

The Risk of Faith

[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

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I was with a group of our youth on Wednesday night, and not all of them knew each other yet, so we were going around the room, saying our names, and when we got to eighth grader Maggie Muth, she introduced herself as Pharaoh—which I found absolutely delightful.

See, she was referencing her iconic performance in this past spring's First UCC Middle School Musical, in which she played, of course, Pharaoh.

If you were there, you know it was quite an event, complete with drones, tweets, and some of our younger children playing the cutest plague of frogs you ever saw in your life.

The whole cast was just wonderful, led by our middle schoolers. Todd's daughter Clara played Moses. Lars Haslett-Marroquin played Pharaoh's press secretary, who bore a startling resemblance to a certain real-life press secretary of the time. I'll let you draw the parallels.

If you missed it, I'm so sorry, because it's one of my favorite things that has happened, ever.

Maggie's mom, Janet Lewis Muth, directed. For the script, she drew from *Moses and the Freedom Fanatics*, a groovy children's musical of the Exodus story by Hal Hopson that I can only imagine came out of the late seventies. But she also adapted several songs from the much more recent Broadway hit *Hamilton*, the hip-hop musical about the American Revolutionary War and Founding Father Alexander Hamilton.

One of the major themes of *Hamilton*—and, incidentally, the Exodus story—is risk. The risk of seeking freedom against a much larger power. The risk of speaking a bold truth versus playing it safe. The risk of being a leader.

In *Hamilton*, the spurned King George III has some advice from the recently liberated colonies, delivered in the style of a breezy Brit-pop ballad:

I thought that we'd made an arrangement
When you went away
You were mine to subdue

Well, even despite our estrangement, I've got

A small query for you:

What comes next?

You've been freed

Do you know how hard it is to lead?

You're on your own

Awesome. Wow.

Do you have a clue what happens now?

Oceans rise

Empires fall

It's much harder when it's all your call

All alone, across the sea

When your people say they hate you

Don't come crawling back to me

You're on your own...

Janet (very cleverly, I thought) put those same verses into Pharaoh's mouth, addressed to Moses. And we can really see Pharaoh's point come to life in the story we just heard from Exodus. Just because the Israelites are freed does not mean Moses' work is over. No, it has only just begun.

Sometimes, when I read this story, I find myself feeling irritated with the Israelites on Moses's behalf. It is really quite extraordinary what he has done for these people. Suffered for them. Abandoned his comfortable shepherding life for them. Killed Egyptians for them. Watched God kill many, many more Egyptians for them. Took the first step into the path through the Red Sea for them. Spent forty days and forty nights on the top of Mt. Sinai. Twice. His sister Miriam has recently died.

Why are they being so hard on him, then? Why don't they get it?

Well. *They're thirsty.*

One of their most basic needs isn't been met. It's not just a matter of comfort. It's a matter of life and death.

Under circumstances like this, of course slavery sounds better than freedom. Because slavery, at least, is a known quantity. Slavery, at least, comes with the comfort of the familiar. The Israelites suffered profoundly under Pharaoh, but within parameters they knew and understood.

God, through Moses, has invited Israelites to step out into the wilderness, into the great unknown. Whenever we

hear the word “wilderness” in a biblical text, our ears should perk up because it’s one of the most important motifs we’ll ever come across in our sacred book.

Here in Minnesota, thinking of wildernesses, we might imagine a vast, dense, pathless forest, thick with oak and elm trees, but it doesn’t mean that in this context; picture instead a desert, a stretch of uncultivated or unoccupied land, or even the stormy Red sea. An in-between place. A chaotic place. A place without people or resources or road signs giving direction.

From Moses to Jesus, Biblical figures wandered through real, physical wildernesses, as have generations of people throughout time.

Many people live in literal wildernesses today.

Some wildernesses are very obvious; I think of the devastation left behind by recent natural disasters near and far; other wildernesses are as real but less obvious to the searching eye. Consider the citizens of Flint, Michigan, whose cries for clean water echo those of the ancient Israelites’. Or what about food deserts, the US Department of Agriculture’s term for areas, both urban and rural,

where people don't have easy access to fresh, affordable food? Another kind of wilderness.

From Moses to Jesus, Biblical figures also wandered through less physical wildernesses, the landscapes of the soul. Spiritual wildernesses can be as scary and transformative as physical ones, because the stakes are high. Moses encountered God on the top of Mt. Sinai. Jesus grappled with Satan. What do you face? What do you wander through?

Some of us might be tangling with deep questions about the future. And the past.

We're carrying with us our families. Partners, children, parents, siblings.

We're trying to maintain our Mental health. Our physical health. Financial health. Spiritual health.

Our inner wildernesses are caught in this constant feedback loop with the wildernesses of the world: the social problems, the political climate, the injustices, the instability.

Of course we're all a little on edge! *We're thirsty!*

We thirst for love. We thirst for courage. We thirst for grace. We thirst for a sense of safety, and reassurance, and accountability.

Living creatures need these things too, as surely as we need water. Our bodies may function without them, but our spirits surely won't.

In such conditions, it can be a risk to step out at all. To give away any part of yourself to anyone or anything beyond your tightly wound circle. To give away your time; your resources, be they financial or energetic. To offer up your leadership; your attention; your voice.

And therein lies the power of the story we heard today. It's a promise, essentially. A promise that if we are willing to take that risk, make that step, God will meet us there in the wilderness.

This is a story about getting a break, and if you read it carefully, you realize that everyone gets a break: not Moses, not just the Israelites, but all of them. They're all working hard. They're all frightened. They're all stretched beyond what they thought was possible, and God meets them.

Now, what I don't want us to do is read this story and say, "Oh, God will always come through at the last minute!" Because... well, that's not true.

And, to be fair, that's not really what happens in the Exodus story either. What we just read—God providing water in the desert—is but one of many episodes of hardship and triumph that take place over generations. God often does come through, yes. But always with the timing that the Israelites would prefer.

I think the point is less that God will save *the day*, and more that God will *save us*. Which is a much bigger, long-term project that requires our cooperation and our investment.

That's right. God invests in us, and we have to invest back.

God makes some promises to us, and we make some promises to God.

Now, there is no guarantor any of these promises. There is no bank that backs it all up, no promissory notes, no prenup, no nothing. To trust in these promises is the very

definition of faith. Nothing more, nothing less. Faith in God, and faith in each other.

So King George, or Pharaoh, or whoever, tries to intimidate us by saying, “Do you have a clue what happens now?” we simply say, “No, we don’t know what’s going to happen. No one does. We’re going into the wilderness with God anyway. It’s worth the risk.”

May it be so.

Amen.