

Sermon for Sunday, November 20, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"HOW TO DIVIDE THE WATERS
Exodus 14:10-18

Text: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward.' "
Exodus 14:15

How would you like to be a Moses? When you got thirsty, you could strike a rock and a spring would flow. When you got hungry, you could call down manna from heaven. And when your way was blocked, you could raise your hand and the waters would divide. That would be pretty neat, wouldn't it? Well, this morning I am going to tell you how you can divide the waters! I'm going to tell you how you can walk right through the waters on dry land!

Now, what waters are we talking about? Actually, most of us don't run into any real oceans very often. Especially ones we need to walk through. I suppose what we are really talking about are problems that come to us in life that stop us cold, that trap us, with no way out. That's what happened to the Jews when they started out of Egypt. Their future must have looked mighty bright when they left, for God was leading them to the promised land. Yet, only a few hours later when they stood on the banks of the Red Sea, their backs were to the wall. Suddenly they had no future at all. Before them lay the impassable Red Sea and behind them they could see a cloud of dust--a cloud raised by the wheels of chariots and the hoofs of horses as the army of Pharaoh came after them. In a very real sense, they were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea! If you'll pardon the mixing of a metaphor, their future was going down the drain.

How does the future look to you? Some of us are concerned about the future because we don't have much of it left. Others of us are concerned because we don't know what it holds. Others of us are concerned because we are afraid we do know what it holds. Just this week I stood in a hospital room with a dear person who has just learned she has cancer. Suddenly, between her and her future lies this great Red Sea, this huge barrier of cancer. And how do you divide the waters? How do you get through something like that?

Now, when the Hebrews found themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea, they had several things going against them. First, their past was against them. For one thing, they had little physical strength to face what lay before them. Their bodies were simply exhausted. For years as slaves they had been driven almost beyond human endurance, working for hours on end with too little food and too little rest. Their backs knew the lash of the taskmaster's whip. They knew the agony of blistered hands, bleeding feet, aching muscles. They knew what it was for every muscle to cry out in weary protest against an awful abuse of the body. There on the banks of the Red Sea that day their past limited them, for they were weary in body.

For a second thing their spirits were weary, too. Born into slavery, all their lives they had known only humiliation and groveling before the haughty Egyptians that had destroyed the very fiber and dignity of the human soul. There was nothing in their past to make them brave or courageous or visionary. So, as they stood there, trapped by the awful circumstances of life, they were suffering from an inner bankruptcy. Yes, they were limited by their past both physically and spiritually.

Do you think our past limits us? Are we, too, shaped and moulded by all we have been? Recently Ann Landers carried a letter from a young girl. She had lived fast and loose at college and had a baby out of wedlock. Now she had met a wonderful man who thought she was wonderful, too. But, she asked, could she marry him in the light of what she had been? And let me say to you young people, be very careful about your present. You see, tomorrow your today will be your past. If it is the wrong kind of past, it will place limitations on you for the rest of your life.

Yes, we are all limited by our past. Can you be a scholar if you've never read a book? Can you be an accountant if you've never learned to add? Can you be a brick-layer if you've never mixed mortar? Can you be a mechanic if you've never seen a machine? Or what kind of spiritual future can we have if our past is improvised? Can we be effective Christians today if we have never read the Bible, never prayed, never worshipped? There will come the time when each of us will stand on the shores of some personal Red Sea. It may be the news that we have an incurable disease. It may be saying a last, fond farewell as we lay a loved one to final rest. It may be some decision we must make that shapes the course of our lives. And when we stand before that barrier, we will be limited by our past.

But notice secondly that the Hebrews were not only limited by their past, they were also limited by their present. Had they stayed in Egypt, they would not have incurred the Pharaoh's wrath. Or, were they safely away into the Sinai wilderness, they would be safe. Yet, they were neither back in Egypt nor safely away into the wilderness. In fact, they were precisely where they were, on the bank of the Red Sea. They were, in fact, hemmed in on one side by the water and on the other side by the pursuing charioteers. And, Oh!, if only! If only they were at a mountain pass, they could have sacrificed a few while the main body escaped. If only there were armed and trained soldiers with a great general to lead them, perhaps some ingenious plan could have been devised. But there was no mountain pass, no brave soldiers, and only a wilderness shepherd to lead them. Yes, "If only"---

Would you like to rearrange your present? If only the boss liked me, I would get that promotion. If only the teacher didn't hate me, I'd get good grades. If only I had the chances he had, I'd really get ahead in the world. Do you ever say that? And it is true spiritually, too. If only we had lived in Jesus' day, we would never have turned him down. If only we had been in Corinth when Paul preached, we would have followed him. If only we had been in Geneva, we could have been a Calvin, too. And it is really too bad, is it not, that we are who we are, where we are? Yes, our present limits us.

So the Hebrews came to a Red Sea only to discover they were limited by their past and trapped by their present circumstances. As they saw it, they had no future. "Were there no graves in Egypt?" they cried to Moses. There seemed little hope. But at that moment the voice of God spoke to Moses. "Why do you cry to me?" he said. "Tell the people of Israel to go forward." So the people moved forward, walking right into the barrier that stood in their way. And as they went forward, the very waters divided before them. They did, after all, have a future. They had one because they walked with God.

Is not this the only future any of us has? What assurance do you have that you will even be alive this time tomorrow? What assurance do you have that all you have built your dreams on will not collapse? What assurance do you have that all you have hoped and labored for will not vanish like the mist burned off by the morning sun? No, not a one of us has a future that is worth a thing unless we can divide the waters by walking with God.

I remember reading somewhere of a man who visited a leper colony. At their worship services he expected them to sing some hymn of great sorrow. To his surprise they began to sing a hymn of joy, "singing I go along life's road, praising the Lord, Praising the Lord..." And how could those pitiful, crippled people find the inner resources to sing a hymn of joy? Simply because whatever future they had was in the hands of God and as they walked into their future trusting him, they knew they could divide the waters.

Are there some things in your past that you are ashamed of--that limit you? There are in the lives of most of us. But Jesus can do something about your past. You see, he can forgive you. He died on the cross for your sins and mine. It doesn't matter how bad they were, how terrible. No, his death is big enough to cover them all, to wipe them out, if we accept the forgiveness he offers us. You can start out this morning with a fresh new sheet, a blank page. All you have to do is to ask Jesus to forgive you. There isn't much I can do about my past, or you yours. But Jesus can.

And what about your present this morning. Are you playing the "if only" game? Most of us are. But we don't have to play that game. Jesus says that if we will surrender the throne of our hearts, if we will give him our wills, he will take our present and bless it. He promises that he will make everything work for good to them that love God. So, if your situation this morning is not what you want it to be, just ask Jesus to take control of your life and you will see the waters begin to divide before you. So, whoever you are, you do not have to stand facing some Red Sea helplessly. Jesus offers to forgive your past and he offers to take your present and transform it. And as you walk with him, you will see the waters divide.

The story is told of a boy traveling alone in a railway compartment on a train in England. At one of the stations an elderly gentleman got on and sat down beside him and engaged him in conversation, "Are you traveling all alone, young man?" he asked. "Yes, sir," replied the boy. "How far are you going?" "To the end of the line," said the lad. "But are you not afraid to take such a long trip all by yourself?" "Oh, no, sir," replied the boy, "You see, my father is the engineer." So with us. We can ride without fear to the end of the line when our heavenly father is the engineer. When he is at the controls of our lives, he knows we are on the train.

In his book entitled, The Sacrament Table, George Jeffery tells a story that I want to share with you. It is the story of a missionary in Canada whose area of travel was so large he could not cover all of it very often. Once, in visiting the home of a remote settler, he began to teach the little invalid son of that home the 23rd Psalm. He taught him by giving him a word for each finger on his right hand-- "The Lord is my Shepherd." "Remember," he said, "always hold on to the fourth finger, for the Lord is my Shepherd." Two years passed before he was able to return to the settler's lonely cabin and when he came, he was not at all surprised to learn that the sickly little boy was no longer there. In the dark of a winter night he had gone to sleep and simply had not awakened. The mother told the missionary about the little boy's death. "We found him in the morning with his hands outside the covers, his left hand holding the fourth finger on his right hand so tightly we could not break his grip. So, we buried him that way, holding on to his fourth finger. It was so strange." Strange? No, not at all, "for the Lord is my Shepherd." No matter how bad our past, no matter how awful our present, we can divide whatever waters stand before us when the Lord is our shepherd. Are you holding on to the fourth finger this morning?