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### **Dead Egyptians Upon the Seashore**

**Exodus 14: 26-30**

I confess to you that I had never been able to conceptualize fully how this scene that Exodus describes could have happened -- until it happened in LA, that is, lower Alabama, God's country.

Just a few years ago, the eye of a small hurricane stalled in South Alabama, over that sizable body of water known as Mobile Bay. To general astonishment, the hurricane greedily sucked up most of the moisture of that vast body of water, creating a walkway where once had stood a sea.

Then it deposited all the contents back in the bay via a raining deluge.

Did some similar natural phenomenon create a path of deliverance for Israel through the Reed Sea?

Could a combination of swiftly-changing tides and shifting winds have created a road to freedom?

Could a tidal wave, sparked by volcanic activity, have swept away Egypt's chariot hordes?

Who knows? All we know is this. Once upon a time the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt.

Somehow they broke free of their bonds. Somehow they became a free nation in Palestine.

To effect this transition, the people of Israel walked through the heart of a substantial body of water that temporarily offered them a pathway where usually there was none.

When the pursuing Egyptian chariots attempted to use this same pathway, those waters converged upon them and destroyed them.

When Israel looked back, all they saw were dead Egyptians washing upon the seashore.

The great power that had formerly enslaved them lay powerless.

Those representatives of their dominion held dominion no more.

As unthinkable as it might have appeared, Israel was free,

gazing upon dead Egyptians on the seashore who would never be Israel's masters again.

People say that history runs in cycles, that the human saga forms a perpetual wheel.

There is truth in that axiom, but there is more truth in this one:

History is a wheel, but it is a wheel that moves forward, a wheel that ultimately progresses.

Those dead Egyptians represent the ultimate power of hope.

Those dead Egyptians speak to us of God's subtle, but ceaseless activity in the world.

They point toward a divine trend that characterizes the flow of history and the arc of the individual heart.

They testify to the impermanence of evil and of the ultimate triumph of God and good.

The inexorable Spirit of Christ is ever challenging the seemingly-invincible, idolatrous status quo, slowly but surely undermining it, eventually overthrowing it.

One of the basic tenets of our Christian understanding of God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, is that God is active in creation, working to bring about dead Egyptians in history, in society, and in our lives.

On the eve of our country's celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday,

I speak as one who was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955.

I grew up knowing that I attended schools, hospitals, stores, churches, and bathrooms that others could not use because their skin was black. I drank from water fountains from which they could not drink.

I grew up thinking that black people were supposed to serve white people.

I grew up thinking that white people were superior to black people.

No one told me this was true. No one needed to.

That "truth" seemed self-evident to any white child of my culture.

Yet, a generation later, my children cannot imagine that such a world existed!

They cannot conceive that such a world ever existed.

Why? Because over the last half-century an entire world-view has been challenged, undermined, overthrown and cast upon the ash heap of desuetude.

The entire cultural perspective in which I grew up is now a dead Egyptian.

Think of the famous kitchen debate when Richard Nixon confronted Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Nikita Khrushchev thundered unto Nixon, "Your grandchildren will grow up in communism."

Nixon thundered back, "No, your grandchild will grow up in freedom."

Many years later Nixon admitted, "I knew that he was wrong. But I did not know if I was right."

Those of us who grew up in that era know what he means. When I was a child, the Berlin Wall stood as a stark, palpable, deadly line of demarcation between democracy and totalitarianism.

I grew up believing that the Iron Curtain was almost as tangible as the Great Wall of China.

Billions were spent in military build-ups as both sides of the Cold War ratcheted up global tension in a deadly gambit for superiority. Then, suddenly, without a shot, almost in the blink of an eye, due to moral, spiritual, political and economic bankruptcy, the Berlin Wall fell, reduced to rubble.

When I was born, a third of the world lived under totalitarian governments.

Now totalitarian governments roughly number a dozen. The very concept is a dead Egyptian.

Dead Egyptians can be created in individual human lives, too.

I think of a middle-aged drunk who had been admitted to the sanitarium so many times that he was on a first-name basis with the doctors. In fact he begged a drink from one of them.

The doctor agreed to slip him a drink in return for a favor – that the man would speak to

a younger drunk housed a few doors down. "I wouldn't know what to say," the man growled.

The doctor said, "Just let him look at you. That might cure him."

So the guy walked down the hall and started talking to the young man. "You need to change your ways," he advised.

"How can I change my ways?" the young man asked, desperately.

"You have to pray, son," the man said. "You have to open up your being to a Higher Power who can give you a strength of will and a powerful resource that you cannot give yourself."

The older man went back to his room unsure that his words had any impact upon the younger drunk.

But his words had made a convert -- himself.

That middle-aged drunk took his own advice, fell to his knees in prayer, asking,

"Lord, give me the strength of your Spirit to give me a will that I cannot give myself."

We know that man today as Bill, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.

For him and for many a drunk after him, their absolute dependence upon God and their reliance upon others who have experienced God's transforming power in a similar way, have delivered them from their addiction to substance abuse.

That life of dependency is behind them. It is a dead Egyptian in their lives.

The truth is, people and communities can become accustomed to anything.

This adaptability to the status quo is often not a positive characteristic.

We can become accustomed to being depressed. We can become accustomed to seeing life as a prison.

We can become accustomed to lethargy. We can become accustomed to seeing life as pure boredom.

We can become accustomed to living in enmity. We can become accustomed to living infected with rage.

Yet God is at work in our lives trying to create dead Egyptians, trying to free us from forces that would restrict our enjoyment of the divine gift of life. God is ceaselessly trying to move us from death to life.

God is constantly trying to help us see what is unnatural and what is truly natural.

Zacchaeus, for example, was sure that a lifestyle of theft, extortion, and bribery was normal.

Then he met the Christ and imbibed the values of Christ's Spirit, and knew instantly that a life of deception and stealing was untenable. His dishonest life became a dead Egyptian.

Nicodemus thought that coming to Jesus by night made good sense, seeking the key to a positive life.

Jesus said to him, "You have to be born again. You have to be made new, be drawn out from the old."

Nicodemus came to realize that his timid faith was untenable.

he cast it aside and stepped forward to claim the body of the crucified Christ under the nose of Pilate.

His cowardice became a dead Egyptian.

In order to create dead Egyptians in our lives we must be willing to change.

This change involves a twofold process:  
we must be willing to envision great things and embrace the discipline imposed by small things.  
You want to create dead Egyptians in your life? Then you must exercise your imagination.  
You must envision yourself emerging out of the old person into a new person.  
But to achieve that vision involves embracing the small, incremental steps that allow you  
to make change happen. Envision large; embrace small.  
Any transformation virtually always entails a painful transition.  
Yet we realize that we cannot stay stuck in the old life and be truly faithful unto God.  
Last week I talked to our young people about what it means to be a disciple, and I told them  
that a disciple is someone who learns, indeed, a disciple is someone who spends a lifetime learning.  
I challenged those young people to ask their older mentors if they had their spiritual life figured out yet.  
I knew that none of them would answer yes. Learning is a lifelong process.  
Indeed, there is a verse in Hebrews that says, “No chastening of the present seems to be joyous,  
but grievous; nevertheless, afterward, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness.”  
“No chastening of the present is joyous.” Duh!  
Chastening is always painful. Change is always painful. Transition from the old to the new is painful.  
Change involves an act of the imagination, sure, but it also entails embracing incremental transitions.  
Yet as Hebrews adds, “Nevertheless, afterward, it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness.”  
If you want to change, it involves a chastening process in which we have to alter our lives.  
Have any of you ever seen a shaft of sunlight streaming into your house?  
It illumines all of the dust particles in the air that you never knew were there.  
(Of course, that may not happen at your house – and don’t tell Melissa that I said it happened at ours.)  
In the truth the light illumines what is there.  
To open our eyes to the illumination of the Christ is to see some things in our lives  
that are there and shouldn’t be there.  
To open our eyes to Christ’s light means that we have to let go of some things that we thought  
were important, and it means embracing some things that we thought were optional.  
“Nevertheless, afterward!”  
Our experience of Christ’s re-creation of us ultimately moves us from death to life, from the old to the new.

Let me give you another real-life example of the kind of change I’m talking about.  
A few weeks ago our newspaper had a picture of a wino lying alongside a railroad track.  
He had scraggly hair, ragged clothes; he was too drunk to rise, a picture of destitution and dissipation.  
But on a night similar to the frigid ones we’ve been having lately, this man sought shelter in a church,  
taking advantage of a congregation’s hospitality in a program like our Room in the Inn.  
He returned the following Sunday for worship and found himself seated by a well-dressed woman  
who showed him kindness and respect. They struck up a halting conversation.  
Eventually, they began a ragged friendship, difficult because of the great differences between them.  
But shortly thereafter he walked in a convenience store and saw a Valentine box of candy,  
and he thought, “I want to give that to my friend.”  
He did so and in so doing realized that he loved her.  
Then he began to envision the type of person he could be,  
and he began to embrace the incremental changes that would render him more like who he should be,  
so that next to that picture of that wino beside the railroad track,  
the newspaper ran another photo of that same man in that same church with that same woman,  
exchanging marriage vows, as they became husband and wife.  
When he looked back upon that wino drunk beside that track,  
He knew that truly that was a picture of a dead Egyptian.  
Go back one last time to the image of those liberated Hebrews looking down upon the lifeless bodies  
of their oppressors, washing up on the shores. What was the dominant thought in their minds?  
It was not, ‘Look what we have done!’ Rather, it was, ‘Look what God has wrought!’  
If you had told them that God would deliver them from bondage in this manner,

they wouldn't have believed it. They could not have conceived it! But it happened!  
But they trusted God just enough to take baby steps out of the bondage they had known  
and thereby put themselves in place to experience a miracle.  
Think about it: tomorrow, our nation pauses to celebrate the ministry of a black Baptist preacher  
who began his career in an obscure little Baptist church on a quiet little street in Montgomery, Alabama.  
Yet, from that tiny fulcrum he exercised leverage enough to change the state of our world.  
Who could have believed that would happen? Who could have conceived it?  
But Martin Luther King Jr. knew a basic principle about God that we must claim anew:  
the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ does not look upon injustice with indifference.  
The God of Jesus Christ does not view our destructive habits with apathy!  
Our God does not look upon the chaos that our society creates with detached listlessness.  
Our God is at work in the world, trying to create dead Egyptians,  
whether it is inspiring a movement to tear down walls of oppression,  
or removing barriers of prejudice, or freeing a people from servitude,  
or turning a tax collector into an agent of justice,  
or freeing a drunk from his addiction, or resurrecting a wino from a railroad track.  
Our God is at work in the world creating dead Egyptians in history and in individual lives.  
A question of pertinence remains: what dead Egyptian can God create in you?

I leave you with this thought.

If the doctor who delivered me into the world had said to my parents on that day:

“Within thirty years, there will be a black mayor of Birmingham, Alabama;  
within forty years, there will be a black president of South Africa;  
and within fifty years, there will be a black president of the United States of America,”  
all within his hearing would have committed him to an asylum.

No one would have believed it. No one could have conceived it.

But dead Egyptians, my friends, wash up on the seashore all around us, if only we have eyes to see.

Let us dare to ask the question: “God, what can you make of me? God, what can you make of us?”

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