



## “What it Means to Give: Taking Steps Toward Freedom”

*Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg*

*September 17, 2017*

*Exodus 14:10-31*

He was a prince of the tribe of Judah. He was the brother-in-law of Aaron, Moses’s right hand man. When everyone else hesitated, he stepped into the swirling sea. His name was Nachshon, the son of Aminadav. Sounds impressive, doesn’t he? Who here knows about Nachshon? He appears for the first time in the Bible when Aaron marries Nachshon’s sister. Exodus 6 says, “Aaron took for a wife Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav, sister of Nachshon.” Nachshon seemed to be someone worth knowing, especially for Aaron who was going to marry Nachshon’s sister.

The Midrash and Talmud, collections of rabbinic teachings and ancient commentaries on the Hebrew scriptures, give us more details about Nachshon. After leaving Egypt, the Israelites found themselves trapped between a raging sea and the ruthless Egyptian army. Then God gave Moses a command that seemed impossible to fulfill: “Don’t cry out to me, Moses! Keep moving!” The order was given for the people of God to go forward, to take steps towards freedom, sea or no sea. But who would be the first to dip their toes in the water? Who would decide to move from fear into freedom? Who would take the steps needed to reveal the power of God? It was at that moment, Nachshon arrived on the scene.

When Israel stood facing the Sea of Reeds, and the command was given to move forward, the story is told that each of the tribes hesitated, saying, “We don’t want to be the first to jump into the sea.” Nachshon saw what was happening, that the people were afraid and unable to move. So, he trusted the God of salvation, the God of deliverance. He walked out into the water. He stood ankle deep and the waters were unaffected. He waded out to his waist and the sea didn’t split. He pushed out until the water covered his chest, yet the waves washed against him. He swam out until his neck was covered and he could taste the salt on his lips, but the waters would not be moved. Finally, as his nose was about to submerge in the depths of the deep, Moses, who was standing on the shore began to pray. And God said to him, “My beloved ones are drowning in the stormy seas, and you are standing and praying?” Moses replied, “Master of the world, what am I to do?” God responded, “You lift your staff and spread your hand over the seas, which will split, and Israel will come into the sea upon dry land.” And as Nachshon’s nose submerged under the waves, the water gave way and the ground was exposed and freedom was found. And so, it was, following Nachshon’s lead, the Israelites entered the sea and were saved.

It is said that Nachshon took a leap of faith. For Jewish people, Nachshon’s name has become synonymous with courage and the initiative to do the right thing, even when the way seems impossible. But Nachshon really didn’t take a leap of faith, he took small steps towards freedom. Anne Lamont, American novelist and non-fiction writer says, “My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I

grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way, I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear.”

It often feels like we are staggering towards faith and stumbling through life.

How do we take that leap of faith? How does this exodus story lead us from captivity to freedom? How do we follow Nachshon and wade in the water? God says do not fear, stand firm, and then move forward.

The Israelites were frozen with fear, ready to flee, and on the edge of demise. They had escaped one form of captivity only to find themselves trapped. They were drowning in the oppression of slavery and pushed up against the drowning realization of a watery death. The Israelites were between a rock and a hard place. And we, too, often find ourselves unable to break free from the struggles that surround us, don't we? Things didn't work out as you planned. You lost your job or your company was swallowed up in a merger and you came out on the short end. You put money away for retirement, but economic trends hit you hard. You thought your marriage would last forever, but it didn't. The untimely death of a loved one has left you not only broken-hearted and grief-stricken, but uneasily insecure. Someone in your family is an addict and you're caught in the middle. We feel trapped on all sides.

What is God saying to us when we stand on the banks of despair? What is God saying to us when we are on the brink of collapse? What is God saying to us when we are on the brim of losing everything, shackled in the captivity of pain and fear? God's first words to us like they were to the stranded Israelites are “do not fear.” Don't fear! Those were God's first words through Moses to the Hebrews at the Red Sea. Now you can imagine how that word was received by the Israelites. There they were, on edge of the waters. They looked and Pharaoh's army was drawing near, the chariots and marching soldiers were pressing in upon them, and the scriptures say, “They were in great fear.”

Well, of course they were! But, you heard the words of Moses in this text, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the deliverance, the freedom that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.”

Fear not! As difficult as it may be, it is God's word to us when we are stumbling towards freedom. Don't fear, God says. Keep your eyes open because I'm going to give you freedom. But fear wreaks havoc in our lives. It leads us to find fault, and to falsely condemn. It makes us think that the shackles of slavery are better than moving forward into an unknown future. And that's what happened to the Hebrews. They defiantly cried out against God and against Moses.

And not only does fear lead us to find fault and falsely condemn but, in the midst of fear, we forget all that God has done. That's also what happened to the Hebrews. They had forgotten the powerful plagues; they had forgotten how they had been miraculously delivered from the angel of death; they had forgotten how God in the cloud and in the fire was guiding them right now. And it is with us. Fear can freeze our minds and paralyze our spirits and our wills. Fear can keep those who are homeless out of shelters. Fear can keep voters from the booth. Fear can keep LGBTQ kids in the shadows. Fear can keep the Latinx community in hiding. But, when we are between the instruments of war and a watery wall, God reminds us, “Do not fear.”

The second word God gives us as we stumble towards freedom is to stand still or stand firm! That's what God said through Moses, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord." When forces are pressing in upon us; when we can't see any evidence of God's work in our lives, or any light at the end of the dark tunnel through which we are passing, we need to stand firm, stand still. The ironic part of our small steps towards freedom is that standing still can actually be a healthy next step when surrounded by problems. Just stand still, wait a while.

For many of us, we tend to act too quickly. When we're in a fix, we look frantically for our nearest way out. And many times, we act foolishly. We do things we shouldn't do. We take advice we shouldn't take. We spend our energy in futile efforts at escape. Or we decide that the oppression, addiction, captivity we are leaving behind is better than an unknown future. But it isn't. It's at that point we need to stand still — to wait a while. To take baby steps into the deep waters knowing that God will be with us and that the community of Christ will buoy us and provide for us. We are called by God to stand firm in what we believe. We are called by God to stand firm against a charging empire. We called to stand firm when the siren song of past addictions calls our names. We called to stand firm when we think the only way forward is to go back. We are called to stand firm until the waters part, until chaos is dispelled by the creative forces of the Spirit, until the ground is once again solid under our feet. God's word to us as we stumble towards freedom is "stand firm."

And finally, it is only as we take that small step forward into freedom and into the recreated life of God, that the power we need to do what God calls us to do is given. That power is given, not ahead of time, but only as we need it, as Anne Lamott said, a lily pad under our stumbling feet. The walls of water and the dry land come when the path is dim and the way is unclear. But we are beckoned to wade into the water and trust that the God of creation will give us firm footing and a light for our path. God said, "Go forward!"

I don't know what going forward means for you. Perhaps, for you, it is to increase your financial stewardship and begin to tithe, to put your feet in the water and boldly begin to give the first fruits of your income to the work of God through this church. Maybe going forward is to sign up for a committee of the church. Maybe it's showing this city what a true follower of Jesus looks like by giving up a week of work and heading to Houston to help repair homes. Maybe going forward is to act in the face of your shyness and begin to share your faith and your story with others. Maybe going forward is to reorder your use of time, give up some of your Netflix binges and Facebook obsessions, and spend some time at North Dallas Shared Ministries or Cornerstone or delivering meals to needy people or serving at any other place where your energy and talent can meet the needs of suffering people. Maybe going forward is coming out of your insulated world to raise your voice against the hoof beats of war, against prejudice, against white supremacy, against the death penalty, or when any members of the human race are oppressed. I don't know what it looks like for you, but I do know that we are called to move forward.

And what will the church find when the waters part and we walk forward on dry land? I'm not certain, but I trust it means at least this: that we, blessed as we are and loaded with human potential for leadership and caring; that we, blessed as we are with financial resources and positions of power; that we must be restless in this city until we're doing all we can for the least and the lonely, the depressed and the despairing, the homeless and the hopeless, all those who

are up and in as well as those who are down and out. Our stumbling steps towards freedom only matter when everyone else is free too.

Philosopher Harold Whitman says, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” Will we, like Nachshon, take a step toward freedom? Yes, we can fight, retreat, beg for the ‘good old days’ of slavery, or leave it up to God. But our faith is grounded in action, in taking the plunge, in giving our time, talents, and treasures to help all people see the salvation and deliverance of God in our midst today, right now.

Rabbi Shefa Gold writes this as one of her meditations:

“We have all made miraculous crossings in our lives. Recall a time when you took a leap of faith, when you took a chance and crossed over into a new way of being in the world. Remember a time when you left the slavery that you knew and set out into the unknown. If you made a crossing and did not stop to celebrate, to sing your own Song of the Sea, and to call the women out to dance with their timbrels, then you have not been properly ‘sent.’” This song of celebration isn’t optional. It is necessary to the journey. This song will carry us into the wilderness. This dance will energize us for the journey.

So, what does it mean to give? It is dancing with the God who set us free. It is standing firm in the promises of Christ and not being afraid. And it is taking the small steps, as stumbling and bumbling as they are in the turbulent waters of the world, knowing that we are safe. If we, as Royal Lane Baptist Church, take a leap of faith together and go forward, we will find freedom and in turn give that freedom to the world.

Amen.