

MOSES AND THE RED SEA



Exodus 14:24 "At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. (The Lord) clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians (finally) said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for (their God) is fighting for them against (us).'

So, since Pentecost the Old Testament readings have been a long series of the stories of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their children, and now story of Moses and the Exodus. And so, these past many weeks, I have frequently devoted the sermons to filling in the blanks amongst those readings, telling you some of the stories about these Biblical heroes that

you never hear on Sunday mornings in the Readings or see in the Hollywood movies. And as I have done so, I hope that you see that the stories you remember from Sunday School as a child are sometimes very different from what the Bible actually says. And there is no better example of that in all of the Scriptures than in today's reading from Exodus, in the story of the so-called Crossing of the Red Sea.

For the crossing of the Red Sea just may be the most dramatic example of how our impressions of what the Bible says are oftentimes sadly more formed by the films of Hollywood than by the words of Scripture. For Cecil B. DeMille's portrayal of this event in his famous movie "The Ten Commandments" is the image most of it us still hold dear, or perhaps the even grander versions in some more modern films like the History Channel's series, "The Bible," or Director Ridley Scott's recent movie entitled "Exodus: Gods and Kings," each newer version showing an even more dramatic parting of the Red Sea than the previous one!

But the problem here is that the words "the Red Sea" do not appear anywhere in the Bible. That's right. They're not really there. Oh yes, numerous people have come up to me in the past and showed me where their Bibles said that Moses crossed the 'Red Sea'; there are, for instance, some 36 instances of those words in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. But where our translations in English might read the 'Red Sea,' the

Hebrew words that actually appear in the Old Testament Scriptures are "Yam Suph." And there is no dispute among biblical scholars, conservative or liberal, as to what how those words render in English. The Hebrew words "Yam Suph" literally translate as "a sea of reeds," you know, a shallow body of water out of whose seabed weeds have grown. And if you look at the actual story of the Exodus in today's reading, the reference to a 'sea of reeds' makes far more sense in terms of the details of the story as it is told there. For the Israelites, we are told, took the roundabout way of the wilderness road out of Egypt towards the 'sea of reeds', finally camping by the sea after walking for several days and nights without stopping.

And so when Pharaoh was told that the Hebrews had left, he sent his chariots to bring them back. And as the Egyptians drew near to their camp, the Israelites cried out to Moses in fear, "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, bringing us out of Egypt? . . . For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians (as slaves) than to die (here) in the wilderness." These escaped Hebrews, as you will see in the coming weeks, are a whiny bunch. But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD (GOD) will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The

LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." Then we are told that Moses was ordered by God to stretch out his hand over the sea and we all know what happened next, right? No, we don't! The waters did not part at that time! Instead, we are told that, the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind that blew all night long.

And after that strong east wind that blew all through the night, the wind had turned the sea of reeds into dry land by morning, whereupon the Israelites could cross on foot. Meanwhile the Egyptians pursued them, and went into the sea bed after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers, and the waters that had been blown back by the hard east wind all night, we are told, returned to their normal depth that morning. And the chariot wheels of the Egyptians became 'clogged' in the sea, according to the Scriptures, so that the wheels turned with difficulty in their pursuit of the escaped Hebrew slaves. What were the chariot wheels clogged with? They were clogged by the reeds in the sea of reeds. The Egyptians were stuck in the mud, and some of Pharaoh's men were drowned. And eventually the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for (their God) is fighting for them against Egypt," that same God who was thought to have wrought the Ten Great Plagues that had devastated the people in Egypt, and so Pharaoh's army turned back.

God saved the Israelites that day from what appeared to them to be certain destruction, there at the sea of reeds God delivered the Israelites, when a strong east wind blew all night long and allowed the Israelites to cross on foot, but where the heavy Egyptians' chariots and horses got stuck in the mud and clogged with reeds. It was a moment of God's salvation that the Jews would never forget, but while their annual celebration of the Exodus story, the Passover Seder, remembers the Ten Great Plaques and the night the angel of death passed over their doors, it doesn't necessarily remember the crossing of the sea, because this is only a small part of the story. The climax of the Exodus story is the night of Passover, not the crossing of the so-called Red Sea. It's just that the crossing of the Red Sea makes for such a better picture in our minds than that of the angel of death striking down the Egyptian children with some fatal disease.

So why then does anyone think the Bible is referring to the Red Sea here and not some sea of reeds? Well, now there are lakes north of what we now call the Red Sea that are filled with reeds, and which in the time of Alexander the Great were considered part of the Red Sea. Indeed in classical Greek, the name Red Sea was used not only for the main body of the water of the Red Sea, but also the Persian Gulf and even the Indian Ocean, as well as these lakes in the north full of reeds. And so

the legendary Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was prepared for the famous Library of Alexandria, the version called the Septuagint, inserted in its translation the Greek words "Red Sea" where the Hebrew words for 'sea of reeds' were found, thinking that that is what was meant. It was not a mistranslation so much as an interpretation of the text or interpolation of what the words referred to. And the Greek Septuagint translation of the Jewish Bible was immensely popular in the Greco-Roman world, more popular than the original Hebrew, even among the Jews, even in the Holy Land, even in Jesus' day two hundred years later, as best evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls and the early Christian writers. The Septuagint was so popular, that whenever the Old Testament is quoted by New Testament writers, it is always quoted from the Greek Septuagint. And that Greek Septuagint translation has been used for readings from the Old Testament in the Greek-speaking Orthodox churches to this very day. And St. Jerome in his famous Vulgate translation of the Bible into Latin, that was the standard Western translation for 1500 years, followed the example of the Greeks, such that to this very day, publishers are afraid to accurately translate the Scriptures here. The Jerusalem Bible does translate these references in English literally as 'sea of reeds,' but few others do. The New Revised Standard Versions at least footnotes the accurate translation,

but most of your Bible translations knowingly perpetuate the Greek error 2,200 years later.

And because what the Bible actually says happened here is indeed very, very different from what we think the Bible says, Hollywood and our imaginations have convinced of something else, something grander, something far more miraculous, such that by demanding that we portray the story here accurately, as it is actually told in the Bible, is sometimes interpreted as somehow denying the power of God and the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea! I had a Deacon in my church in Bridgeport who once told me that she didn't care what the Bible says, the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, and in Ridley Scott's movie of the Exodus, it looks as though Moses parted the Red Sea at its deepest part just to make the point that God can do anything.

Now I believe that God can do anything, but I am more interested in what God actually did than in what we think God did! And so should you be! The Scriptures are the precious story of God's continual love for us and of God's saving presence again and again in our lives. We don't need to make things up to prove that God loves us! What we must hold sacred are the stories we do have, recorded in our Holy Scriptures, in the story of Moses and the Exodus, and in our own lives, and thus we must always know the difference between what we think the Bible says and what the Bible actually says! Amen.