



*A sermon by E. Scott Winnette
Exodus 14:19-23
September 13, 2020
God's Cease-Fire Cloud*

I confess, sometimes I deviate from the lectionary's sacrosanct assigned text for each Sunday. How awful several preachers will sigh. I always check it and if it gives me a sense of dread, I often skip it. On Tuesday I checked it out and a sigh of relief issued: a pleasant ah-hah, a light blue spray of petals floated, the cats square-danced my legs a-purring, the chickens were cooing, and the ducks gently shivered a shared glee.

The slaves were running from their old subjugated, deprivation world to a new freer world of abundance, a promised land. They were hopeful following Moses. They were fearful chased by the Pharaoh's forces. They were hungry, thirsty, surviving and dying. They careened with emotions: hope to fear, promise to peril, trust to terror. During the days of walking, running, hastening and hustling they chased a tall column of mist, a pillar of cloud, a metaphor of the Holy – they followed it by day and by night it glowed with fire guiding their steps. Keep going it pulled. Keep going, keep going. Unceasingly, it pulled them forward; many complained the Angel Cloud's demands were harsher than their slave-masters' worst. All along, they were hounded by the Pharaoh's status quo; their dehumanization.

Blue petals of delight danced, cats purred, Anthony tapped-danced, asters blossomed. Then the task-master-Angel-Holy-rushing-God-pillar of cloud danced backwards over their heads stopping behind them, between them and the violent, re-enslaving Imperialists. The cloud bulwarked transforming from a justice-seeking-firebrand-call-to-action-force-of-nature into a Holy Cease-Fire Cloud. It transformed from a creative force that was abolishing oppressive status-quos and remaking society into a Sabbath cloud. Rest came in the storm. A pause happened in the flight. A calm came. Holy Stop ceased the worrying and running for a moment. Dry cocoons burst to dazzling colors of butterfly flight. Tucked in the Exodus story's flight to freedom was a Sabbath pause.

The directing cloud soared over their heads and positioned itself between the Israelites and the Egyptians. “All during the night the cloud provided light to one side and darkness to the other side so that there was no contact between them.” An armistice moment.

When Harriet Tubman made it to Pennsylvania, she was welcomed, cared for, nourished and replenished. Time is negotiable in scripture. Seven days in bible time becomes almost 5 billion years according to scientists. “All during the night...there was no contact between them.” That restful night might have been a night, a month, a year, a generation of freedom from fear and flight. History does not record Harriet having much of a break, she escaped in 1849 and was an Underground Railroad Conductor in 1950. Nonetheless she got breaks, glorious deep Calgon moments of peace before and between her rescue missions.

When I read how the cloud moved from front to back, from type-A agitator to asylum-maker, when I read of that night of pause, of safety, of calm, my heart yearned reached grabbed for it and the chickens cooed, the ducks shivered. In our yearning we experience our desires.

Do you yearn for a break from running and hiding from the Corona-virus? The promise of this text doesn't give us that freedom, but it allows us the freedom to give ourselves a break. Give ourselves cease-fire sabbath moments every day. If you cannot break from work, from negotiating school for your children and the essential stuff of your life won't let you stop for long, then give yourself a break from whatever version of perfection you pursue, or a break from the news, or a break from a tasteless routine, even pause Zooming for a while. Allow yourself to laugh. You can even let me and Pastor Jennifer know you need a break and we will see what help we can get for you.

Do you yearn for a break from pursuing justice? Let this text give you permission, God didn't stop making a new way for the slaves, but God did Sabbath and let them rest. Even the oppressors rested in armistice time. Do you yearn for a break from being chased by your fears of four more years? Do you yearn for a cease-fire between Democrats and Republicans? Do you yearn for a rest from political thinking? If you do, pray, pray, pray with all your being that the Holy One, the God of all creative juices, the God of all compassion, pray for a pause.

And after your break pray hard that our besieged democracy grows into its best principles. Pray honesty fill the news. Pray gentle people share in the leadership of our country. Pray with an eye on God's mysterious beyond us cosmic time. Take a deep breath and let God be God and nest down in Holy Mercy's loving arms.

I must preserve some scriptural integrity. After the night of calm, the story continues with Moses opening the Sea and the Israelites escaping; then God orchestrates the annihilation of all the Egyptians soldiers. You know me by now. You know my theology has no room for a terrorist God. Yes, that is what the text says. But we all know what was told and retold and written and interpreted and re-written remains to this day a biased invention telling the story to often benefit the tellers and their people.

I re-interpret it considering the wholeness of the biblical story; its grace motives; its all-creation-is-good-motives; its God cares for the widows, orphans, strangers, all the marginalized motives, and include the all the miraculous stories of Jesus' love, inclusion and radical non-violence.

Interpreting the story with God's love, after the night, day, month, lifetime of the cloud pillar's cease-fire a new day came, and the Sabbath ended. The cloud floated to a local mountain and left the peoples to attend each other. The Israelites had done well for themselves, such good workers, they had plenty of grain, plenty of beans, milk, eggs. And over the armistice families had grown and children of many ages ran in the fields. The Egyptians warriors had not fared so well; they were hungry; they

were without children; they were tired from hunting and gathering. Miriam and Moses remembering the judicious wisdom of ancestor Joseph urged the Israelites to feed the Egyptians. On the banks of a Reed Sea the Egyptians were welcomed and they disappeared into a new family. It seemed as if they had disappeared into the Sea.

A new world is being made friends, pray, pray hard, pray long that God's kind and just will be done. Author Barbara Winters in writing about care-giving promises, *"When you come to the edge of all the light you know, and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: there will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught how to fly."* May it be so. Amen.