“Through the Water”

Exodus 14:19-31 Hebrews 12:1-3

Years ago, Art Jensen, a friend from my mom’s church gave me a mug and it is one of my favorite, favorite mugs. In the center of the image, but way up in the back, you see Moses with his great white beard and his staff in his hand, arms raised. Behind him, you see this line of tiny people making their way up to the Red Sea. But Moses and the people are not the main focus of this image. Instead, we see these great walls of water parted miraculously with dry ground forming a path between them. In the left wall, you can see three, quite large, quite angry looking fish with focused, hungry eyes and great, sharp teeth. In the right wall, on the other side of the path of dry ground, you can see a much smaller looking fish who is suddenly quite by himself. Realizing that he’s probably not going to be someone’s lunch today after all, his eyes are smiling and he’s sticking his tongue out at the bigger fish. Beneath the image, the mug says, “Herman catches a lucky break.”

When we read the story of the Exodus in the Bible, we find descriptions of the plight of the people of Israel, how they had been slaves for perhaps 400 years, how things had gotten worse and worse for them. Yet, this story centers on God sending Moses and Aaron, Moses trying to talk to the people, Moses confronting Pharaoh. So often, when I’m drinking from my mug, I try to remember what this miracle was like from different perspectives.

Okay, granted, I’m usually not thinking about how it was for the sea creatures. I think about all the different ways the children of Israel must have experienced this miracle. In one of Moses’s first attempts to talk to the people and give them hope that the Lord would deliver them from a life of slavery in Egypt, Exodus 6:9 tells us, “they would not listen to Moses, because of their low spirits and their harsh labor.” Really, the Hebrew says that their spirits were cut off, shortened – it was a way to speak of their feelings of anguish, discouragement, and exhaustion. They couldn’t connect with his impossible dream because…well, because it was impossible!

So many of the miracles that Moses does during this part of the story are before Pharaoh’s eyes – to convince him of the power of God to, “let my people go.” The people witness the destruction and the impact of the ten plagues of Egypt, for certain, but I’m betting more than a few of them would’ve been jaded and cynical about it. “Yeah, sure, Moses! You say these flies are from God, but, come on! We’ve had flies before!”

So, think about the people walking together through the Red Sea. There’s an old woman who never stopped praying, who never stopped believing, but she’s seen generations of her family come into the world, suffering, struggling. Her eyes now open wide as she sees the stories of faith come true before her eyes: praise the Lord!

There’s the guy whose been working, toiling, making bricks, suffering the lash. He can only even think about one day at a time because the days have been too hard to add them up together in his mind. Does he even believe in God any more? Maybe not, but look at the waters, divided, forming a wall! Could it be that God is with us? Praise the Lord!

See, a mother walking past with a nursing infant in her arms. All she wants is a safe way forward for the life of her child. She doesn’t think about her own life any more, but she will do anything to put her child on firmer ground. As she walks through the waters and sees the dark, strange skies swirling above and the waters heaped up as they never have been before, she presses her child more tightly in her arms. In perfect trust, the infant sleeps soundly: praise the Lord!

Or have you ever thought about the little kids? Sometimes it’s like their whole world is made up of what they’re seeing and experiencing in any given moment. Can’t you just see them running around, laughing, playing the ancient world equivalent of tag? Can’t you just see them saying, “Daddy, daddy, what kind of fish is that?” or splashing their hands in the water walls on either side while some overwhelmed loved one shouts, “stop that! Come here! Give me your hand!” Can’t you just see them – giddy, in awe, embracing the evidence of God’s faithful love that surrounds them? Praise the Lord!

This miracle wasn’t just about Moses vs. Pharaoh. It’s also about each and every anguished spirit learning to hope and trust in God again. It’s about starting to understand what it means to say, “the Lord is fighting for [the people],” the Lord saves the people and is with the people.

This morning, we’re celebrating Rally Day – and what a different Rally Day this is! We’re at home and in person. We’ve got school plans and schedules that you need a decoder ring to decipher! And none of us really know what crazy thing 2020 is going to throw at as next!

In many ways, I guess, 2020 can feel like how the Israelites must have felt before the waters parted. The Egyptian army was behind them, the Red Sea was in front of them, and they were told to make camp. Can you imagine – trying to sleep with an army bearing down? They had gone through so many difficulties and hardships just to get to that point and they had no earthly idea how they could possibly move forward from there.

But, well, God had a heavenly idea, a miraculous way forward to bring them to the next part of their journey. Because once the seas parted and the miracle happened and they moved along that next holy piece, their saga wasn’t over. Things didn’t just come easy, right away into the promised land. They kept journeying on with God, with the angel of the Lord, with Moses and Aaron and Miriam, and with each other. This, I think, is where we are today. We have these moments of miracle and inspiration – creativity and collaboration that get us just a little bit further on the way. And God is with us through all of this, but God is certainly not done ushering us forward into the future.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we shoot forward into the days of the early church. We are reminded that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses – including the people walking through the Red Sea; including the people walking close behind Jesus to the seashore, to the cross, to the tomb; including all the generations who help us see where God’s path has twisted and turned in every time and every place. Our hope is alive and we can be steadfast and dedicated as we run our part of the race – as we pass the baton on to the generations that come after us. We can do this because Jesus is our pioneer, our trailblazer – the one who shows us the path before us and bids us, “come and see,” “come and hear,” “come and do!” The weight of sin is not so heavy when we offer it up to Jesus who has already lifted it from us.

We might not feel like we are part of an earth shattering miracle everyday, but Christ is clearing a path for us now and always so do not grow weary, do not lose heart! Do not think that working yourself to death is going to solve this – do not go so long between rest times that you burn out! Do not let your spirit be cut off, shortened, or anguished. Do not let your soul faint within you. See, the miracle wasn’t about Moses. It wasn’t about that time and place alone. God is everyday parting the waters in some way, Christ holds us together, and the Spirit draws us onward. With hope in our hearts and trust in each step, let us say: praise the Lord!