

## Freedom Trail

### Exodus 14:10-31

When I was a kid in school, I always looked forward to field trips. Partly because it felt like a day off from being in a classroom. But more than that, field trips made history come alive for me in ways that a textbook alone never could. Simply reading about the perilous voyage of the Mayflower, for instance, failed to impress on me the harsh realities of that journey. What did the trick was walking the dark, claustrophobic below-decks of the Mayflower II in Plymouth Harbor. Field trips to the Freedom Trail in Boston and visits to places like Concord's Old North Bridge, where the "shot heard round the world" was fired, brought to life our nation's journey from tyranny to independence as no lecture ever had.

Just as the Revolutionary War has shaped our American identity and values, what happened at the Red Sea was the defining moment in Jewish history. You might say that the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt marks the route of Israel's "Freedom Trail." Unlike our Freedom Trail, there is no field trip we can take to the site of the parting of the Red Sea. There is no modern monument there to commemorate the confrontation between a subjugated people and a mighty empire. No Plymouth Rock to enshrine the place where the Israelites first stepped into a New World as a free people. No historical records of the Exodus anywhere, except those of the Biblical account.

To accept the story of the Red Sea Passage at face value requires a leap of faith. People who demand more scientific explanations for things in life have proposed a number of alternative scenarios to make some rational sense of the story for themselves. The problem with attempting to rationalize the Red Sea story is that in the process of figuring out a logical way around the story you negate the purpose of its telling, which is that there was no earthly way for the Israelites to get out of their predicament on their own.

The Israelites themselves, never took any credit for their own liberation. They never claimed that freedom came because the highly trained Egyptian soldiers were outfoxed by a rag tag band of freed slaves. This was no "Braveheart" moment, with Moses acting like Mel Gibson on horseback rousing Scottish peasants to bravely repulse the English army. Left to their own devices, the Israelites always seemed more eager to turn *back* to a life of slavery than to trust that God would deliver them from the hardships that came with freedom.

But as the Egyptians bore down on them that day, they faced a point of no return. These former slaves, knew something about how to make bricks by hand from mud and straw. They knew *nothing* about defending themselves in hand to hand combat against lethal warriors. They had lived long enough in Egyptian captivity to have seen with their own eyes and felt upon their whip-scarred backs what brutality the Egyptians were capable of inflicting on them, to make the mistake of underestimating their enemy.

What they would not understand, not until their backs were against the sea with no escape route, was what God was capable of doing to deliver them. They were gripped by terror and cried out to Moses, "it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." But there was no

turning back by then. And so, God spoke to Moses and said, “Tell the Israelites not to be afraid, but to go forward.” Then God told Moses to open up a way for them to go forward by lifting his staff and stretching out his hand over the water to divide it and create a road to freedom for them to follow.

You can swap hypotheses about what happened next all you want. What I want to know is who it was among the Israelites that dared to take that first step forward into those parted waters? What was going on inside that person? At what point did faith in God’s way override their fear of the unknown? Because that is what is going to help me when I find myself in that sort of hopeless situation. What I need to know, and maybe you want to know it too, is how to not let fear stop us from stepping out in faith.

If fear keeps us trapped in some situation, afraid to move forward; or bogs us down in always telling God how insurmountable our problems are instead of confronting our problems with how great God is, then we may never step onto the trail that leads to freedom from the past. The life changing power of this story is found not only in the Israelites deliverance from Egypt’s tyranny, but in their deliverance from the tyranny of their own fear, and doubts about God. They came to understand who they were as a people by understanding who God was as a deliverer. And if we want to know who we really are ... or can be, we need to always be learning who God is, too.

Gladys Aylward was a missionary in China when the Japanese invaded during WWII. She helped lead 100 orphans on a freedom trail from danger to safety. But at times on the journey, she despaired of ever reaching their destination. During one of those times of doubt, a young Chinese girl reminded Gladys about the story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. But I am not Moses,” Gladys said. “No, you aren’t” the girl replied, “but God is still God.”

Sometimes the only way we find out that God is still God is by being in life situations where we are powerless to help ourselves, or others, so that we can discover and trust God’s solutions. It is never fun to find that life has painted you into a corner with no apparent way out. But to walk through a great fear, to know that we have gotten through something we dreaded not by our own wits or courage, but because God was walking alongside us, opening a way for us--*that* is a tremendously liberating experience. And as we gain freedom from the power of fear to dominate us, we can be more available to be instruments of God in guiding others toward freedom from whatever forms of captivity they are tangled up in. It was God who delivered the Israelites, but God chose to work through a person--Moses. An easily forgotten detail about Moses is that he had already escaped Egypt once. He was doing OK for himself, working for his father-in-law Jethro, safely beyond the reach of Pharaoh’s power. But then he experienced the presence and power of God where he had least expected to find it, in a burning bush. He still had a lot of self-doubt after that encounter, but he also had a new faith that enabled him to go forward on the way that God was sending him.

That way led back to Egypt, to his brothers and sisters who were still oppressed and in bondage. The trail led him to a lopsided showdown at the Red Sea, where the overmatched Israelites walked into the unknown as runaway slaves, and walked out the other side a free people. But their freedom trail did not end there. Eventually it led to a place called Nazareth. It was there that a Jew named Jesus kicked off his public ministry by declaring that the Spirit of God was upon him, to “bring release to the captives.”

That trail leads to us, here and now. Where are you on that trail? Where do you need to go forward in life, trusting in God’s presence and power when you feel like your past won’t release its grip on you? Or, when your future feels hopeless? Where can you share your faith with someone who feels cornered and

alone by some circumstance in his or her life? The place where God needs you might be by the side of a friend who feels hopelessly trapped by some seemingly impossible situation. It could be in advocating and working to change systems that keep people in bondage to poverty, injustice or violence. Wherever you are, how *you* have experienced God's deliverance will shape the ways you can walk with others on their "freedom trail."

Because today is Church School registration Sunday, I want to say something about the importance of passing along the stories of our faith to each new generation. Just about the time that I was born, the Freedom Trail in Boston was preserved and dedicated. Before that, it had been neglected and was being threatened by the wrecking ball. If those sites *had not* been preserved, how many children like me would have missed out on an experience that helped to shape their understanding of their history and their identity?

If we fail to pass along, teach, and interpret the stories of our faith to our children, what might they never understand and experience about God, and their place in God's world?

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