

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

13<sup>th</sup> September 2020 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

**EXODUS 14:19-31**

**WATERS OF LIFE AND DEATH**

There's a great 'Far Side' cartoon which has three goldfish standing on a table beside their fish bowl, while smoke and flames come out of the top of the bowl which, somehow (?), has caught on fire. While we might dwell on how a fish bowl catches on fire, what makes this cartoon very funny is one of the fish turning to the others and saying, 'Well, thank God we all made it out in time ..... 'Course, now we're equally screwed'.

Sayings that come to my mind when thinking of this cartoon are things like, 'Out of the frying pan and into the fire', and 'Caught between a rock and a hard place'. It's the kind of scenario which also often appears on movies: the hero is caught in a bad situation from which there is seemingly no escape, except that, somehow, miraculously, they do escape from it. Only then, as the result of what has happened, they now find themselves in a *really* bad situation. And the movie goes on.

From what we are told in the Exodus story, there is no doubt that this is exactly how the Israelites were feeling when they left Egypt. Last week we looked at the story of the Passover. After spending many years as slaves in Egypt, God heard His people's cries for help and He sent Moses to lead them out of slavery back to the promised land. Pharaoh wouldn't release them, even after God sent plagues on the Egyptians. It was only after the last and most devastating plague, the killing of all first-born sons, that Pharaoh finally let the people go.

So, around 400,000 Israelites, including the young and the old, with all of their belongings and livestock, left Egypt to make the long journey back to the promised land where Jacob and his family had come from many years before. But very soon after, Pharaoh realised that no one was left to do the work of all these slaves, so he gathered up an army of his 600 best chariots and chased after them.

And now, the Israelites find themselves between that rock and a hard place; Pharaoh's army behind them, the waters of the Red Sea in front of them. For them, are those waters to be waters of life, a means of escape, or of death, a trap to stop them escaping from Pharaoh and his soldiers?

Waters of life? Or waters of death? What is water for us? It's both, isn't it? Water is essential for life, there would be no life without it, and it makes up so much of our world. But water also brings death, sometimes on a large scale, which we see regularly on our news.

Think about how we experience water here in our country: we have life giving, drought breaking rains, which can also turn into destructive and life destroying floods. In December 2018 as we drove through Cloncurry and Julia Creek in western Queensland the effects of a 7-year drought were very obvious. Just two months later farmers there were rejoicing in the rains which brought life back to that land. But then, very quickly, those life-giving rains became floods which wiped out all the animals, both native and livestock, which had survived the long drought.

Each year we hear too many stories of drownings in back yard swimming pools, absolute tragedies. Each year we also hear the stories of people who take shelter in their pools and are saved from devastating bushfires.

Every summer, as we hear and see the effects across our wide and diverse land of either too much or not enough water, I have the words of Dorothy McKellar's poem 'Sunburnt Country' going through my head, 'of droughts and flooding rains'.

Water brings death, water brings life.

For the Jewish people, trapped in the grip of Pharaoh's army by the water which was in front of them, what happened next is *the* saving event in their history. On God's command, Moses stretched out his arms, and God sent a wind which blew the water back, making a dry space for the Israelites to walk through between walls of water. And then, with the Israelites having passed through and the Egyptians attempting to follow them, God again closed the sea and drowned the entire army, including the Pharaoh. The Red Sea became waters of death for those who wanted to enslave God's people, but waters of life which allowed the Israelites to be free from slavery and to now go and worship God as His people.

It's an important story for us now in our faith history also. Listen to these words here from Romans 6: 'Don't you know that all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptised also share in his death? When we were baptised, we died and were buried with Christ. We were baptised, so that we would live a new life, as Christ was raised to life by the glory of God the Father.' (*Romans 6:3-4 CEV*) What do you see here?

Here we can see again this theme of water bringing both death and life, but this time referring to our Baptism. These words from Romans are spoken at the beginning of a funeral service; words, at a time of death, to bring us comfort through a reminder of the new life we receive by being joined to Jesus' life and death through our baptism.

As the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, through that water they entered a new life, a life of freedom, a life with God. Those same waters brought death to the Egyptian forces which were trying to enslave them and keep them away from God. Our baptism frees us and brings us into God's family, but drowns the devil, sin, death, and everything which tries to keep us away from God.

Baptism is our great saving event. Last week we looked at the connection between the blood of the lamb at the Passover used to assure the Israelites they would be saved, and the assurance of our salvation we receive through Jesus' body and blood whenever we come to receive Holy Communion. Now, Baptism is our Exodus event; freeing us, giving us life, enabling us now to live a life with God and following God.

How does water work in our life in Baptism? I have conducted an emergency baptism of a baby less than a day old, in a humidicrib, where the only water I could place on his forehead was a bit on the end of my finger. I remember one tiny drop of water running from his forehead down the side of his nose and on to his cheek – that water brought both death and life. I have done baptisms of teenagers in a swimming pool, when, because of their cultural context and what they had seen previously, it was significant for them to be baptised by going fully under water – that water brought both death and life. Both baptisms are equally effective in bringing both death and life to those people. And that's because it's not how much water, or the type of water, or who applies the water that gives it this life and death power in Baptism. As Martin Luther says in the Small Catechism; 'Baptism is not just water used on its own. It is water used together with God's Word in the way God has commanded'. And so, as Jesus commanded, we now go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of our God; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And by this act, by the Holy Spirit giving power to these words used with the water, in our Exodus event we pass through death and into life. We know we still struggle with sin; we know we still face death in this life. We know that the devil still has too many victories in the way that we think, speak and act.

You'd have to be a pretty arrogant Christian to say you don't sin any more, and certainly the Bible has plenty to say about the fact that, right now, we are living in that space between life and death.

But our Baptism means that ultimately, like we remember at a funeral, those waters used with the power of God's Word wash us clean, refresh us, renew us, and bring us in to new life. Sin and the devil will still have their victories, just as the Israelites still grumbled about God even after He saved them, but they no longer ultimately enslave; they have been put to death. We have been set free; to love God, to serve Him, to ask for His forgiveness when we do wander off. We have been given new life.

Many times in life we are going to feel like we are stuck between a rock a hard place, that we are like those fish looking at their burning bowl and thinking 'what now?' It will often feel that sin and the devil are very much alive in us, not drowned. But ultimately, in our Baptism, God has passed us through from death to life. With Luther we can also say, 'But, I am baptised!' whenever any threat comes against us. And that is all the faith we need to hold on to and receive the new life which is now ours. A new life to live now in freedom in how we love and serve God and share His love with others, and a new life also which will be ours forever when He calls us to be with Him. Amen.

## **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

### **New Life Through Baptism**

Either share with those with you, or reflect on yourself, the events of your own baptism

- When and where was it? Do you know who was there? Have you been told anything special about that event if you don't remember it yourself?
- Do you often think of your baptism now? What does it mean for you?
- How can the guarantee that we have God's love and are brought into His family through our Baptism now help us to live our lives in Him?

### **God's Protecting Shield**

Another aspect of this Exodus is that God used both a cloud and fire to keep the Egyptians away from the Israelites as they were fleeing.

- Do you experience God's protection in your life now?
- Can God's protection sometimes be there for us, but we fail to recognise it?

### **Our Walk Through the Waters, a Life-long Journey**

Being baptised doesn't mean that we suddenly become perfect, or our faith is always strong, and that sin and the devil are completely dead in our lives.

- Think about your 'Exodus' (faith life) journey. What role does your Baptism play in this?
- Where are you now on this journey; in the Promised Land, stuck back in Egypt, wandering around in the desert, all of the above?
- Ask God for both His help and guidance, and the strength of His love, to continue to bring you through the waters of your Baptism from death into life.