



BREAD IN THE WILDERNESS

A sermon by Dan Saperstein

Holly Presbyterian Church

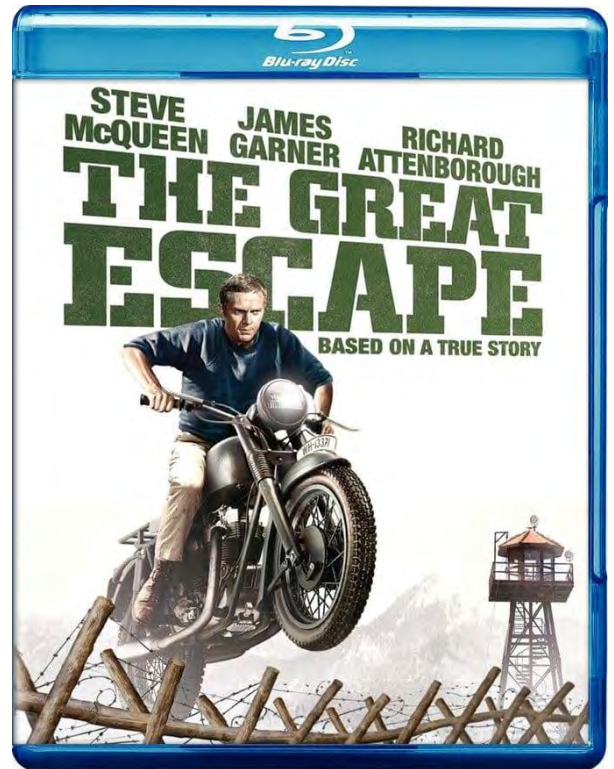
June 16, 2019

Texts: Exodus 16:1-15; Mark 6:30-44

The film classic *The Great Escape* is a Hollywood telling of one of the great true stories of World War II. It recounts the massive escape from a high-security German POW camp by a group of American, British, and Canadian prisoners of war. The escape testifies not only to the courage and ingenuity of the soldiers, but also to their deep passion for freedom, a passion that caused them to risk their lives for the chance to be free again. The one iconic image of this from the film involves an American POW played by Steve McQueen. He has spent most of his time in the camp locked up in “the cooler” – solitary confinement – and is fleeing the Nazis on a motorcycle after the escape. With the Nazis closing in on him, he appears to be trapped by a long, high, barbed wire fence. Just when his capture seems imminent, he finds the right approach, and like a daredevil jumper, soars over the fence on the motorcycle.

The image was reproduced in thousands of posters and ads for the movie, and is on the cover of the blu-ray edition of the film. It resonates so powerfully because it captures how strong our drive for freedom can be.

The ancient Israelites, like the POWs in *The Great Escape*, had a tremendous passion for freedom. They had been slaves for an increasingly oppressive emperor, who had launched a genocidal campaign against them. But more powerful than any empire is the power of God, and no evil, no matter how oppressive, will long endure when God acts against it. So God called Moses to speak God's word to Pharaoh: "Let my people go." A battle of wills ensued, a succession of divinely sent plagues, answered with increasing obstinacy by Pharaoh, and ever worse hardship for the Israelites. Finally came the awful but inevitable judgment against Pharaoh's murderous deeds when the Angel of Death visited the land, sparing only those homes with doorposts marked with the blood of a lamb.



Only then did Pharaoh finally relent and let the Israelites go free. They left immediately, and took the Egyptians' gold and silver with them. Then, when they seemed trapped at the Red Sea, God created a path through the sea, and caused all of Pharaoh's soldiers and horses and chariots to drown in pursuit. And there was a tremendous outpouring of joy among the Israelites, such as was witnessed in many of our lifetimes at the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But we know that the euphoria did not last. No sooner had they begun their wilderness journey than the complaining began. I once read a cartoon entitled, "Mr. and Mrs. Moses." In the comic an endless throng of people plods through the wilderness. Some of them have bewildered looks on their faces. Ahead of them, leading them into what seems like the middle of nowhere is Moses. He's walking with staff in hand, hunched over as if he carries a huge weight upon his shoulders. He also looks really miffed. That's because Mrs. Moses is right behind her husband. She is saying, "But would you ask the burning bush for directions? N-o-o-o-o, not mister-I'd-rather-wander-the-desert-for-forty-years..."

The book of Exodus does not record this conversation between Moses and his wife. But we do know Moses did have to endure much murmuring, complaining and whining as the Hebrew people trudged through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. They found themselves in a situation very different than the one they were used to. In Egypt there was a schedule: Get up at sunrise, work until sunset,

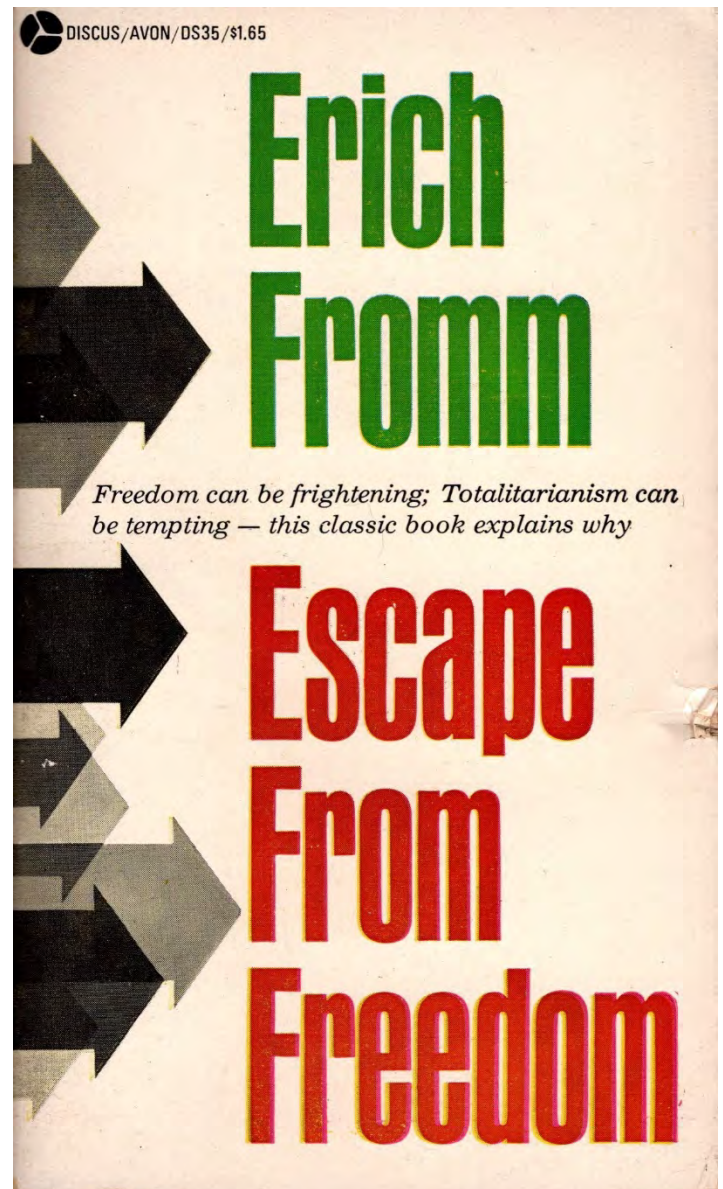
return home exhausted, do the same thing the next day. Out in the wilderness the people never knew what to expect. In Egypt there was a meal plan, wasn't much of a meal plan but at least there was food on a regular basis. Out in the wilderness they didn't know when or if the next meal would arrive. In Egypt the army had secured the borders from threats of invasion. In the wilderness the people were vulnerable to all kinds of attacks--mountain lions, serpents, hostile tribes of nomads.

So they complained. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." Complaining, murmuring, whining is a natural response to unknown, potentially hostile surroundings

You see, along with the euphoria of freedom often comes something else, something unanticipated: the fear of the future. As with freedom movements throughout history, the Israelites had been so focused on what they were running *from* they had given little thought to what they were running *to*. As strong as is our drive for freedom, it is often balanced by an equally strong drive for security.

It is the impulse that psychologist Erich Fromm, writing in the aftermath of World War II, labeled the escape *from* freedom. The Israelites were daring out into uncharted territory. And the security of the familiar, though it be brutally harsh, was suddenly more attractive than the fear of the unknown ahead of them and Pharaoh's armies fast on their heels.

When Craig Barnes, now President of Princeton Seminary, was pastor of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., he delivered a sermon on the Exodus. It was September 9, 2001, two days before



the events that shook our world. In words that ring with haunting insight, he said,

Notice how many times the word Egypt comes up in those verses. No one is talking about the Promised Land, freedom, or the Lord. All they are talking about is what they left behind. That's because they are scared, and when people are scared they will always trade in their freedom for security.

So let us be clear: when God opens up the Red Sea to allow the Hebrews to walk away from Pharaoh and slavery, it is not because he is moved by their great faith. They have no faith! That's what they will learn in the desert. At this point all they have is fear, which the Bible understands as the opposite of faith. [“Leaving Slavery Behind” online sermon]



There is a perceptive scene in the very first *Lord of the Rings* film in which the main character, the hobbit Frodo, is walking away from the Shire, the land where he had lived his entire life, on his quest to destroy the powerful ring in his possession. Frodo is accompanied by Sam, his faithful hobbit friend who has vowed to help him. As they walk along, Sam suddenly stops in his tracks. Frodo is a little puzzled, and asks “What is it, Sam?” And Sam looks down at his feet and says: “If I take one more step...I will be further away from home than I have ever been.” And Frodo smiles in understanding, and then says “C’mon, Sam. Let’s go.” And off they go on their journey.

Really, it was a key point for Sam and Frodo. A turning point. One more step, and they have moved into the unknown. One more step, and they will be different people from that point on, in ways they can’t totally imagine. Sometimes we call those moments “watersheds.” The term is actually a geological one, a geographic line, such as a mountain range. If rain falls on one side of that line, it drains down into a

particular set of valleys, trees and lakes. But if it falls just a few feet on the other side, it moves towards a totally different world. Sam and Frodo had arrived at a watershed moment. [Dan Baumgartner, "Walking by Faith: Toward Freedom" online sermon]

The people of Holly Presbyterian Church have also reached a watershed moment. You have started a journey into the wilderness between pastors. The era of Sharlyn Gates is behind you. For many I am sure it is a time of grief and loss. For all of you, however, it is a time of uncertainty. You know what you have left. But you don't fully know what lies ahead.

Like Sam and Frodo, it may not be a journey you have willingly chosen. And it is a journey fraught with anxiety. But here you stand anyway, in the wilderness of uncertainty, at the watershed of your future.

As with any stressful situation, the natural first response is to take quick action to remove the source of stress. Don't have enough food? Go back to Egypt where food was plentiful. A logical option. But completely wrong. Don't have a pastor to preach? Find the first one you can, because any pastor is better than none. A logical option. And also completely wrong.



As with the Israelites in the wilderness, as with Sam and Frodo leaving the Shire, the real choice that confronts you is one between fear and faith. These are two quite different responses. Fear forgets. Just a chapter earlier, the Israelites were celebrating their deliverance from slavery. Had they forgotten so quickly the slaughter of the Hebrew babies? The command to make bricks without straw? More importantly, have

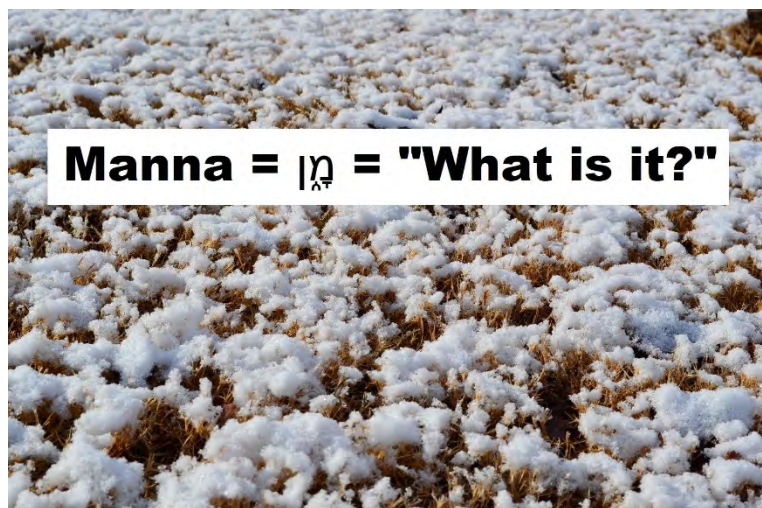
they forgotten what the Lord has done for them? Have they forgotten the Passover and the miracle at the sea?

Faith, however, remembers. Faith not only remembers the past for what it was, it remembers the One who is faithful and who alone holds the future. Israel had fear, not faith, so the Lord must remind them. "I'm the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt. . . At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God." That night quails were found in the camp. The next morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. It left an edible fine, flaky bread-like substance as fine as frost on the ground.

The point of all of this is that somehow, some way, the Lord provided for Israel. That is the message that people of faith always remember. The Lord God Almighty will provide—even in the wilderness. The Lord will sustain—even in times of panic.

Most of us here today know this to be true. We've had those moments in our lives when the right person showed up at just the right time. Or the unexpected financial gift came when we needed it most. Or the spoken word gave us more strength than we could imagine. Or the fever broke and the healing began. Looking back we can see how the Lord provided and sustained even in the most difficult of times. So it's important in times of uncertainty to remember. The Lord God Almighty will provide—even in the wilderness. The Lord will sustain—even in times of fear and anxiety. [Bill Clark, *Whining in the Wilderness* online sermon]

The best reason for seeing manna as the symbol for the faithfulness of God along our wilderness journeys comes from its name. A literal translation of manna is "What is it?" Every morning the Moms of Israel would gather "What is it," place it on the table, and their kids would ask, "What is it?" The Moms would say, "Well, yes."



Their daily nourishment was found in a question. "What is it, God, that you are doing?" "What is it that you are asking us to leave behind?" "What is it that you are calling us to become?" Nothing is more nourishing to your faith, to your identity, than wrestling with that question. It is the irresistible daily question of anyone in the

wilderness who soon runs out of resources and resolve. [Craig Barnes, *Regimens of Mystery* online sermon]

It takes time before you start to hear the answers that God is giving. A quick answer may relieve the stress of uncertainty, but will almost always be wrong. In the life of this church, the wilderness journey ahead is a time of creative listening with one another, with the resources of the larger Body of Christ, and, above all, to the voice of God who never tests us beyond our ability to bear it, and who always provides just what we need for each day, if we live it by faith.

Jesus knew what it was like to be in the wilderness. After his baptism, he was in the wilderness for forty days and nights with nothing to eat. Satan tempted him to take the easy way out – to turn stones into bread – but he replied, “A person does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” In other words, when faced with a time of uncertainty, he knew that the only sure solution was to trust in God.

Not long afterward, he was in the wilderness again, teaching to a great crowd, well into the day. His disciples began to fear that the crowd would get hungry and start to turn against them. They had no idea how to feed them all. But Jesus had faith. He knew that God would provide. And he took a small boy’s lunch and used it to feed 5000 that day. When things look uncertain, and you are tempted to fear, God will provide enough to sustain you in your wilderness times.

Egypt is behind you. The Promised Land is in the distance. But now, you are in the wilderness. The way may seem long, and it may be filled with anxiety, but don’t fear. Don’t yield to the temptation to take the quick fix. But go forward in faith, and God will provide all that you need.

The sad thing about the movie *The Great Escape* is that ultimately, only a handful of the POWs made it to safety. Most were recaptured or killed. But God will lead us into a future and a freedom that is guaranteed. As God spoke to Israel at another time of crisis, “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.” Thanks be to God.
Amen.