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Got You Surrounded

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Exodus 14:19-31
Romans 14:1-12

Crossing the Red Sea – a story of salvation

When it comes to getting into a cold lake or swimming pool there are two kinds of people: the jump right in type and those who ease in slowly gently adjusting their body inch by inch to the temperature. The Israelites were in the second category – they were the slow to acclimate, resistant to discomfort, and hesitant to commit. Moses had been trying to get the Israelites to trust him and follow him and get away from the persecution in Egypt but they were dragging their feet. Finally Moses had convinced them that their suffering was enough; they would be better off anywhere else. And so at last, the Israelites were going to cautiously step from the shoreline into the Red Sea and into the great unknown. The story of the crossing of the Red Sea with its dramatic images and powerful movements is a story of God's grace and salvation. It was a story where only by the grace of God did the Israelites survive the water and arrive safely on dry ground.

This is a familiar story but there is something unusual about God's presence with the Israelites here – God appears in this story not in a single form but in two distinct modes – both as an angel and a pillar of cloud. First, the angel of the Lord begins by leading them to the sea and then once they start to tip their toes into the water and sink their feet into the muddy soil, the angel moves to the rear to keep the Egyptians, who are chasing them, at bay. With the angel escorting them they have overcome their initial fears of leaving the land of Egypt and now are racing towards their long awaited freedom. In Psalm 91:11-12, the Psalmist writes, 'for he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' In the form of the angel, God provides recognizable assurance that they are indeed being led and protected.

But, as if the angel was not enough, God also appears in this story as a pillar of cloud. The cloud appears behind them and before them providing a screen of cover for the fleeing Israelites. Exodus tells us the action all happened at the morning watch, which was the period between 2am and 6am and so the crossing happened in darkness. The cloud, the angel, and the darkness of night all worked together to keep the Egyptians and the Israelites hidden from each other. God provided a smoke screen under which the Israelites could travel safely. Walter Brueggemann writes, "By appealing to both "angel" and "cloud", these verses are an extravagant way to characterizing the vigilant protection God gave Israel, which Moses had promised."¹ God stood guard over his people, appearing as both angel and cloud thereby instilling confidence and faith as well as providing protection. God was

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Exodus, The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1 Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994, 794.

truly in their midst urging them onward away from captivity towards the sea and their salvation.

Last year, I officiated a funeral for a D.C. VIP who was given a police escort from his family home in Georgetown to the cemetery. We lined up our cars along the street; the hearse with the casket first, family limousines next, with my car taking up the rear. We were told the police would meet us as we crossed the Key Bridge and went over the Potomac River. Sure enough as we started on the bridge motorcycles surrounded our vehicles. They took positions in front, on the side, and behind us. Every time we reached an intersection we would meet more officers, blocking the traffic so we could pass freely. As we passed one group of officers they would then take up the rear positions and the motorcycles at the back would race ahead to their next position. I could not count how many of them there were, dozens though I assume. Imagine getting on 66 at 9am on a Friday with no cars around you, just motorcycles zipping by you, racing ahead to clear the next crossing. At no moment were we left without protection or guidance, at no moment were we caused to slow down or stop, at no moment did we have to wonder about turns or directions. They were there, in excessive protection, to clear the way so that we might pass safely.

I imagine God's angel moving from front position to rear guard and God's pillar of cloud serving in a similar way to a police escort. They were there to guard excessively and making it clear to everyone who witnessed the scene that the people being led were VIP's. On that day, neither the fears of the Israelites nor their assailants would prevent God's people from traveling safely. God was there as the cloud, as the angel, through the darkness, and in the leadership of Moses. Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim notes the agencies involved are threefold – divine, human, and natural – all working together. They were covered – before, behind, above, below and within. This story of God's excessive providential protection is a lesson for us all.

When we stand in faith, yet with trepidation, trying to convince ourselves to enter uncharted waters, God is there for us with abundant coverage. When we have to start new chapters, when we have to make hard decisions, when we go through deep waters, God is with God's people providing that same excessive protection. This is not a story about 'a long, long time ago – in a land far away'. This is a story about how God shows up, in various ways and forms and shapes in order to protect us, guide us, encourage us, and ultimately save us. If you reflection upon your own life and faith you can probably identify a few times when cloud coverage was provided so you could escape some trouble, or a wise leader taught you an important lesson, or an angel offered a friendly nudge, or something that others would call 'luck' opened a door for you. For those of us who believe in the providential care of God, we know these are acts of God's love and God's grace for us. We believe God's love and protection take all sorts of forms in our lives.

When I was in London, I served a church that I loved and who wanted to extend my contract to stay beyond my three-year term. The denominational offices in

Edinburgh, however, denied the church's request to offer me this position and promotion. They said I didn't know enough about 'Scottish History', which was a code for being too young, or too female, or too American or maybe all three. The church in London and I tried a few different attempts to appeal the decision but they were all denied. So I went to see one of the wise elders of the church who worked as an executive at an insurance company. We met at the cafeteria on the top of this grand building overlooking the city of London. I remember he was on some weird diet and only ate an apple and a cup of green Jell-O. He had followed my situation and although he wanted me to stay, he gave me some very sobering and sound advice. The advice was basically 'get out of Dodge.' He had good reasons and thoughtful things to say. I left that lunch with a pit in my stomach knowing my time in London was finished. The next day, I had a Skype interview with a certain church in Washington, D.C. I believe there were multiple forces working providentially on my behalf – that only in retrospect could I see how they were leading me to dry ground. This is how God works sometimes – through multiple means and surprising forces, which enable us to take risks, make right decisions, avoid pitfalls, escape our enemies, and surmount our fears. These are an expression of God's love for us.

The love of God set the Israelites free - it protected them when they were vulnerable; it fed them when they were hungry, and it comforted them when they were afraid. God showed up in recognizable ways for the sake of God's people. And the good news is that God's love, God's grace, and God's protection are still there for us today enabling us, like the Israelites to relinquish our fears and move forward, with the knowledge of God's divine presence and love.

There are still many things in our lives and in our world, which keep us tentatively clinging to the shorelines. We know fear is alive and well.

- You can fear terror attacks in cities around the globe.
- You can fear our national political divide that paralyzes us from solving problems.
- You can fear heart disease, cancer, old age.
- You can fear financial instability and saving for the future.
- You can fear your boss, your professional future, your performance reviews.
- You can fear not meeting the right one, or staying too long with the wrong one, or ever finding happiness on your own.
- You can fear not giving your children enough time, or enough love, or enough boundaries.

These fears can be very real and also very limiting, thereby keeping us trapped or demoralized or paralyzed. Just as it was hard for the Israelites to leave their former and known lives and enter the waters of the Red Sea so it is hard for us to leave our own fears behind. Yet God desires that God's people would be free, liberated, and saved. This was God's desire for the Israelites and this is God's desire for each one

of us. We are God's chosen people, and God will guide us and guard us, come hell or high water!

Deuteronomy says, "Be strong and of good courage, do not be afraid; for the Lord your God, is the One who goes with you. God will not leave you nor forsake you." Write that on your hearts, and repeat it to yourself every time you need encouragement– for there is no greater provider, comforter, or companion than the One who guided the Israelites through the Red Sea and the One who guides you still today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.