

Sunday Service at 10:30 AM
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Summer 2020 Worship Theme: Human Rights at the Crossroads

“Pillars in the Cloud of Witnesses”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 19, 2020

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures Exodus 14: 1-4, 10-31 2 Timothy 1: 3-7

Exodus 14: 1-4, 10-31 (NRSV)

Crossing the Red Sea

Then the Lord said to Moses: ²“Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall camp opposite it, by the sea. ³ Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, “They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them.” ⁴ I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.” And they did so.

¹⁰ As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. ¹¹ They said 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, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

¹³ But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ But you lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.”

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and

on their left. ²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. ²⁴At 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. ²⁵He clogged^[a] their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

The Pursuers Drowned

²⁶Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." ²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Footnote:

- a. Exodus 14:25 Sam Gk Syr: MT *removed*

2 Timothy 1: 3-7

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

SERMON

A Cosmic Victory

Hear today's tales, my friends, as liturgical material, [\[1\]](#)
as material for worship, for remembering,
for celebrating and re-telling God's story,
our history and story of the Faith.

All the stories we share this day give glory to God.
We give public honor to the One Who Created and Creates.
God's liberating action calls for songs of praise,
praise before all the earth and around the world.

We give praise to God,
and we give witness about God.

A Cosmic Victory

Moses said to the Hebrew people,
*“Remember this day,
in which you came out from Egypt,
out of the house of bondage,
for by strength of hand
God brought you out...”* --Exodus 13: 3

The day of God’s deliverance from slavery and into new life
is marked with singing, with worship, with prayer and praise.

Today in church camps and Vacation Bible Schools around the world
children sing (to the tune of “Louie, Louie” by The Pharaohs no less)
*“Pharaoh, Pharaoh,
Oh, baby, let my people go,
yeah, yeah, yeah!”*

We sing in church:
*“Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn
Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn
Didn't Pharaoh's army get drowned?”*

We sing of ***a cosmic victory***

God the Creator of the Universe,
God who made the stars & sands, oceans & mountains, animals & humanity
heard the cries and suffering of the oppressed,
and sent them an instrument of hope,
a deliverer named *Moses* (drawn out of water)
to *mashuy* draw them out of bondage.

As they moved forward, they did as Moses said:
they remembered that day of freedom.

As they moved forward, they took the long way around,
even though they were hurrying,
thousands of families hurrying
to get away from Egypt and Pharaoh’s army.

The shorter route to freedom was through the land of the Philistines.
God warned Moses to make sure to take the long way,
to go toward the Red Sea,
lest they repent when they see war with the Philistines,
become afraid and return to Egypt.

The Hebrews arrived at the shore of the sea.

In Hebrew it is called YAM SUP

Yam Sup is translated: *Sea of Reeds* or *Red Sea* or *Sea of the End*.

At the shore of Yam Sup, the Red Sea, apprehension sets in.

The Hebrews caught between the Egyptian Army and the Red Sea
have a shared moment of fear, apprehension, deep anxiety.

They complain to God through Moses.

"What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?"

In other words,

"You drew us out into the wilderness to die!"

"At such moments, the enemy seems so near; God seems so far away." [\[2\]](#)

At such moments, what they need the most is the Gospel.

Moses preaches the Gospel.

"Do not be afraid.

Stand firm!

The Lord will fight for you,

and you have only to keep still."

Once again God uses Moses as an instrument

to show the power of the Lord over creation and for liberation.

Note, my friends, that

salvation is no less the work of God

because God chooses to use people or nature

for God's resurrection purposes. [\[3\]](#)

This work is cosmic.

What Moses is doing for God is cosmic.

This isn't a parlor trick, a magical illusion,

or merely about separating a random body of water

or evading some nameless enemy.

There is a great, divine purpose at work and play here.

This, this is God's loving activity to save an oppressed people.

Here we witness God caring for their human rights as God's own.

Moses raises his shepherd's staff and the waters part.

The waters were parted by the power of God, through Moses.

Yet...yet...yet the Hebrews still had to walk forward,

still had to go boldly into the unknown.

That first step takes tremendous courage,

requiring a spirit of boldness and love and power.

God is forever using people in our midst to be instruments of courage.

Moses' last words to the Hebrews, when he was 120 years old, were to say:
"Be strong and of a good courage." --Deuteronomy 31: 6

Have the nerve, bravery, audacity to act, to love, to serve.
Have the courage to pray for help and hope.

2 Timothy 1 reads

*"God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."*

We draw upon a variety of versions of the Bible for variations:

King James, New International, New Revised Standard, The Message.

God did not give us a Spirit of

FEAR / COWARDICE / TIMIDITY / OF BEING SHY

Rather a spirit of

*BOLDNESS / POWER / LOVE / SOUND MIND /
SELF-DISCIPLINE / SELF-CONTROL*

We're talking about God's gift of a Spirit of Courage,
one that lives and breathes within us.

We're talking about God sending folks into the realm of your reach and touch
to give you courage, heart, hope.

We're talking about God sending you to the crossroads
to embolden someone else.

Dr. Brené Brown said:

"Wholeheartedness requires ordinary courage" [\[4\]](#)

"The root of the word courage is cor—the Latin word for heart.

Courage originally meant

"To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart."

Over time, this definition has changed,

and, today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic.

I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly

*about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences
(good and bad) is the definition of courage.*

Heroics is often about putting our life on the line.

Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line.

In today's world, [says Brené Brown] that's pretty extraordinary.

When we pay attention, we see courage every day.

We see it when people reach out for help..."

Our living prayer:

May God and the Church be there for you;
May your vulnerability be respected and encouraged;
May we respect and affirm each other's vulnerability.
I know so many, many people who are right now being stretched, changed,
exploring new ideas and new ways of being.
That takes ... Courage
Boldness. Faith. Power. Self-Discipline. Love.

A Cosmic Victory

God is still speaking, still saving, still using us to be instruments for civil and human rights.

Civil rights are an essential component of democracy.
They are guarantees of equal social opportunities and protection under the law,
regardless of race, sexual identity, religion, or other characteristics.
Examples are the rights to vote, to a fair trial, and to a public education.

Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings,
regardless of race, sexual identity, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion,
or any other status.

Human rights include the right to life and liberty,
freedom from slavery and torture,
freedom of opinion and expression,
the right to work and education and health care,
and many more.

Today we are beholden to the great cloud of witnesses
who have gone before us to advocate
for the rights of all people to be free,
to have equal access and equal protection and equal pay.

This week we lost two giants in the fight, Rev. C.T. Vivian
and Representative John Lewis, both of Atlanta, Georgia.
Both men led the fight with courage and grace and faith.
Rep. Lewis was called the Conscience of the Congress.
He fought for the rights of all people,
including the elderly, LGBTQ folks, Latinos, Blacks and Whites.
All meant all, to John Lewis,
who called Rev. Vivian "America's finest preacher," and most humble.
Both were called by God to serve as instruments, to lead us with courage.

They paved the way for people like you and me to draw strength at the crossroads,
to take that step into the unknown,
to trust that when we stand at the water's edge,

unsure and apprehensive,
we can have faith...because they had the faith for us.

We are blessed to have in our midst, in our congregation,
many such prayer warriors.
You have taught us much about how to have courage,
how to walk into the fray knowing the battle we fight is cosmic,
for we stand together for the human and civil rights
of everyone, friends, neighbors and strangers alike.

A Cosmic Victory

Our own beloved Mary Frances Early was the first African American graduate
of the University of Georgia in Athens,
enrolling in 1961 to earn a master's degree there.

Although Early was thriving at the University of Michigan,
she decided to transfer to the University of Georgia in 1961
after seeing a disturbing image
of two fellow Turner high school alumni on the news.^[5]

Although Early was five years ahead of Hunter and Holmes in school,
she knew them both.
Charlayne Hunter had interviewed Early for the Turner high school newspaper
when Early was student teaching,
and everyone knew Hamilton Holmes
because he was a top student and star football player.
Those television images inspired Early
to make a major life decision:
That night she decided to transfer to UGA
and help her friends integrate the university.

"That same week, I applied to UGA," said Early.
"My mom wasn't very happy about it, but she supported me."
Mary Frances said,
"Mama, I cannot stand on the sidelines and wait and watch
until somebody else solves the problem.
I want to be part of the action."

"I felt I needed to open the doors of the grad school.
I wanted to do something instead of just stand on the sidelines.
You have to be an activist if you want to see change made.
I was a very quiet person – an unlikely person to integrate UGA.
But having grown up during a time

when everything was separate but not equal – I was tired of that.”
It took some time to be admitted,
but Early made it to campus where she faced many obstacles.
Students threw lemons at her in the dining hall.
Once at the post office some male students threw rocks at her,
“And one landed under my eye,” recalled Early, adding,
“I threw one back but didn’t hit anyone.”

One night at the library, male students stretched themselves across the steps
when they saw her coming and made cruel remarks.
“I wanted to be the [Georgia] Bulldog I was supposed to be,” said Early,
“so I kept going. At the last minute, they broke ranks.”

“When I went home the next weekend,” says Mary Frances Early,
she worshipped at Ebenezer Baptist Church.^[6]
“I went to Dr. [Martin Luther] King’s office after church,
and I said, ‘Dr. King, I have erred.’
She told him the story of what happened,
how she had not been non-violent.
“He laughed and said,
‘I would have done the same thing, Mary Frances, don’t worry about it.’
I didn’t believe him, but that was a big relief.”

At the last moment they broke ranks.
At the last moment the waters parted.
At the time she stepped into the unknown, and the victory was God’s.
And it was – and is – cosmic.
Transformational.
Life changing.
Worthy of song, of dance, of remembering.

She went on to graduate with a Master Degree in Music Education
and, with precision and passion, to teach generations of musicians.
Mary Frances Early served Christ here in the Choir and Bell Choir.
She fulfilled terms as a Deacon, Elder, Board Moderator, and Church Trustee.
On February 25, 2020, the UGA Education Building was named after her.

Here at the crossroads we worship a Risen Christ,
telling the stories of deliverance and salvation,
singing and praising God with gratitude,
listening to the stories of courageous people
who in turn give us courage.

At the crossroads we are reminded that God loves you

and calls you to be an instrument of God's grace.
"Be strong and of a good courage!"

Here our liturgy parts the waters to make way for Mary Frances Early, who now has the floor:

*"We have to activate ourselves and take on the responsibility
to help make this world the kind of place it can be."*

*"People recognize me not because I'm so great,
but because I had the opportunity
to be one of the first people to help students
have the courage to come to UGA themselves..."*

*You can be courageous or you can be a coward.
But the one thing you have to be is determined."* -- Mary Frances Early

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] Terence E. Frethem, *Exodus*, Interpretation Series, John Knox Press, 1991. Page 152.

^[2] Frethem. Page 156.

^[3] Frethem. Page 157. Adapted.

^[4] "Courage, Compassion, and Connection: The Gifts of Imperfection" Excerpted from *The Gifts of Imperfection* by Dr. Brené Brown

^[5] "Mary Frances Early: A life of courage and accomplishment" by Heather Skyler, UGA Today, September 6, 2018.

^[6] University of Georgia Insider Magazine, 2020 Issue, Page 18.