

Story and Meditation: Miracle Work

September 13, 2020

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 14:19-31

Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21

by *Eric Anderson*

The kolea was not content, and it was not a minor problem. It may also come as something of a relief to you that it was not a myna problem, either, because that means it's the last time in this story that I can make that pun.

The problem, in short, was that it was her first autumn in Hilo, and, well, it was wet.

She'd arrived during a week like the one we've just had. Gray, overcast skies lasting nearly all day. She'd wake up in the morning hoping that the sunrise would herald a bright day, but instead the clouds would settle in again and, well, bless her. And bless her. And bless her.

The other kolea, having heard people use that expression, would tell her she was being blessed.

"I could stand a little less blessing," she told them.

"Don't worry. It will stop," they said.

"When?"

They'd look out to sea, cock their heads to the side, stand on one leg for a moment, and reply, "Well, not yet."

She was not content.

"Does the sun ever shine here?" she demanded. "It did in Alaska."

"Of course the sun shines here," they told her.

"When?"

"Well, not yet."

"Not yet" is a lousy answer when you're a wet, uncomfortable, disappointed, and thoroughly irritated kolea. "Not yet?" she muttered. "Not ever, more likely."

One of her neighbor kolea, an older bird who had made the round trip many times between Hawai'i and Alaska, landed near her one rainy afternoon and watched her gloomily pulling worms from the grass. She had to admit that the rain helped bring them to the surface and make them easier to find, but she was hungry for the Alaskan sun much more than she was hungry for Hawaiian worms.

"Do you really want to see the sun?" her neighbor kolea asked.

"Yes!" she said.

"Come with me," the older kolea said.

The two birds leapt into the air. They flew higher and higher and higher, and the young kolea was glad she'd been doing all that eating. She was sure, absolutely sure, that the older kolea was leading her home, back to Alaska. In great circles they rose through the air filled with raindrops before entering the gray and white clouds above. In just a few moments they came to the top and saw the sun beaming across the cloud tops.

"Look," called the older one. "Here's the sun!"

They didn't head to Alaska. They turned great circles between the blue above and the cotton white below. "Here's the sun," he said again as they flew.

"It's always here," he told her as they flew side-by-side. "Sometimes it's easy to see, when the clouds have gaps for the sun to shine all the way to the ground. And sometimes it's not. Sometimes, if you want to see the sun, the sun comes to you. Sometimes, you have to make the effort to find the sun."

What you and I are likely to remember of the crossing of the Red Sea – or the sea of reeds; translating the Hebrew isn't straightforward – is the artwork of towering walls of water flanking a sandy road surface. That's not entirely Cecil B. DeMille's fault. European and American artists consistently depicted the scene with that kind of drama over hundreds of years.

What they left out was... the work.

The ten plagues that struck Egypt, you might remember, were devastating but not entirely effective. Pharaoh would agree to the departure of the Israelites, then "harden his heart" and change his mind. When the last plague struck, Moses and the descendants of Israel resolved on a speedy departure. They probably couldn't leave Egypt before Pharaoh changed his mind, but they could put some distance between themselves and likely pursuit. They threw things together, they gathered up the livestock and traveling gear, and they made tracks, swift tracks, toward the border.

They were right to move fast, because Pharaoh changed his mind again – he changed his mind but not his pattern – but this time he had to catch them.

The Hebrews' flight toward Sinai would have been exhausting. Exodus speaks of camps being set in two different places, so this was not the trip of a single night or day. The people would have come to the shores of the sea physically drained and in fear of the gaining pursuit. Earlier in chapter 14, they wailed to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?"

They had worked so hard to come to this point, trapped by the sea. So hard.

The work didn't end there. As Michael J. Chan writes, "By means of a 'strong east wind' (beruach qadim 'azzah, verse 21; see also Genesis 1:1-2), God separates the waters of the sea, exposing dry ground (yabashah, see also Genesis 1:9-10) and an escape route. Moses plays an important role in all of this. He holds out his arm for the entire night (verse 21), as Yhwh drives back the waters and splits the sea."

Even as the writers of Exodus made it clear that the Israelites' escape was the act of God, the simple truth is that people had to contribute. They had to take part. They had to work, whether it was Moses' outstretched arm or the people moving as quickly as they could between the walls of water. It isn't even limited to people. A strong east wind blew to create this unconventional road.

God and wind and water could hold that escape route open for hours, for weeks, for decades if they wanted. If the people of Israel had not literally taken steps to follow it, it was all for nothing.

God makes miracles. Human beings don't benefit from miracles unless they embrace them, engage with them, work with them, and work for them.

This isn't the only Biblical example. Remember Joseph and Pharaoh decades before – the reason that the Hebrew people were living in Egypt to be enslaved. Pharaoh had prophetic dreams that Joseph successfully interpreted as predicting seven years of great harvests followed by seven years of famine. God sent the dreams. You can also say that God sent the interpreter. But it was a wise Pharaoh who gave Joseph the task of saving for the days of need. It was an active Joseph who set out to build storehouses. It was the people of Egypt who gathered the grain safely into the barns.

I keep praying for a miracle in these days of COVID-19. I am sure you do, too. The miracle will likely come about, in part, through the hard work of medical researchers working on a vaccine. It will come through the willingness of people to test it. It will take the time it takes, because there is no shortcut for this kind of miracle. This isn't Star Trek. Doctor McCoy is not going to whip up a cure and test it on himself by the end of the hour.

The miracle, however, does not need to wait for a vaccine, and it does not rely only on researchers, technicians, and clinical volunteers. It relies just as much on you and me. Ed Yong wrote in *The Atlantic* this week, "...people forget that controlling the pandemic means doing many things at once. The virus can spread before symptoms appear, and does so most easily through five P's: people in prolonged, poorly ventilated, protection-free proximity. To stop that spread, this country could use measures that other nations did, to great effect: close nonessential businesses and spaces that allow crowds to congregate indoors; improve ventilation; encourage mask use; test widely to identify contagious people; trace their contacts; help them isolate themselves; and provide a social safety net so that people can protect others without sacrificing their livelihood. None of these other nations did everything, but all did enough things right—and did them simultaneously."

The rest of Yong's article, I regret to say, describes the way that the U.S. did one or two of those things at a time, not together, and the price we've paid for that failure.

I know we're tired. With all the deaths at the Yukio Okutsu Veterans Home, we're scared. We have got to abandon the thinking that restricting activity is "punishing" people who've been doing things right. It isn't. We have got to abandon the thinking that courage looks like bravado. It doesn't. We have got to abandon the thinking that we know when we're sick and when we're healthy. We don't. We have got to abandon the thinking that prioritizes economic systems over public health. Economic systems will continue to flounder if people continue to get sick and die. This week the United States will mourn the 200,000th casualty of COVID-19.

We have got to abandon the thinking that says, "We're not going to pay people not to work." If we don't ensure that people have the necessities of life in this period when they can't work, how will they ever be able to work when things are good?

We have seen a lot of foolishness, and a lot of selfishness, and a lot of failure among the world's population and the world's leadership in these last eight months. Ed Yong's account is scathing. But the people of Israel did cross the sea floor. Joseph did build the silos. They did the miracle work.

Wouldn't it be something if the people of this planet took care of one another, if we did the work to keep one another healthy? Wouldn't that be a miracle in itself?

In *Long Walk to Freedom*, South African freedom fighter and later President Nelson Mandela wrote, "I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lay defeat and death."

Let us hold to our faith in God and in humanity. Let us do the work of miracles. And yes, we shall rise above the clouds and once more see the sun.

Amen.