

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
October 9, 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Reading: Exodus 14, selected verses**

**Sermon: You have only to keep still (Thanksgiving Sunday)**

Do you have one of those family stories that shapes your identity? In my family there are a number of stories that have given grandchildren and great-grandchildren a sense or spirit of resilience – the courage to start over from scratch when they need to – the faith to believe that God is always at work beside us, even on the days when it feels like everything around us is in chaos.

From the Halliwell side of my family comes the story of my great-grandfather, one of several sons in that family, who had emigrated from Manchester in the UK to Cornwall Ontario. My great grandfather and great grandmother rented a farm from an older farmer in the area. That farmer who was the landowner was no longer physically able to farm his land, and his adult son had no interest in farming. So my great grandparents believed that this was a kind of rent-to own situation. They cleared much of the land, built a house and a barn, and put their kids to work – all back-breaking work in that time. Then the first world war broke out, and the 2 eldest sons, my great uncles, enlisted. My grandfather was just a young teenager at the time, but he remembered the weight of that farm work falling on his shoulders. More years of hard work followed.

Finally the war ended. The son of the landowner, who had also enlisted, returned from the war quite shattered by his experience overseas. He begged his father to let him take over the farm, which he believed would be a peaceful and healing place to rebuild his life (and, as my grandfather would say, most of the really hard work was done!) His father, over joyed to have his son back, agreed, and my great-grandparents lost the farm. Not through any mismanagement or lack of care, but simply because the war changed the world and the people around them, in ways that would impact them for generations to come.

It's a happy ending though – they moved into Cornwall and my great grandfather started a new business, built a new house, and his family flourished and became prosperous. I note that they were white, anglo-saxon Christian people, so they did not confront the prejudice or barriers that many other immigrants face throughout Canadian history.

However, as I said before this kind of story, told over and over again, has given our family a sense of resilience, a resilience which is bred into us, the same as red hair or freckles or the ability to roll your tongue. "Look" it says "you can have everything you have worked for taken away from you, but that is never the end of the story. You can always start again."

A number of years ago, we invited Rabbi Deborah Zuker to speak to us on "I have a dream Sunday". And she told us that this story which we heard read from the book of

Exodus today, is that kind of family shaping story for people of the Jewish faith. Thus, they were shaped by the command to listen for the call of God; believe in your own worth and dignity; and follow the holy one, even if it means finding yourself in the unknown wilderness of change

It's an unusual story for us to be hearing on Thanksgiving Sunday, when we are usually telling the story of Jesus and the 10 lepers or hearing Deuteronomy's commandment to offer your first fruits in thanks. But it's also a great story to be hearing on Thanksgiving, because it expresses that thanksgiving is not just talking about gratitude, but the shift that takes place in our hearts and minds when we experience a new beginning – that is what makes us truly thankful.

New beginnings often come with chaos and impatience and frustration, rather than gratitude. In the story from Exodus the descendants of Abraham and Sarah were liberated by Moses from their slavery in Egypt – a political structure where they had no rights or human dignity and no reprieve from back-breaking labour. And while they called out to God for salvation, they didn't really expect it. So when Moses led them from Egypt to the edge of the Red Sea they were still full of fear and disbelief: *"It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness"* they complained.

But Moses challenged them not to give up, to trust that God was still with them in this confusing, unpredictable new beginning. I love the direction that Moses gave them, because it's pretty clear that Moses himself didn't have a very detailed game plan: *"you have only to keep still,"* he told them.

*"You have only to keep still."* When there were chariots to flee and a Pharaoh to confront, children to protect and an expanse of water to cross, Moses told them to "keep still."

Keep still means trusting God to shape the future. Moses' words reminded me how we need to listen to what God is telling us in our hearts. That deep listening requires taking some time and space for stillness and mindfulness. Even in a moment of crisis, Moses' people needed to stop panicking, they needed to stop thinking like slaves and to start believing instead that God wanted something better for them. Even if God had to part the Red Sea to make it happen.

So then eight hundred years later, when the Judean nation was destroyed by the Babylonians and they were taken as captives into slavery again – what story did they tell? Over and over again, they told the story of how God had intercepted the very path of the sea, so that the Egyptians could not follow them into the promised land. They remembered that Yahweh had done this in order to liberate an enslaved people from oppression and captivity. We have clear evidence in the psalms and later scriptures that they remembered this chapter of their history. It was those songs of thankfulness for parting the Red Sea that gave them the resilience and courage that

someday, with God's help, they would break free again. Which they did – not as dramatically – but eventually they were restored to freedom in Judea again.

In Canada, our celebration of Thanksgiving is tied to the season of the harvest – of pumpkin pies and cornucopias full of corn and sweet potatoes. We tend to associate Thanksgiving with counting our blessings as people who have enough, maybe even more than enough, so that we can survive and flourish in the places we live.

But the true Thanksgiving marked by our faith family is the thanksgiving of the destitute, the enslaved, the marginalized, or those who have no harvest to celebrate. This year we are mindful of many families whose homes or livelihood have been lost in recent catastrophes – not only in Eastern Canada and the southern states, but in Puerto Rico and Bermuda, the Dominican Republic and Cuba. What would Thanksgiving mean to them?

For the people following Moses through the Red Sea, and all their family of faith afterwards, thanksgiving is not just the celebration of something good which we have received. Being thankful to our Creator is the promise to “Keep Still”, first of all, to trust in God's love so that we can live with hope, no matter what life throws at us.

An author I studied over my time on sabbatical is William Bridges, he wrote a wonderful piece comparing organizational change to this story of the Exodus which we have heard today. One of the quotes I really appreciated was his observation that “every organization needs a red sea” (from time to time.)

Moses and God knew that there was no going back – the Red sea was like a line of no return between the slavery of the past and the wilderness that lay ahead. While it was terrifying and destructive at the time, eventually it became the people's primary story of thanksgiving. It became part of their identity like location or DNA. Bridges describes this time of transition as often a frustrating challenging time when change is desperately needed but we haven't yet learned to live in that new way. And so people would complain: *“It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”*

The pandemic has been a kind of Red Sea for us. I am thankful for all the past times when we enjoyed meals and gatherings and concert crowds and no worries about physical distancing. I am thankful for years of spur of the moment hospital visits that I was able to make, going out in public without worrying where my mask is, making home visits and hosting family parties.

But as we move out of the pandemic (she says hopefully), we can't just go back to the old ways. We have to ensure that there are ways people can participate in the mission and ministry of our church at the distance where they feel comfortable and safe, even while we open the doors and welcome others back in person.

Moses managed to keep the people of Israel in the wilderness, in a time of transition for 40 years. We are already impatient with 2 years plus of a pandemic. So we need to remember to be thankful, too, not only for the changes we have been able to make, but for this family story, of faith and new life that will guide us forward. There will be wilderness times, yes, and there will be times to start over from scratch. But if we keep still and listen, if we keep trusting God – then we will find that our identity has been shaped by a song of thanksgiving for our past and for our future. Thanks be to God.