

**The Swiss Church in London, 17 February 2019**  
**Sermon “The Crossing of the Red Sea” (Exodus 14)**

*Moses - A collection of famous stories*

When Moses and the Israelites stood in front of the Red Sea, the waters in front of them, the Egyptian army behind them, it could have been the end. The outcome of the story is nothing short of a miracle. The people of Israel took on the powerful kingdom of Egypt. The ancient kingdom of Egypt that dates back as far as 3'000BC and at its peak covered modern day Egypt, Israel, Palestine and large parts of Turkey was the power house of the region and their leader the Pharaoh was merciless and enslaved the people of the occupied regions.

The story of Moses leading the Israelites across of the Red Sea to escape slavery in Egypt is part of a huge collection of famous stories. We could run a whole sermon series only with famous Moses stories!

One famous story tells us about the birth of Moses during the Egyptian occupation. The Pharaoh told the midwives to kill all new-born Hebrew boys. To save her son the mother of Moses put Moses in a basket on the shore of the river Nile and abandoned him. The Pharaoh's daughter found and raised him.

Another famous story goes that Moses encountered God in the shape of a burning bush. That's when he knew that God was God and that he was called to lead God's people into freedom.

Then there is the story of the ten plagues that God sent after the Pharaoh repeatedly refused to let the Israelites go. Only when the Pharaoh was threatened with the killing of all firstborn sons did he finally agree to let the Israelites go.

Another famous story goes that after their escape and crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites wandered through the desert for 40 years. Moses received the Ten Commandments from God: the ethical code of the Hebrew people. And

then at some point during their long journey the people of Israel lost faith in God and worshipped the Golden Calf.

Moses abandoned in a basket, the burning bush, the ten plagues, the ten commandments, the golden calf... So many famous stories! If you want to read them all the book of Exodus, the second book in the Old Testament, is the place to turn to.

Moses is the leading figure of the Jewish people. He led the people of Israel to strength and independence.

### *Founding myths*

Just like the story of the creation of the world that we heard last month, the stories of Moses and the people of Israel build the foundation of Israel's religious and cultural identity. This identity was under threat during the Babylonian Exile (that is when the powerful Empire of Babylon conquered the small Kingdom of Israel and deported a large part of its population). The Israelites needed a *raison d'être*. They needed a story that would give them a strong enough foundation to hold on to their identity and to their faith in God in spite of being far away from home.

It's a bit like the founding story of Switzerland. Switzerland is a nation with many different cultures and languages, and it really is a bit of a miracle that it actually exists. But we also have a good founding myth that every school child knows: there is William Tell who scared away the Habsburgians and shot an apple from his son Walter's head; and then the three first cantons who met on the Ruetli to build a federation. Although William Tell and the Ruetlichwur are more of a myth than historic reality they are hugely important for the identity of Switzerland.

And this brings us back to the Israelites. They survived because they had a strong founding myth that became part of their identity.

The story of the exodus from Egypt is passed down in Jewish families from generation to generation and celebrated and remembered at Passover each year which takes place around the same time when we Christians celebrate Easter. It is a defining part of Jewish identity and therefore also of our Christian identity.

### *Our identity*

If someone asks you who you are, what do you answer?

What stories and experiences make you the person you are?

What stories do you tell others about yourself?

In our life we meet so many people, we live through so many events good and bad, we experience so much, small daily things and big changes, that it is impossible to give an accurate picture of who we are. Instead we pick and choose from this vast collection to create the story of ourselves. Just as the Israelites with their incredible collection of famous stories so does each one of us have a collection of famous stories! Some of our stories we share are pretty accurate, others are enhanced with details that might not be entirely correct but have a symbolic value.

People often ask me why I decided to study theology. This is my story: When I was a student of history and philosophy I found myself one day in a seminar about medieval philosophy. I was fascinated to hear that the philosophers of the middle ages, the scholastics, tried to prove the existence of God with rational arguments. Why would anyone want to rationally prove God? What was the point of this? Was it even possible? I was hooked and I realised that although I did not consider myself a Christian at the time the questions that I was most passionate about were the questions that theologians asked themselves all the time. And this was the beginning of my journey to becoming a vicar...

I'm not sure if this seminar was the first time that I discovered my passion for theology. More likely it was a process with many different stories. I'm not even sure if the seminar took place exactly as I remember it. It doesn't matter. It became part of my storyline. It became part of my identity.

When we tell our story, we pick certain experiences over others. Some events shake us to the core and almost break us, others change our lives in the most positive way. Those are the stories that define us, that make our identity. They are our storyline.

In the same way the stories of the Bible are the storyline of our cultural and religious identity.

### *The Crossing of the Red Sea*

One topic seems to run like a red thread through Israel's story: being on a journey. The Israelites seem to be constantly on the move, never resting, never quite settled, sometimes because they chose to, sometimes because they are forced to. The founding fathers and mothers are nomads, Eve and Adam forced to leave the Garden of Eden, Sara and Abraham moving around in their tent, the prophets who go from city to city to proclaim the word of God, Jesus who wanders tirelessly to preach the good news.

And then there are the Israelites and their story of a long journey. On the first sight the escape from slavery and the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea is a story of freedom. And yet, if we look a little bit closer, this freedom is not only a positive experience. There are risks involved and an unknown future lies ahead of them. When the Israelites are standing in front of the Red Sea, the army of the Pharaoh approaching behind them, they say to Moses: "What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

They would have paid the price of freedom in order to have a proper burial site. The prospect of having to die in the desert and being left behind and to be forgotten without a grave was horrifying. At least in Egypt they would have

been remembered on a grave stone. Their identity, it felt, would have been preserved. But their escape and journey into an unknown future meant that they had to giving up their identity as they knew it without knowing who they would become, without a predictable storyline.

But God would not let this happen. Yes, the journey would be long and painful, but it would also be meaningful and miraculous. At one of its most dramatic moments, when the Israelites were almost extinct by the Egyptian army, God calls Moses to divide the sea and leads the people of Israel across the Red Sea. It is the beginning of a new storyline.

### *We are somebody*

To embark on an unknown journey can be daunting. To stay where it feels safe might seem like the better option, even at the price of an unsatisfying compromise. At least we know where we are, and we are surrounded by people who know our story.

If we embark on an unknown journey it can feel like losing our identity. New places, new people, new experiences, they make us feel like a blank canvas, like a nobody. No one knows our story. But: we are somebody. Even in the strangest of places, even in brand-new circumstances, we are always somebody to God. In God, we are who we are. Even if everything feels strange and foreign, in God we never lose our identity. Our journey makes us who we are, and no one can take this away from us.

Amen