

## **That Sounds Familiar: Crossing the Red Sea**

(Exodus 14:10-20), 21-31

June 28, 2015

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. <sup>22</sup>The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. <sup>23</sup>The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>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.'

26 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.' <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>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. <sup>29</sup>But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

30 Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup>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.

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Like you, over the past 10 days, I have been searching for words to help me make sense of what happened in Charleston. To begin this sermon I offer you not my words, but those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached on this scripture from Exodus 61 years ago just after the Supreme Court voted to integrate schools.

*There is hardly anything more obvious than the fact that evil is present in the universe, King writes. It projects its nagging, prehensile tentacles into every level of human existence. We may debate over the origin of evil, but only the person victimized with a superficial optimism will debate over its reality. Evil is with us as a stark, grim, and colossal reality.*

*The Bible affirms the reality of evil in glaring terms. It symbolically pictures it in the work of a serpent which comes to inject a discord into the beautiful, harmonious symphony of life in a garden. It sees it in nagging weeds disrupting the orderly growth of stately wheat. It sees it in a ruthless mob hanging the world's most precious character on a cross between two thieves. The Bible is crystal clear in its perception of evil.*

*But we need not stop with the glaring examples of the Bible to establish the reality of evil; we need only to look out into the wide arena of everyday life. We have seen evil in tragic lust and inordinate selfishness. We have seen it in high places where men [and women] are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of their self-interest. We have seen it in imperialistic nations trampling over other nations with the iron feet of oppression. We have seen it clothed in the garments of calamitous wars which left*

*battlefields painted with blood, filled nations with widows and orphans, and sent men home physically handicapped and psychologically wrecked. We have seen evil in all of its tragic dimensions...*

*...The [Judeo-Christian] tradition is clear, however, in affirming that in the long struggle between good and evil, good eventually emerges as the victor. Evil is ultimately doomed by the powerful, insurgent forces of good. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter. A mythical Satan, through the work of a conniving serpent, may gain the allegiance of [humanity] for a period, but ultimately he must give way to the magnetic redemptive power of a humble servant on an uplifted cross. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name.*

In the providence of God, the Word that addresses us this morning is the story Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. This scripture was a stalwart during the Civil Rights movement – our African-American sisters and brothers held on to the hope that even through long years of oppression, God would make a way when there seemed to be no way.

The title of Dr. King's sermon was "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore." This title is important, for, you see, at the heart of this story is not the drowning of an army. Indeed, as Dr. King said, "no one can rejoice at the death or defeat of [even a single] a human person." Rather, this story symbolizes something basic about God's creation. It symbolizes the death of evil. What is to be celebrated in this story is not the death of soldiers but the death of inhuman oppression and ungodly exploitation.

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When I think about the hate and racism that infected Dillon Roof – that blinded him from the humanity so evident in those nine lives he took ten days ago – it strikes me that we are not yet to the point where we can look back and see the death of evil upon the seashore.

The Red Sea has opened. And our country has come a long way – treading the dry ground supplied by God's faithfulness and the faithfulness of God's people – of every color and in many generations.

The Red Sea has opened. Things that we thought impossible just 150 years ago are normative and celebrated: the end of slavery, the right for African-Americans to vote, the freedom of interracial couples to marry, progress on equal employment and opportunity, the integration of schools. These feel like old victories to us – especially to those of us who have been blessed to never know what it was like before – but we dare not lose sight of how much progress we have made.

The Red Sea has opened. With each successive generation an appreciation for diversity grows and the legacy of race-based oppression fades.

The Red Sea has opened – but we have not arrived on the other side.

Dillon Roof was not born hating black people. His hatred was an acquired taste – formed by individuals, I am sure, but also by the culture in which he lived – which is the culture in which we live.

It would be easier and more convenient for us to believe that with Dillon's arrest and confession we may be rid of the treat that his kind of hatred represents. But we know better. The racist narratives in the culture that shaped Dillon – that preyed on his fears and stoked his anger – are still at work. And we must acknowledge this...long after the headlines fade and the news-trucks relocate to the next breaking story.

In his seminal book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr talked about this precise difficulty. The nature of sin and evil, Niebuhr thought, was such that individuals can

transcend their own self-interest and consider the lives of others. Groups of people, however, lack this capacity.

This is what makes sin and evil so insidious – it gets reinforced by others. Were Dillon left to hate on his own, perhaps he could have overcome his sin. Yet – while responsible for his own choices – his hate was calcified by the sin of the culture around him.

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On days when I feel weary, I find myself praying that things would just be simpler. As I imagine standing in the middle of the Red Sea, I wish it were as obvious as this story makes it sound about what is to be redeemed on dry land and what is to be tossed and swept away by the waters God's judgment. But it is not that simple. For each of us participates in and carries with us parts of a culture of racism that needs to be rooted out and left on the seashore. And each of us carries with us the image of God and a calling to be about the work of God's kingdom.

Earlier this week I received an email from a friend named Anna Pinckney Straight. Anna is a pastor in Chapel Hill. She grew up in Charleston. Anna is white.

As she grew up in Charleston – attending the prestigious Porter-Gaud school – Anna began to learn more about the family for which she is named. The Pinckneys were people of means and privilege – and as they emigrated from England, they settled in South Carolina where they continued to be people of means and privilege. The Pinckneys were politicians, entrepreneurs and constitution-signers. According to Anna, more Pinckneys have run for President and lost than any other family in our nation.

Like other European colonists, when the Pinckney's arrived in South Carolina they bought and used slaves to perpetuate their business and lifestyle. And as was the practice, those slaves who belonged to the Pinckney family had their own names taken away and were given the name of their owner.

Reflecting on the tragedy at Emmanuel AME, Anna confessed: "I may not be personally responsible for slavery, but I am [aware that I am] a recipient of white privilege, an inheritor of a system that is un-equal and un-fair and in which not everyone is born with the same horizon or available bootstraps."<sup>1</sup>

Anna does not know if she and Reverend Clementa Pinckney are related by blood, but there is no question they are related by history – and she notes that we only have to look at the surnames of those who lost their lives while they gathered for worship (Pinckney, as well as other Charleston society names like Middleton, Singleton, and Simmons) to know that they are a part of a racial violence that is centuries old.

I read an editorial this week by Nicholas Kristof that served as a punch in my gut as someone who thinks we have come a long way on our journey to eradicate racism from our collective conscience. "America's greatest shame in 2015 is...that a black boy has a life expectancy five years shorter than a black boy. It is that the net worth of an average black household in 2011 was \$6,314 compared to \$110,500 for a white household. It is that 2/3 of black children grow up in low-income families. It is that black men in their 20s without a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated than employed."

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to the Rev. Dr. Anna Pinckney Straight who gave me permission to share part of her story.

What is complicated is that race and racism do not have everything to do with these statistics. But they do have something to do with these statistics. And, perhaps, taking action to address these injustices is the mark of our faithful response to a tragedy we cannot understand.

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As we reflected on the tragedy at our staff meeting on Tuesday, Nick Kepp, the church's chef (who is really a minister for food and table fellowship) made a keen observation:

This shooting is but one of a number of racially charged events our country has experienced in the last 18 months. By far, it is the most brazen – the most tragic – the most nakedly racist act.

And it happened in a church – at a Bible study.

What Nick noticed is how different our national response has been compared to the other events that forced us to have difficult conversations about race where we have seen protests, and riots, and incendiary conversations.

What happened in Charleston took place in a church. With people studying the Word.

And out of death – we have seen life.

And expressions of unity.

And forgiveness.

And soul-sharing.

And confession.

And as those who put our trust in the Lord, should we really be surprised?

We may not yet see the evil of racism laid to waste, swept away, dead on the seashore. And there is plenty of work to be done before we do – in our culture and by taking a look into our own hearts – but we are not aimless on our journey.

As Dr. King said,

*Let us not despair. Let us not lose faith in [humanity] and certainly not in God. We must believe that a prejudiced mind can be changed, and that a man, by the grace of God, can be lifted from the valley of hate to the high mountain of love.*

*God has a great plan for this world. His purpose is to achieve a world where all people will live together as sisters and brothers, and where every person recognizes the dignity and worth of one another. God is seeking at every moment of his existence to lift his creation from the bondage of some evil Egypt, carrying them through the wilderness of discipline, and finally to the promised land of personal and social integration. May it not be that this is entirely within the realm of possibility?*

*I prefer to live by the faith that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.*

*Hallelujah!*

Amen.