

Sermon #1,003: Exodus 14:5-31

2-17-13 (1st Sunday in Lent), Bethany-Princeton MN

WALLED IN BY THE WATER OF BAPTISM

Prayer: Almighty God, in Your judgment You drowned hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his armies in the Red Sea; but in Your mercy You led Your people Israel through the same waters on dry ground. In this way You prefigured the wonders of the water of baptism. By the power of the saving flood of Holy Baptism continue to confound Satan and drown the Old Adam, our sinful nature, which continually torments us, that we may at last attain to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen! (*from Luther's prayer for baptism known as the Flood Prayer*)

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

The children of Israel and Pharaoh's army went into the same Red Sea.

"The waters were a wall to them on the right hand and on their left," was true for the children of Israel. **"The waters were a wall to them on the right hand and on their left,"** was true for the Egyptians too – for a while, anyway.

They were both going into a tomb, a place where everyone who goes in drowns. But one group came out on the other side. Moses and the children of Israel came out on the other side, alive and free. Pharaoh and the Egyptian army drowned **"in the midst of the sea. Not so much as one of them remained."** – **"But the children of Israel had walked on dry land in the midst of the sea, and the waters were a wall to them on the right hand and on their left. So the LORD saved Israel that day, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore."**

This is history, it was a real event, it was a miracle like the ones God allowed Moses to perform earlier at Pharaoh's court. A miracle is a supernatural event, literally *above nature*, when God Himself suspends the laws of nature, the natural course of events, and making an entire body of water part into two walls of water with the ground suddenly dry in the middle – when the ground otherwise would take days to dry if you would be able to empty the sea of water – this

can only be a miracle. Many people don't believe in miracles. They're influenced by an atheistic worldview that no God is involved in nature, but only what can be explained by nature is true. But the parting of the Red Sea is not a myth, and you can find evidence for that in a massive loss of military strength by Egypt in the 1400s B.C. Also, the fear of the peoples in Canaan that the Israelites encountered later begins with the report of this miracle. So this is historic and true.

But as important as it is to maintain this – because the Christian faith is based on true, historic events – the importance of this goes beyond the fact that it is history. It is not only history. It is not only about those children of Israel. This is about you. Through this history God teaches you more about your baptism. This has been the proper Christian teaching for a long time. Martin Luther taught that in the Red Sea crossing God “*prefigured the wonders of the water of baptism*” (*Flood Prayer*). As early as the 200s, the church [*Tertullian, On Baptism: IX*] was teaching that their being saved by crossing through water receives its complete fulfillment in baptism. We can learn this and join today with Christians of old.

Picture the scene in Exodus chapter 14: Moses stands with the children of Israel at the edge of the Red Sea. Pharaoh's army has overtaken them. The Egyptians are laughing, the Israelites crying in anguish, looking for someone to blame. The children of Israel, it says, “**were very afraid.**” They said, “**It would have been better for us to serve [literally, be slaves of] the Egyptians.**”

Now picture your scene, in every chapter of your life: Jesus stands with all His children at the edge of another *Red Sea*, a “sea” of blood and death. That started with the blood of Abel. This was what the devil planned: a sea of blood and death, for “*the wages of sin is death!*” So everyone in the world is “**dead on the seashore.**” Every baby who is born comes out of its watery home in the womb, and is “**dead on the seashore,**” dead on arrival, dead in sin.

The devil is laughing.

He has caught up to you. He has you caught in the clutches of sin. He has enticed everyone to sin, to do his will. You are his slave – slave to sin, the devil, and death. By virtue of the devil ruling this world you live in, and using his instruments of torture -- sin and its consequences, not only death but even the fear of death and a guilty conscience -- your life here is a wilderness. You too are afraid that you will “**die in the wilderness,**” the wilderness where there is only sorrow and despair and everything comes to an end. We make it worse. Don’t we think it’s “**better for us to be slaves**” of our heartless Pharaoh, the Devil? That doesn’t make any more sense than the Israelites’ request to go back to Egypt, but actually we live like that’s what we want, to be slaves of the Devil.

This history teaches you how often you are at the edge of the Red Sea.

You are at the edge of the Red Sea when you are toying with being slaves of your Pharaoh, the Devil, by wanting to join the ones who look so strong or numerous, getting enticed; by not thinking of your sins as a grievous foe; by making peace with sin, refusing to let your sins – or the sins of others – bother you, excusing and tolerating sins, you listen to the siren song that goes, “*Don’t be so uptight, relax your strict standards.*” In all these things you join the ones doomed to drown in the sea of blood and death, who are oblivious to the dangers.

You are also at the edge of the Red Sea when you are drowning in your sins, not seeing that the victory is already yours, thinking your sins are still with you and that you bear the burden of them, forgetting that your sins were drowned, buried, in Christ’s tomb. You say you just can’t believe you could be forgiven. This too dooms you to drown in the sea of blood and death.

It is because of all this that Jesus instituted baptism, and indeed was preparing for it through all of human history, even this Red Sea history.

As you know, Jesus instituted baptism right before He ascended into heaven, with His words *“baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* It was really the last thing He did on this earth. He didn’t want you to be without it. He didn’t want a single soul to be without baptism. This is one of the ways that, even though Jesus has ascended to heaven, He is not gone but is with you always, because baptism does great things. Baptism is not just water, but it is the water connected with the Word. Baptism effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil – just like the Red Sea crossing – and gives eternal salvation to all who believe, for *“he who believes and is baptized shall be saved.”* Baptism too is a miracle that really happens, it does these great things by the power of the Word of God which is in and with the water.

And so, in the language of the Red Sea crossing, what is baptism? Baptism is the wall of water on your right hand and on your left. You are walled in by the water of baptism. It keeps you safe. That’s what your baptism does: it saves you.

When you are at the edge of the Red Sea, either drowning in your sins or tempted to be slaves of your Pharaoh, the Devil, when you are too weak and helpless and all you are is *“very afraid,”* then *“stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord”* in your baptism! Jesus doesn’t transport you back to the crossing of the Red Sea in 1446 B.C. He brings it all to you. In the water of baptism. Jesus led you in the Red Sea which is holy baptism; for, as we sing in Luther’s baptism hymn, baptism is a *“cleansing fountain, red with the dear blood of Jesus”* (#247 v. 7).

When you’re baptized, something gets drowned like Pharaoh’s army: all your sin. But you come out on the other side, like they did, meaning: completely free from sin, the devil, and death. *“What harm can sin and death then do?”*

There’s nothing they can do to you – until the devil overtakes you in sin, or in the terrors of death and judgment. Don’t you find that this happens to you?

Doesn't your baptism seem so weak, when you don't walk like a child of God? Don't you feel like you are wandering in the wilderness? So then what do you need? Not to be baptized again, not to have another Red Sea crossing, but what to use your baptism. To drown the old Adam with all its sins and evil lusts.

You do this when you repent. That's what the season of Lent reminds us to do. Coming to repent is like coming to be baptized. It's as though we are little fishes, staying in the water where it's safe (*Tertullian, On Baptism: I*), which is the significance of the wall of water on the right hand and on the left. You still need this protection. You need the water of baptism to wall you in, to keep you safe. When you have sins, you are still walled in by your baptism. When you have doubts whether you are forgiven, or fears about whether you will go to heaven, or you aren't the Christian you want to be, you can say: "But I am baptized." You have the wall of water, the water of your baptism, on your right hand and left.

We have to be reminded of this. So did the children of Israel. The Red Sea crossing is the subject of many psalms that repeat this history in detail. In many cases these are psalms of repentance for not being what they should have been, such as Psalm 78, Psalms 105 and 106. This was a regular part of their prayer life.

So also just because you haven't lived up to your baptism, and kept yourself as clean as you want, does not mean your baptism didn't work. When you repent you are simply returning to the promises of your own baptism, to be washed clean again. Thank God for baptizing you. Pray to Him to keep you in this baptismal grace. Pray for your faith. Pray for the faith of your children, and godchildren. We make the sign of the cross in remembrance of baptism, to be reminded that you are baptized, that you walk on your path of life walled in by your baptism and will make it safely across to heaven. "*Through Christ's redemption you shall stand among the glorious heavenly band!*" (#241 v. 1) Amen!