



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 19A, SEPTEMBER 13, 2026
EXODUS 14:19-31; PSALM 114; ROMANS 14:1-12; MATTHEW 18:2-35

ON WENDELL BERRY WISDOM, THE EXODUS, AND DEEP MEANING

Forty years ago, the sage bard Wendell Berry wrote these words:

"It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings."¹

Integral to life's most important work is learning our narratives of meaning. Did someone tell you about the day you were born, or the day you were adopted, in such a way that it became your story, not just theirs?

Intimately yours, down in the depths of your being?

We encourage godparents of infants preparing for baptism here that it is incumbent on them to tell their godchild the story of the baptism day, so that they will know it in their bones.

We need such narratives to make sense of this existence, this life, this journey, so that when we lose our way, as we inevitably will, we may still have guideposts to help us orient.

Communities need these narratives, too. This story from Exodus is one of our bedrock narratives. At the Easter Vigil, we always hear

¹ Berry, Wendell. *Standing By Words*. 1983.

the Creation story from Genesis and this story from Exodus. The rest of God's salvation history unfurls from those two foundational stories, and we are invited to make them intimately ours here and now.

The story of the Exodus is not for the faint of heart. Angels going before and behind God's people, kicking up dust storms and throwing pillars of fire to keep Pharaoh's bloodthirsty army at bay. But the people knew they were there, on their tail and closing fast, as they came to the seashore. Cutoff, nowhere to escape, you can imagine panic, the sort that awakens you from a nightmare, with heart racing, sweat on the brow.

But this is God's story, too. The stories that lend most meaning intertwine our story with God's story.

The Hebrew word for Red Sea is a play on words, a paradox really. It's the Reed Sea, full of rushy marshes oozing into the deep waters, but with the tweak of a tittle, the word can also mean the Sea of the End. The end of the old—slavery in Egypt, oppression, stifled existence, violence, and the beginning of something new—new, but as yet not fully known, a threshold between what was and what will be, and God figures prominently in it.

Moses channels that divine power and leads the people in admirably pastoral fashion. Fiercely encouraging. Resolutely the leader, smiting the water with his two-by-four, as the old Negro Spiritual tells it.

Moses stood on the Red Sea shore.

Smote that water with a 2x4.

Oh, Mary, don't you weep.

The waters part but then come crashing back in with tsunami-scale power against their pursuers. The people are delivered into the desert of unknowing, to wander forty years, a straight-line distance of some 200 miles, from here to Portland, but life doesn't usually follow straight-line narratives, does it?!

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At points, the people of the Exodus will wish for a return to the fleshpots of familiar suffering rather than remain in this desert of unknowing, this crucible of mystery and meaning-making. They will be treated to manna and meat falling from the sky, and they will resent even those miracles at times.

We may want to scoff or guffaw at their seemingly ridiculous fickleness.

But remember, this is our story, and we should hear it, not as an ancient tale of anachronistic entertainment, but as the story that gets down into our bones and breathes its sinewy life into our mortal coils on the real journey here and now.

Can we see the journey across the sea and into the desert as the long-winding way to meaning and true identity? Can we hold our spiritual ancestors' foolishness and fears as portals into our own meandered inanity **and** our newly rediscovered belovedness? Sooner or later, we must make the choice to leave behind the familiar haunts of a shackled existence and step into the mysterious unknown where we find ourselves **and** God in fresh, liberating and life-giving ways.

Again, Wendell Berry:

*"the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home."*²

The people who came up off the dry seabed and wandered into the desert were never going to make it "home" without seeing that God was with them every inch of the way. It is a scriptural promise we seem to have to learn over and over again. This is the spiritual journey.

This radical story of ours is dripping with truth presenting as irony and allegory and, most of all, mystery. Mystery leaves a feathered edge to the thresholds of wisdom; mystery holds the space for dark tones to demure full clarity, and in doing so, invites us into those depths of divine possibility, with engaged heart and mind and soul and strength. It is there, in the depths of our being, that we often discover God anew.

Here on this day that we traditionally know as Homecoming Sunday, it is good to be together. Today we are reminded once more that this sacred space and the work we do arising from here are structured on such bedrock narratives that intertwine our meandering stories with God's story.

This is a place where a community—you and I, and those who have gone before and those not yet known to us—gather so that God might lead us through the parted waters that demarcate what was from what may yet be.

²Berry, Wendell. [The Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky's Red River Gorge](#)

That is at once exciting and intrepid, as a story with deep meaning should be.

Will we trust God enough to embrace this journey, together, and newly rediscover our belovedness, stepping inch by inch into a newfound freedom to be who we were truly created to be, and see the hand of God at work in our lives?

This is our story, friends. This is our journey.

As Berry said, it is the real journey, “very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home.”

Welcome home.

Exodus 14:19-31 *[The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. 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. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. 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. He clogged 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.” Then 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.” So 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. The 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. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel 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.]*

