

Exodus 14:10-14  
Resistance Training  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
10-9-16

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Again, I want to welcome you and say what a pleasure it is for us to be together in worship this morning. My name is Jonathan. I see many familiar faces, and a few new faces. Those of you who may be visiting, we are in the middle of a series of messages that parallel the lessons our children are learning this fall in their Godly Play classroom.

I'm very excited this morning because today we have a new volunteer teaching his very first story to our children, none other than our Buildings and Grounds chair Ray Chowning. I point this out, not because there is something special about Ray—though Ray is one amazing guy! I point this out because volunteering and developing a relationship with our children is a tremendously rich opportunity. Especially for you men. Believe it or not, you have a unique voice to which our children are remarkably responsive. This last Wednesday, I watched Jim Kaltenmark play with my son Christian, and I was amazed at how Christian responded to him. I would love for every man and woman in this room to have that unique connection to the children of our church.

One of our core values as a congregation is to be a church that nurtures intergenerational relationships. We want our kids to have lots of aunts and uncles, grandmas and grandpas. Likewise, we want each of you to have lots of nieces and nephews and grandkids. Now, I know that there is at least one of you here, at this very moment, thinking to yourself: "I already have grandkids, why would I want more?" To this I would say, perhaps you haven't fully grasped the beauty of this agreement. All the fun of kids, plus when it's over you get to send them home with the likes of us. So, let me rephrase the question: can you really have too many grandkids?

Ok, Public Service Announcement over.

When we left off last week, Abraham responded to God's call to go from his homeland, from the familiar place. Where? To the place where God would show him. Like many of us, what Abraham and Sarah wanted more than anything in the world was to be parents, but God would do much more than that—only it would require stepping off the precipice. **That's how this works. God always calls us to the *place he will show us, and grace comes along the way.***

Well, fast forward 400 years and the descendants of Abraham are once again in a place that had become familiar to them. Only this time, it was captivity in Egypt that was familiar to them. By now, it was all they knew. And the best they could do was to make best of a bad situation: to appease their captor.

You know what your captor is. It's the thing that causes you to anxiously lay awake at night. It's the thing you just can't bring yourself to let go of. Could be aging, it could be losing your looks or your physique; it could be the constant and unrelenting pressure to have it all together, the right family, the right home, the right stuff. They come in all shapes and sizes, but every one of us has something that holds us captive.

The thing is, though, God is not interested in helping us cope with our captor. The only thing God is interested in is freeing you from its grip.

Now, just one chapter before, the Bible tells us that there were two ways to the Promised Land. One way was called the way of the Philistines. It was a highway that ran along the Mediterranean Sea. As a heavily traveled trade route, it had lots of water, rest stops, motels, and Starbucks along the way. But God led the people south, “by the roundabout way of the wilderness” where there were no roads, no bridges, and no water or food. On this way, all anyone could see was the expansive Red Sea and a whole lot of lonely desert after that.

Why does God often take us on the round about ways? Do some of you feel like you are on one of those round about ways now? Maybe you’ve been caring for a loved one, who seems to test the threshold of your nerve. Maybe you’ve reached a point in your life when you thought what would be ahead of you is the rest and enjoyment of a retirement, but a diagnosis just told you you’ve got a new challenge ahead.

The ironic thing about the way of the Philistines is that the destination is almost in sight—that’s how direct it was. Why doesn’t God lead them this way? For God, the road is not just a way from point A to point B. The road is where we meet the God who leads us. And the purpose of the road is learning to walk freely in faith and trust in God. And we don’t learn this on the way of the Philistines.

Back in Minnesota, I have an uncle who built and ran a successful printing company. With his three children grown and grandkids beginning to arrive like a reward, Kent thought the way forward was in handing the business off to the next leader and settling into the joy of ball games, fishing trips, and unlimited time available to his grandkids.

By a show of hands, how many of you think that this is how the story is playing out for Kent?

Not long after he retired, Kent met a man who worked with men who were coming out of captivity—captivity to drugs and alcohol, and literal captivity, incarceration. God said to Kent and Betty, I want you to provide a place for these men to transition back into society and I want you to disciple them in my love along the way.

Now, there are still plenty of ball games and fishing trips with his grandkids, but they as a family are also walking an unknown and sometimes very difficult road as they follow the road on which God had called them.

You see, there is something important that happens on the wilderness road that wouldn’t happen on the Philistine Road. The Philistines will tell you that all you need to do is to buy something else, find that new relationship, get a new workout or diet, get a new job, or go back to school. The Philistines offer the easy way, the path of least resistance. But freedom doesn’t come from quick results; it doesn’t come when we fix up the outside. Freedom comes from the inside out, and there is no quick way about that. That kind of freedom only happens on the desert road where you must face your fear and decide: “God...are you, or are you not, completely sufficient?”

This is the first point: the way to freedom is allowing God to lead you on the road in which God is in control most and you are in control least.

Moses and the people don't go far before they're met with their first big challenge. Out ahead of them is their first obstacle, the Red Sea. Behind them is the temptation to return to the familiarity of captivity. The text says that as the Egyptians were advancing on the Hebrews, **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 by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians?'"**

The first step on the road to freedom is a frightening one. It's not because of the Hebrews' great faith that God parted the Red Sea. It was as they were shaking in their boots that God opened the waters and drug them through. At this point, all they have is their fear and their ability to cope with a bad situation. Parting the Red Sea was not an act of great faith on their part, but a gift of sheer grace on God's part. God loved them too much to let them keep coping with captivity, so he pulled them onto the frightening road to freedom.

One day, you may lose that thing that has been syphoning from your soul. You may lose the job that is coming between you and your family. One day, you may lose the money that you thought would make you secure. One day, you may be asked to imagine life differently because of a diagnosis. One day, you may lose the ability to satisfy that thing that holds you captive. And if that happens, consider yourself blessed. One day, something so wonderful may come into your life, but the only way you'll see it is if you've let go of trying to please your captor—you let go of the way it was supposed to be.

God leads us to freedom, not necessarily because we choose it, but because God parts the waters and pushes us through it. What we thought was the end is only actually the beginning. This is the second point: freedom is God leading you through your fears, even if he has to push you.

Finally, let God fight the battle for you. Moses' first great act in leadership was standing up to the people and declaring, **"Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today."**

He doesn't try and work a deal with Pharaoh but he says to the people, "Stand still, pay attention, and look up to see your deliverance." God is the one going before us and you can't see that deliverance if your gaze is always at the ground. The people could only see their own problems, they could only see the chariots coming for them. But Moses told them to look up and see salvation before them. The waters parted and they walked through them to begin their life of freedom.

A little later, it says that when the Egyptian chariots pursued them, their wheels became clogged with mud and they fled saying, "The Lord is fighting for them." It's not your job to fight your battles, let God do that. Your job is to walk in freedom.

Later in the New Testament, there would be another leader who would lead his people to freedom. He would calm the storms, heal the ailments, dispel the confusion, and sometimes push the people—unwilling as they were—into the new mission he would have for them. But lest they think that is was up to them alone, Jesus invited them to look up and see their salvation, not a parted sea,

but a cross. God is in the business of leading us to the place we would not be able to go by ourselves, and he brings us there by his sheer grace.

For the Hebrews, there was a desert on the other side of the sea that they would have to contend with for the next many years. And for the disciples, it was a mission to carry out on the other side of the cross. But just as the people walked through on dry land, and just as Jesus walked out of the tomb, the battles before us are not ours to fight alone.

Even though, as we like to say in our Godly Play class, “the desert is a dangerous place,” the desert road, the hard road, is where we become fully alive. Fully alive because we walking with the one who is the Lord of life, the great warrior who fights for us, the God who is leading us into true fullness of life.

Remember, in your baptism, you were led through the waters. Behind you is the life captive to Pharaoh and the fear and misery he shackled to you. Ahead of you is the great mystery the great wonder of the unfolding grace and mercy of the God who is with you. Put down the burdens of Pharaoh. You don't have to carry them anymore. They no longer have power over you. Now is the time to walk in confidence that it is God who fights for you. You need only stand firm and see your deliverance.