

**“Somewhere beyond the sea”**  
**Exodus 14:19-31**  
**Sunday, September 13, 2020**  
**A sermon from Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church**

**By Chris Keating**

Long before Universal Studios in Hollywood, CA became a theme park, it was only a studio tour, a behind-the-scenes look at movie sets, props and special effects. One of its prime attractions was the park lake which had doubled for various ocean scenes over the years, including “The Ten Commandments.”

I remember going there as a child. We boarded a tram that took us across the backlot of the studio. As it crept closer to the edge of the lake, it felt as though we were about to drop into the water. But then tour director would wave his arms in his best impression of Moses and, voila! Suddenly the “sea” parted, and the tram proceeded across the lake with water rushing down on all sides.

But the effect was sometimes diminished because you could see the metal plates holding back the water. And, even worse, sometimes the tram’s wheels would get stuck just like the Egyptian chariots.

It just goes to show that the book is always better than the movie.

You can’t blame Hollywood – it’s impossible to try and understand the “ins and outs” of Israel’s passage out of Egypt. Trying to figure out how this happened is not the point as Walter Brueggemann says. In his words, this story is “a witness to the power of (Yahweh) the Lord and a summons to faith.”<sup>1</sup>

A better version of the story, I think, might be the animated movie “Prince of Egypt” produced by Dreamworks in the 1990s. In that movie, God’s people gather at the shoreline. They see Pharaoh’s chariots stampeding toward them. Even Moses is filled with fear. His hands try to hold steady his rod, which is the symbol

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. I, p. 796.

of God's authority and presence. It is not clear whether or not that promise brings him much comfort.

That is the tension we experience in our lives. Faced with bedeviling struggles on one side, and the murky depths of watery chaos on the other, we wait for God's leading. We lean forward, straining to trust that God is present, but suddenly we hear the stampede headed our way.

Perhaps not unlike the Hebrew people, we may be wondering if God is present, or if God even cares. Do we believe that our hope lies somewhere beyond the deep blue sea?

So far in this story, God's imperative has been clear: "Move forward!" God has freed the people of Israel, calling them to move forward. Their faith has led them away from their captivity. Their faith has cleared a pathway through obstacles. Their faith has preserved them from the plagues.

And there is the basic conflict of this story: Israel is about to be crushed, but God has made it clear: somebody had better cue Bobby Darin, because their future is somewhere beyond the sea!

As they stand on the shoreline, neither of the options in front of them looks great. The horses are gaining ground, and it seems the Hebrew people have forgotten to pack their swimsuits. On one side is a heavily armed army propelled by a greedy leader who has just realized his cheap labor has run away. On the other side is the marshy, muddy waters of uncertainty.

Israel shouts out to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt, that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us?"

By now some are surely wondering why Moses did not stop to ask for directions prior to leaving Egypt. They murmur to each other, "Does he even have a map?" Moses overwhelming trust in God fails to ease their fears, especially since the primary way God has been leading them has been by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. When you're lost in a strange place, clouds and fire are generally not the most comforting method of receiving directions.

These are not the big, fluffy, happy clouds that Bob Ross taught us to paint on PBS years ago, either. Instead, the cloud which leads by day and the pillar which lights

the night are potent, but mysterious reminders of the unimaginable presence of God.

Musing on these verses several years ago, Princeton Seminary president Craig Barnes noted that this is still how God leads us through life.

“In the daytime hours when we are busy with plans and strategies,” Barnes wrote, “God is present only as a nebulous cloud. It is so hard to grab hold of that. At night when we are lying in bed staring at the ceiling, alone with our anxieties, God is a pillar of fire we cannot touch.”<sup>2</sup>

Israel faces a challenge. Just as Pharaoh’s armies close in, the cloud moves (v. 19). In their most desperate moment, as Sean White notes, it must have surely felt as God’s presence had just vanished.<sup>3</sup> Once again, Israel’s life has become destabilized.

The narrator does not tell us, but it is not hard to imagine how the fear gripped Israel when they noticed the cloud had disappeared. It is the fear that hangs in our hearts as a loved one dies. It is the fear felt by many in California, Oregon, or Montana as they watch wildfires draw near. It is the anguish a parent feels late into the night, or the dread which fills us when we are uncertain if we have the convictions faith calls us to hold, or the pain that stabs us as chemo flows into our veins.

Are you with us God?

The cloud of God’s presence leading them is not a pleasant cirrus or even an unusually shaped stratus. Nor is the cloud a map, or even a set of written directions.

Instead, the cloud of God’s presence is a bit like the disembodied voice of our cell phone GPS – in 1500 feet, turn left. Turn left! In 600 feet, make a “U” turn. The cloud does not disappear, but rather it moves to the rear, becoming a barrier between Israel and Pharaoh’s rage.

One of the techniques that firefighters use in battling brush fires is called backburning. The premise is that you fight fire with fire, as counterintuitive as

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<sup>2</sup> “Cloud and Fire, *The Christian Century*, July 27, 2010, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> White, “Theological Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Proper 19, Exodus 14:19-31.

that may sound. By setting a boundary, firefighters set a control burn between the boundary and the raging inferno. The power comes from behind, consuming fuel and controlling the blaze.

God moves behind the people. God does not disappear, but instead provides the power which allows them to move forward.

This is also the good news of the Gospel: God does not ignore our desperate cries. Freed from our bondage to sin, Jesus Christ is with us as we move forward in faith. Indeed, we shall see and know the presence of our God.

Thomas Merton is known for his keen insights into spirituality and prayer. Yet his own journey of faith was not a particularly easy path.

One of his most famous prayers reflects this:

My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you  
does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always though  
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. <sup>4</sup>

Six months into our socially distanced reality, and two months before a hotly contested election, we may well be wondering about God's presence and

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/merton-prayer>

whether it has dissipated the way fog lifts before noon. Nearly apocalyptic images of fear are blasted across our screens. Time and time again in 2020 our lives have been destabilized.

But the cloud of God's presence has not evaporated. It is not gone. It has moved behind us, protecting us as we move forward in faith.

"The task ahead of us," Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "is never as great as the power behind us." That was certainly true for Israel, and it remains true for us. The power and presence of God guide us even in the moments when the way forward is unclear. We step into the uncertainty of the sea, confident that God not only goes ahead of us, but also behind us.

Amen.