn back towards Egypt. The purpose for this is so that Pharaoh would believe they were lost. God knew Pharaoh wasn't done yet. He would make one last effort to block

the people's departure. After all, all the free labor for the Pharaoh's empire was leaving and he would be left with nothing.

Yet let's face it, this truly wasn't the people's first detour. Long before this moment in the wilderness, the people were already turning back toward Egypt, both mentally and spiritually. In chapter 13, God had an inkling about this when God said, "I can't lead the people through the land of Philistines, although it would be quicker. If I do that, the people might encounter some bumps in the road and decide to turn back to Egypt." So God has to take them the long way around just to get to the same point on their journey to the Promised Land.

Why we might ask? After all, for the people of Israel, Egypt was a land of oppression, a land of brick quotes, broken backs, and bitter lives. We would think that they would be glad to get out there, thinking do not pass go. Do not collect your \$200. The people were free. We assume that after hearing they were released from captivity, that all the people would be able to think about was getting out of Dodge the fastest way they knew how...except, except what we soon discover is that the people are already starting to turn back towards Egypt, both mentally, spiritually and now physically. In spite of all the oppression and brokenness that they had experienced in Egypt, they had already started to turn back towards Egypt for one simple reason.

They turned back because Egypt was the “known” entity in their lives. It was comfortable for them in a weird sort of way. While in Egypt the people knew what to expect but on this, this journey to the promise land, everything was unknown. For the people of Israel, turning back became their mode of operation. All because...it was easier to do things the way they had always done them. Regardless of how bad it might have been, the people preferred Egypt over venturing into the unknown and trying something new. Let’s just say this was not a great beginning for the people of God.

And if this detour for the people, mentally, spiritually, and now physically, if this detour wasn’t enough to make the already stressful journey more so, it became even more complicated for people when they came upon the Red Sea, a seemingly insurmountable road block which was preventing them from moving forward on their journey. These two things, this detour back towards Egypt and this road block in the form of the Red Sea, these two things had brought the people’s journey to a complete stop.

This is where we find the people of Israel, on the banks of the sea, wondering which direction to go. All ways are blocked. Pharaoh and his army are chasing them down on one side. The Red Sea is preventing them from moving forward on the other side. What are the people to do?

Well, they respond like we all do when we encounter road blocks on our journey, they begin to complain! They begin to blame others. They begin to give up hope, wondering what the point of it all was. At the first bump in the road, the people preferred to give up and die rather than to discover a new way forward. At the first unexpected twists in their journey, the people wanted to return to oppression and brokenness rather than to venture into the unknown.

This is where we find the people of Israel...on the banks of the sea, without resources and facing certain death. Or as one commentator put it...we find the people in one big chaotic mess.

However, much to our surprise, and to the people's surprise, we realize that all hope is not lost. "God has one last miracle to perform, [a miracle which would once more bring about a new creation for the people of God. This miracle] would forever establish that the God of the Israelites is more than a god of just one nation. Through this miracle, for now and evermore, God is revealed as the God of all the universe, having power over two great enemies, enemies which had long disrupted and disturbed the peace for the people of God. Those two enemies are chaos and tyranny." Sounds familiar right? Do you sense a theme happening here?

If, when we look at this text, we are reminded of the first creation story, that's a good thing. Because that is exactly what the writer intends for us to do.

The writer wants us to hear the words of this passage and remember....remember again the promises of God, to remember again a time when God restored and redeemed God's world, to remember again that God has claimed and named all as God's very own.

When we hear the author describing how the waters of the Red Sea were churning and preventing the people from moving forward on their journey, the author wants us to remember another time when God made a way out of no way. In the beginning of Genesis, we are told that the earth was a formless void with darkness covering the face of the earth. Then something amazing happening, something life changing began to stir. God's Spirit moved across the waters, separating the light from the darkness, separating the waters, bringing forth dry land. In the beginning, we are told that God overcame the chaos, bringing forth life for the people of God. Just like God is doing for them again.

With the moving of God's spirit, the waters part. Dry land comes forth, and now the people have a way to continue their journey. The road block has been removed. And the way forward is cleared. Through the deliverance of God's people, bringing them safely to the other shore, we realize that there is more to this story than just comfort for God's people. The narrative of this story is to show the daunting cynical powers of the world that God will always have the last word,

something all of us need to be reminded of again and again because as much as we like to think this story is for us, it is really for the people on the margins

]Let me explain....I'll be the first to admit that I have often struggled with this story, trying to bring together what I know and have experienced of our God, a God who is loving and slow to anger, a God who is faithful from generation to generation, a God who embraces all as Beloved Children of God. For a long time, I have struggled to assimilate what I know to be true about our God with this image of a vengeful God, a God who kills.

Thankfully this week, through conversations with some biblical scholars, people who are way smarter than me, thankfully, they helped me reimage this text, taking me from a place of privilege and reorienting me, inviting me to see this passage from the viewpoint of one who is still facing the bonds of oppression and brokenness by the powers of this world which honestly does not include the majority of us sitting in the pews right now. For most of us, we have money in our banks, clothes in our closets, food in our pantries and other safety nets to catch us when we fall. But for the majority of the world's population, this is not true. That's why this is their story and not our story.

This narrative of God making a way out of no way is for the refugee fleeing his home. This narrative of hope and redemption is for the immigrant whose family

is being torn apart. This narrative of God restoring God's people is for the majority of the world's population who live day in and day out with poverty and despair.

This narrative of God having the last word is for those others have forgotten, people who have been ignored too long, and who are always at the mercy of the powers that be, which does not describe the majority of us sitting here today.

Now please don't hear me say that this text has nothing to say to us. The opposite of that statement is actually true. It is just not what we expected or even wanted to hear. You see, this text acts as a wakeup call to us, for us to dismantle the power structures of the world's empires rather than becoming a tool which continues to prop them up. Amazing what we learn when we read the bible in its entirety, isn't it?

For me, this uncomfortable realization all started when one commentator pointed out that "there are two words for "dry land" used in this passage. One is yabbashah. This is used most often to describe this miracle of parting the Red Sea. It is also used to describe God's work in Genesis to tell of the creation story as well.

But another word for dry land appears in verse 21, charabah, derived from the root, ch-r-b. This word means to "dry up or to be in ruins". Not only does this distinguish between liquid and solid, water and its absence, it is also used to

describe the waste and desolation that follows upon warfare, judgement and destruction. In this particular verse, it is used to mean end of an order."

This commentator went on to reference MLK's sermon, "The Death of Evil on the Seashore" in which MLK states, "there are things in our society, such as greed, war, high places where people are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of self-interest, and imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with iron feet of oppression [which must be dismantled so that God's people may all really be free.] The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good."

As I took the time to reimagine this passage this week, now from the vantage point of someone who is on the margins, I realized that this is the whole Gospel message in a nutshell. From Mary's song where she sings of God bringing down the powerful, to the angels' chorus to the shepherds, celebrating peace on Earth, from the story of David and Goliath to the women's tears upon discovering the empty tomb, as people of faith, we proclaim each and every day that God will have the last word.

Or as MLK said as he drew his sermon on the death of evil to a close, "Above all, we must be reminded anew that God is at work in God's universe...As we struggle to defeat the forces of evil, the God of the universe struggles with us.

Evil dies on the seashore, not merely because of human's endless struggle against it, but because of God's power to defeat it."

Please don't hear me say, that I am standing up here with all the answers. What I am saying is as people of faith, we have a responsibility, a responsibility to ask ourselves what it means to be disciples of Christ, to ask ourselves what it looks like to live out our call to care for the least of these. As followers of the Risen Lord who overcame the grave, we have a responsibility to reflect on what our faith requires from us as we become the transformative, life giving, life changing Body of Christ here on Earth.

I don't know about you but it gives me hope to realize that God is still overcoming the chaos which fills our world, bringing forth new life as God works to remove all the road blocks which prevents us from moving forward on our journey, roadblocks which prevents the Kingdom of God from being here on Earth as it is in heaven. I don't know about you but it gives me hope to know that God will always make a way out of no way. Thanks be to God. Amen.