

Immobilized by fear, the Red Sea on one side of them, and the approaching Egyptian army on the other, God tells the people of Israel to “move forward.”

“Move Forward”

Exodus 14:5-16

One of the popular television shows in America today is a reality TV show called “*The Amazing Race*.” In the show, a dozen teams of two people each go on a race all around the world. The race lasts several weeks, goes through multiple countries, and is full of clues, obstacles and challenges. The winners of the race get a million dollars, so a lot is at stake.

Several years ago a Nashville couple named Canaan and Mika participated in “*The Amazing Race*.” During one part of the race the contestants had to go down a huge waterslide called the “Leap of Faith.” The waterslide stood over one hundred feet high, almost straight down. Mika, terrified of both heights and water, found this a particularly overwhelming challenge. In the end, Mika refused to go down the slide. Her fear of heights and water were simply too much to overcome. As a result, she and Canaan were disqualified from the race and they lost their shot at the one million dollars. It probably won’t surprise you to hear that Canaan and Mike are not a couple anymore!

Mika’s fear of going down that water slide reminds me of the fear we find in today’s text. In this story from Exodus 14, we find the Israelites leaving Egypt after centuries of slavery. For the first time in many years they found themselves free people—on an exciting journey toward the Promised Land. As they departed Egypt and the oppressive power of the Pharaoh, they arrived at the Red Sea. The sea was far too large and deep to cross, so they made plans to walk around the sea in order to continue their journey.

But then, from a distance, they could see the Egyptian army headed their direction. The Pharaoh changed his mind about letting them go free and pursued them with his entire army, including chariots and thousands of soldiers. Evidently, in his anger over the ten plagues, the Pharaoh decided to kill them all off. When the people of Israel saw the Egyptian army approaching, their hearts filled with terror. On one side of them laid the Red Sea. On the other side came the rapidly approaching army. They found themselves trapped. They could not go into the ocean or they would all drown. But they could not face the Egyptian army either or

they would all be killed. Listen again to today's text, "As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'"

What a terrible dilemma. On one side stood the cold deep dark sea. On the other side, the Egyptian army approached with their horses, chariots, spears and swords. So they have to decide, how do we want to die today? Do we want to drown in the sea? Or do we want to be killed by the sword? What would you choose? Death by drowning or death by the sword? It's not a very good choice.

This passage reminds me of a television show from my childhood. In Africa, killer ants were on the move. Millions of these ants swarmed the land, eating everything alive in their path. These killer ants, when combined in a huge swarm, could eat an entire cow in just a few minutes flat. The TV show depicted a man caught in the path of these ants, running for his life. As he frantically ran away from the ants, he came to a river bank. He prepared to dive in and swim to the other side to escape the vicious ants that were gaining ground and getting uncomfortably close. Just before jumping in the river, the man looked into the water and saw hundreds of piranhas! He was trapped. Killer ants on one side. Killer fish on the other. So he's wondering, how do I want to die today? Do I want to be eaten alive by ants, or eaten alive by piranha? Just so you won't wonder about this story during the rest of the sermon, the man did find a way to escape his dilemma!

This story of the killer ants and the piranhas is very similar to the scene in today's scripture reading. The people are trapped between the deadly waters of the Red Sea, and the approaching army of Egypt. Do they die by drowning, or do they die by the swords and spears of the Egyptian army? The people of Israel were immobilized by fear, unable to do anything except shout at Moses, "Why did you bring us here to die?"

And then, in the midst of all that fear and chaos—God spoke. First God spoke through Moses who said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance of the Lord." And then God said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to move forward." If you follow the story, you will read about God parting the Red Sea and rescuing the people of Israel.

Although terrified by fear with the sea on side, and the approaching army on the other, God said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to move forward.”

As we approach various challenges in our life, God speaks to us, just as he did to the ancient Israelites. God says, “In spite of your fears, move forward. Take another step, for I am with you. And if I am with you, you can face whatever comes your way.” But like the ancient people of Israel, we must move forward.

The applications of this truth are almost limitless. For example, is your marriage in trouble? If so, then move forward. Call a counselor and set up a plan for improving your marriage. Are you in poor health? If so, then move forward. Get serious about your diet and exercise. Are you in financial trouble? If so, then move forward. Set a plan for getting out of debt and restoring your financial health. Is your spiritual life dead? If so, then move forward. Join a small group, attend worship weekly, or find a way to serve others. Are you immobilized by depression? If so, then move forward. Call your primary care doctor tomorrow and set an appointment to see what can be done to help. On and on we could go. God is still in the business of parting Red Seas. But before he can, we must move forward.

Some time ago I watched a “60 Minutes” episode about a woman soldier who lost her leg in a roadside bomb attack in Iraq. For months she felt sorry for herself, as anybody would. She grieved and then grieved some more, as everyone must when confronted with such a major loss. But finally she decided to move forward. She said in the interview, “There came a time when I had to decide if I was going to spend the rest of my life feeling sorry for myself, or if I was going to move forward with my life.” This woman made the decision to move forward. She now serves as a physical therapist, helping other soldiers who have lost limbs. She is also full of life and laughter and love. Like the people of Israel years ago this woman heard God say, “Tell the people to move forward.” And that’s exactly what she did.

In just a moment, we will sing our song of response. But before we do, our pianist is going to play for a minute or two. During this quiet time, please think of an area in your life where you need to move forward. Then ask yourself, “What would that look like? What step or steps do I need to take in order to make progress in this area? Be as specific as possible. For example, don’t say, “I will get in better physical shape.” Instead say, “For the next four weeks, I will take a walk four times a week.”

And remember, you don't have to take those steps alone. God will be with you, just as he was with the people of Israel in today's text. However, God still expects you and me to walk in the right direction. After you reflect on that for a moment, I want to invite you to say a prayer. It's a simple prayer. But if we really mean it, this prayer could make a significant impact on our life. The prayer is, "Lord, with your help, I promise to move forward."

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