

## (IM)POSSIBLE!

Reflection Sept. 30, 2018 by Hubert Den Draak.  
Scripture passage Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29



It's May 26 of the year 1940. Over 400,000 British and French troops are trapped with their backs to the English Channel, surrounded by German panzer divisions and ground troops. Churchill calls the situation "a colossal military disaster," saying the whole core and brain of the British Army is stranded at Dunkirk. A national day of prayer is declared throughout the United Kingdom for the deliverance of the troops.

Churches all across the UK call out to God on behalf of the trapped soldiers.

The next day, Churchill orders "Operation Dynamo" into effect. The biggest component of the operation is not so much the warships, but about a flotilla of civilian vessels: small fishing boats, lifeboats, pleasure boats, paddle steamers, private sailboats, yachts – about 700 of them, all with civilian crews make the crossing back and forth under strafing fire from the Luftwaffe overhead. It's the "little ships of Dunkirk," as they came to be called, that rescue the Allied soldiers from the German advance in the nick of time.

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, Churchill gave his now famous "We shall fight on the beaches" speech, in which he declared the operation, "a miracle of deliverance."  
A miracle of deliverance...

Clearly, there are some uncanny parallels between that situation and the situation the Israelites found themselves in. They, too, were trapped with their backs to the sea, with the equivalent of panzer divisions (the elite chariot troops of Pharaoh) advancing on them. As far as they knew they were about to get slaughtered. So to get a sense of the mortal fear, the despair and of what was at stake that day at the Red Sea, Dunkirk is a good analogy.

But we have to be very careful when comparing both situations. As you know, the rescue at Dunkirk avoided the total destruction of the Allied forces trapped there on the beaches. Churchill had to remind the elated British people that this was *not* a victory but merely an escape that brought their troops back home safe. Remarkable as it was, it was still a retreat.

It was a different story for the people of Israel. For them, there was no safe home to return to; "home" was slavery under an Egyptian regime that thought nothing of committing genocide. And now they had to make an impossible choice: either get killed by the Egyptian army – or get killed by the sea.

Keep in mind, to a desert people, the sea was alien to them, something they didn't understand, something to fear. It was the realm of monsters and death and destruction. Think of any Scripture story that involves a big body of water, and you'll notice that it's about destruction or chaos.

For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century an equivalent would probably be the cold emptiness of outer space where no life is possible, where evil aliens lurk, planning to exterminate humanity. "In space no one can hear you scream", as the tagline of a classic sci-fi thriller goes.

And yet – God tells them to go there, to step into the abyss as it were and to trust that God would find a way for them. But not just like that. In all the chaos and the fear and the confusion and the yelling, there's this surprising moment. Did you notice? It's easy to miss: Moses tells the people of Israel "Just be still. Wait. No, no, no, don't move. Stay where you are. You don't need worry. God will fight for you." What was he thinking? Standing still in the face of impending extermination?! Does the expression "sitting ducks" mean anything to you, Moses?

Recent movies about Dunkirk and Churchill truly capture the chaos and the gut-wrenching awareness of being caught in a death trap, something the Israelites also must have gone through. But those movies never show some general telling the troops to just be still and not to worry, and to trust God. But that's exactly what the Israelites are called to do: to centre themselves and check in with God. To prepare themselves for what God is about to do: the impossible.

And once God has parted the waters, the Israelites had to quit being still and get moving, pronto. First, stop. Now, go! It still would have been terrifying: it was night and pitch dark, the only source of light being a pillar of fire, this fearsome furnace roaring behind them. They had to advance through mud and muck between two churning walls of watery death, with the Egyptians closing in on them from behind, and no idea what's ahead of them other than uncertainty and their own ghostly shadows... But they made it in the nick of time.

After this powerful event they must have realized that there was no turning back, ever; they had come too far. Yes, they were free now, but they probably also realized that moving from bondage to freedom not a cakewalk; is hard, and terrifying and filled with uncertainty.

It was a defining moment for the people of the Jewish faith, who remember and tell this story every year at Passover, so they never forget how God led God's people to freedom; to never forget that God is a God who frees and liberates – both body and soul.

It's also a powerful story to think about as it relates to our own lives, individually and together as a congregation. To be reminded that when we find ourselves stopped at the sea and all we can see are dead ends, God will make a way where there seems to be no way. *Not* a retreat to save our skin, but a new way into a new future – terrifying as that way might be.

We each have those moments when we step out to make a change in our life, only to find that it's so much harder than we ever could have imagined.

I think of the person who bravely picks up and leaves an abusive relationship, not knowing where to go from there, where to live or how to secure a basic income. S/He has to face the fear and hardship of piecing together a new life for him/herself.

I think of this congregation that worked so long and so hard on this beautiful idea of the Spirit Place – only to see it go down in flames. That was *your* Red Sea, and even though the path you chose was deeply unsettling and uncertain, somehow you made it through because – well, because you had come too far to turn back.

I think of the United Church on the national level as it finds itself slowly drifting toward society's margins in this time of steep decline. We don't know where the recently approved restructuring will lead us, whether it's way out we hope it is. All we know now is that we will be losing much of what we cherish, and there is no certainty that it will work. But we have come too far to turn back now, we have to move forward.

God is the one who knows the way *and* the one who will make the way. That's not our work – although I think we often wish it was because that would mean having control of our situation; we like to know where we're heading, right? But making the way is God's work; our job, like the Israelites, is to figure out when to be still, and when to get moving. Which is much easier said than done.

Keeping still is not the same as doing nothing. Keeping still means just to breathe, to help let go of some of the anxiety and anger and frustration that block our thinking. That's why we have these moments of silence built into our worship. Keeping still also means to pray, talk and listen to one another, creating space and time for God's Spirit to work – and to pick up on it.

And once you've picked up on it you need to act, to get up and go, like the Israelites did. No ifs, no buts – just go. And yes, it will be scary – and no, there's no insurance policy for any damages or losses.

Of course you can always just stay where you are. God never makes us do anything or wave a magic wand to miraculously fix our problems. God always gives us a choice; it's up to us to stop and be still – to discern the choice that's offered to us – and then to act on it, to get up and go, through the walls of water, into the future that God has for us on the other side of this tough spot. Like I said, it's a powerful story.

Of course, there is one more catch... You all know where the Israelites ended up after they crossed the sea, right? Any guesses? Not in the Promised Land, but in the wilderness wandering for 40 years...

Amen.

**Scripture reading for Sept. 30, 2018**  
**Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29**

<sup>5</sup>When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" <sup>6</sup>So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. <sup>7</sup>He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them.

<sup>10</sup>As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. <sup>11</sup>They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup>Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

<sup>13</sup>Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. <sup>14</sup>The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

<sup>21</sup>Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, <sup>22</sup>and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

<sup>23</sup>The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. <sup>24</sup>During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. <sup>25</sup>He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

<sup>26</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." <sup>27</sup>Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. <sup>28</sup>The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

<sup>29</sup>But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

One: This is the witness of the Hebrew people.  
**All: Thanks be to God!**