Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church
Waiting on God: Being Emptied
November 15, 200
Facing the Red Sea

Today and next Sunday we'll be using our congregational theme, Waiting on God: Being Emptied/Being Filled as our focus for worship. And then Advent begins, the liturgical season of waiting, and we'll again use the lectionary Texts. For today I've been thinking about emptying, being emptied. What is the Word for this community? What is the Good News for us? Surely there is much that *could* be said, so where do we begin? Any sermon on emptying *should* use the Philippians Text, one of the few places in our Bible where the Greek verb for emptying is used, "Jesus *emptied* himself, taking on the form of a servant." Thinking about Jesus being emptied, us being emptied and letting go, the Exodus narrative came to mind. Another piece to listen to. I also thought about some of my emptying when I was in seminary. Another piece. And yet this sermon has been surprisingly difficult. Not for lack of content or possibilities. Not for lack of conversation with others and notes. The sermon was started but kept getting stuck. And then I saw what may be obvious to everyone else: it's difficult because it's about emptying. It's difficult because I'm full of what I wanted to say. It was time to start over.

Waiting on God is easy enough to talk about. But *emptying* is un-easy. As an intellectual or theological concept emptying is one thing. As a material or monetary issue, emptying is something else. But when we talk about *emptying* as in emptying ourselves, of what is in me that needs emptying, then I start to squirm and get anxious. Of course we do! Being emptied of ego is hard. It is hard to let go of what we know, of what we're sure about, of what we think we have control. It is un-easy, even terrifying.

Let's turn to the narrative of the Hebrew people in Egypt and their exodus, this narrative that is foundational to our faith, to our understanding of God as One Who Liberates, One Who Saves, Redeemer. The story of Egypt and the exodus is the biblical story, re-lived and re-told throughout Scripture, generation after generation, in different times, in different contexts, in differing places. It is the story of Jesus, bringing the Good News of God's Saving and God's Freedom to people burdened by the weight of the law, enslaved by systems and structures that enforced and maintained the status quo. The unending story of Egypt and the exodus is *our* story.

The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt. It's easy for us to think geography when we hear Egypt, but the word Egypt in Hebrew literally means "double straits," which describes the geographical upper and lower straits, where the Nile flows through. So this place name means "narrow places," or "narrow confinement."[1] Egypt then is more than the place where the Israelites were enslaved; the word becomes a biblical symbol for "narrow confinement." No matter the time or place, we as humans find ourselves in spaces of narrow confinement—some people physically, others spiritually or emotionally.

God saw the children of Israel, slaves to Pharaoh, burdened and crushed and dying by too much work, too many demands, by injustices, oppression. From the beginning God is a God of the poor, of the oppressed, the marginalized, the vulnerable. God is One Who Saves and Empowers; God is Liberator, Savior. We know the story of Moses and the plagues and Passover. We know how God, after the unspeakable tug of war and suffering between Pharaoh and Moses, led these people out of Egypt, out of their narrow confinement. God saved them from their slavery, freed them from their oppression.

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1 From Daniel G. Groody's *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice*

But that isn't the end of this story. God's deliverance didn't take them into a magical kingdom but into the wilderness! Nor does God deliver them from their humanity. When the Red Sea is in front of them and Pharaoh's army behind them, in their terror they cry out to Moses, in Exodus 14.11-12, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

I don't know about you, but my first response is, "You ungrateful people. You'd really rather still be slaves?!" But then the story speaks into my life, into my places of narrow confinement. I see the times and places when I would rather have returned to the narrow confinement because no matter how terrible it was, it was familiar, it was *known*. And frankly, if we put ourselves into this story, it is no comfort to be out of Egypt, no longer in slavery, when the Red Sea is in front of you and Pharaoh's army behind. God took them from one confinement to another place of confinement. Of course we would rather be back in Egypt! The alternative is too risky. Even when the sea is parted, walls of water forming a dry path to walk on, I do not know if I would have the courage to step into the sea. How terrifying to step between walls of water, into the unknown, risking life itself.

I understand their crying out to Moses and their regret at leaving their home. At least they would be alive. For much of my life I have been an observer of this story, assuming that because of my life context and experiences, this couldn't be my story. But the story of Egypt and the exodus is the human story. It *is* my story. It is *our* story.

In my first year at seminary, I found myself in the middle of the Red Sea. I didn't get there by choosing to step between the walls of water; I'm not sure how I got there.

Maybe God picked me up and plopped me back down! More likely I was walking around asleep, certainly unconscious, and stepped in without knowing what I was doing. But I woke up one day full awake to and aware of the chaos and turmoil or water swirling around me. Nearly all the structures I had created, my beliefs and understandings about the Bible and theology and the church were being dismantled. My life wasn't ever threatened, but my ego was. There were things I had been so certain about. Everything in my experience told me I was right. I *knew*. But I was wrong and my ego had a lot at stake. I remember a kind of paralysis, being completely beside and outside of myself. I *had* to let go. And I did. Proof that I let go is that I got a C on a mid-term exam. No, actually a C-!

In hindsight I easily minimize or dismiss the experience. "It really wasn't so bad." And relatively speaking it wasn't. But perhaps particularly for those of us who are privileged, our egos thrive on being right, on knowing, on being in control, of avoiding being wrong. Our egos, or false self, doesn't thrive so well on being wrong, or losing, or not knowing. It will fight for its survival.

Into the false self's fight for survival we hear Paul speaking, in Romans 6.6, "We know that our old self was crucified with Christ…so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin." Paul sounds as though this is a one-time event, rather than a lifetime of letting the old self die while the being created in God's image rises and shines God's love and light. In a sense Paul is right. When we step into the waters of baptism—whether we're sprinkled or immersed—baptism is a kind of stepping into the Red Sea. It is a sacramental emptying ourselves, letting go, giving ourselves to Mystery, to the Unknown. When we step into baptismal waters we, we step out of our narrow confinement into the heart of God. Letting God be God; giving ourselves permission to be human.

And while baptism may be a one-time event, we are continually stepping into the Red Sea, into the waters of freedom. We do so with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the one who emptied himself. If we *really* believe in Jesus humanity, and his divinity, then we can begin to imagine what it meant for Jesus to let go of his ego. From Philippians 2, "Though [Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] didn't regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." Jesus made himself lower, debased himself, chose to be a slave, a servant.

Jesus was filled with God, with the knowing that he was created in the image of God. Jesus was filled with God's love. Emptied of his false self, Jesus was filled with God's grace and mercy and compassion. Dwelling in the heart of God, Jesus was free to step into the Red Sea, between the walls of water.

Ex 2.20 "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery."

TNK Exodus 20:2 I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: