

September 13, 2026 + 10:30 A.M.

Seventeenth Sunday of Pentecost

We Join in Worship

Liturgist: Tracy Oprea

If you need extra space for a wheelchair or walker, or if you have young children with you, please feel free to make use of our Prayground, the extra space across the aisle from the sound booth.

PRELUDE

Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring

Johann Sebastian Bach

WELCOME

CHORAL INTROIT

ANNOUNCEMENTS

*THE PEACE OF CHRIST

* CALL TO WORSHIP (Adapted from *Psalms* 103)

Leader: God forgives all our iniquity, God heals all our diseases, God redeems our lives from the Pit, God crowns us with steadfast love and mercy! God satisfies us with good as long as we live so that our youth is renewed like the eagle's.

ALL: **Bless the LORD, O our souls, and all that is within us, bless God's holy name! Bless the LORD, O our souls, and let us not forget all God's benefits!**

Leader: The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. The LORD's ways were made known to Moses, the LORD's acts to the people of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD will not always accuse, nor will the LORD's anger be kept forever.

ALL: **Bless the LORD, O our souls, and all that is within us, bless God's holy name! Bless the LORD, O our souls, and let us not forget all God's benefits!**

Leader: The LORD does not deal with us according to our sins nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is the LORD's steadfast love toward us! The steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting! The LORD's throne has been established in the heavens, and the LORD's kingdom rules over all.

ALL: **Bless the LORD, O our souls, and all that is within us, bless God's holy name! Bless the LORD, O our souls, and let us not forget all God's benefits!**

Leader: Bless the LORD, O you angels, you mighty ones who do the LORD's bidding, obedient to the spoken word. Bless the LORD, all you hosts, you ministers who do the LORD's will!

ALL: **Bless the LORD, O our souls, and all that is within us, bless God's holy name! Bless the LORD, O our souls, and let us not forget all God's benefits!**

*OPENING HYMN: "How Can I Keep from Singing?" (Glory to God 821)

INVITATION TO CONFESSION:

Leader: In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." Let us confess our sins before the judgment seat of our merciful God.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (unison)

Great Jehovah, we come before your judgment seat with confession on our lips and contrition in our hearts. We confess that we have lost our way in so many ways. You blaze forth before us in a brilliant pillar of fire, but we keep looking away. You show us where to go and tell us what to do, but we keep closing our eyes and our ears. You guide us upon life's journeys, but we act as though we must go it alone. Forgive us for our ignorance and arrogance. Guide us back to you. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

KYRIE: Glory to God, No. 579 (unison)

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Leader: Friends, hear the good news! Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. In our living and in our dying, we belong to the Lord who forgives us!

ALL: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven! Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!

GLORIA PATRI (577)

Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, ever shall be, world without end. Amen.
As it was in the beginning, is now, ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

STATEMENT OF FAITH: (The Nicene Creed)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

We Hear God's Word

EMBODIED WORD FOR DISCIPLES OF ALL AGES

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find wisdom, and in your will discover your peace. In the name of Jesus Christ our risen Lord we pray. Amen.

HEBREW BIBLE LESSON: *Exodus 13:17-22*

EPISTLE LESSON: *Romans 14:7-12*

GOSPEL LESSON: *Matthew 18:10-14*

SERMON: God Will Make a Way...with Fire

MUSICAL MEDITATION: *You'll Never Walk Alone*
In loving memory of Jeanne Nestor

Rogers and Hammerstein

We Respond in Faith

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

CHORAL RESPONSE

OFFERING INVITATION:

Leader: God guided the people as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Let us give our tithes and offerings so that this church can shine with that light and show the world the way of God's love. If you are here in person, please place your offering in the plate as it is passed. If you are worshipping from home, please mail in your checks or use our online giving option on the website. Now let us practice stewardship as we listen to today's offertory.

OFFERTORY *Canon in D*

Johann Pachelbel

***DOXOLOGY**

**Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God, above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.**

***PRAYER OF DEDICATION: (Unison)**

Great Jehovah, we dedicate these gifts to you with faith that you are with us still, making a way for us where we see no way. Guide us as we use them to support each other and this community. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

We Go into the World

***CLOSING HYMN:** "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" (281)

BENEDICTION

CHORAL BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE *Psalm 19*

Benedetto Marcello, arr. Edward Broughton

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* So that we can properly greet people who come to the building during Sunday morning worship, Door A will be the only unlocked external door during the worship service.

PEEK AT THE WEEK:

SUNDAY 9/13:	Worship In Person & Online – 10:30 AM First Sunday with Choir
MONDAY 9/14:	GA – 6:30 PM Al-Anon – 7:00 PM
TUESDAY 9/15:	Private Flute Lessons 2-8 PM (FH) Session – 6:30 PM AA – 7:30 PM
WEDNESDAY 9/16:	Private Flute Lessons 2-8 PM (FH) GA – 7:00 PM
THURSDAY 9/17:	Choir – 7:00 PM
SATURDAY 9/19:	Sharon's Table Prep AA – 6:30 PM
SUNDAY 9/20:	Fall Kick Off and Brunch

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **OUR FALL KICKOFF AND BRUNCH** will be held on **Sunday, Sept. 20** after worship. Our Session will provide delicious dishes for brunch, and you'll get a preview of all the exciting things happening this fall in the life of our congregation. A sign-up sheet will be available in the narthex beginning on Sept. 6. Questions? Contact Heather Casiano (hcasiano@fpchighland.org).
- **FELLOWSHIP HOSTING IN THE FALL** We are asking folks to sign up to host fellowship time in the Fall. Our ministries and committees have been doing a fantastic job, and they are getting a well-deserved break! Hosting entails bringing a simple snack to share, setting it out, and cleaning up afterwards. On Sundays with no sign-ups, we will still have coffee and tea to enjoy.
- **CHOIR PRACTICE IS THURSDAYS AT 7PM** We need singers of all sorts and welcome singers of all skill levels! We have a great time, and singing is a great way to give glory to God!
- **MARK YOUR CALENDARS FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION** BYOB (Bring Your Own Bible) will resume on Wednesday, September 23, at 7:00 PM. The Bible in Today's World will resume on Sunday, September 27, at 9:00 AM.
- **OUR ANNUAL BONFIRE AND HAYRIDE** will be on Sunday, Oct. 4, from 3-5 pm at Oak Ridge Prairie County Park in Griffith. All are invited and friends and family are welcome. The hayride starts promptly at 3 pm, and lasts almost an hour. Then we'll enjoy a bonfire including roasting hotdogs and marshmallows over the campfire, along with some fun activities and songs! Plenty of food, fellowship and fun for all! There will be a sign-up sheet in the narthex mid-September, or you can RSVP to Heather Casiano at hcasiano@fpchighland.org by October 1.
- **FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA!** If you don't already follow us on Facebook and Instagram, please start doing so [@firstfpchighland](https://www.facebook.com/firstfpchighland) on both Facebook and Instagram.
- **INTERESTED IN BECOMING A MEMBER OF FPCH?** You are always welcome here, whether a member or not! If you are interested in joining as a member, though, we would love to have you! Please talk to Pastor Tyler if you would like to learn more.

Opportunities to serve as the HEART, HANDS, and FEET of Jesus Christ:

- **BLESSING BOX** Please continue to place items in the Blessing Box and take items if you are a person in need! Items most commonly donated: Canned goods with pull tabs, socks, toilet paper, non-perishable foods, small snacks, toiletries, baby wipes and diapers. Please check expiration dates!
- **HELP STOCK OUR PANTRY!** Please pick up a beautifully decorated grocery bag in the narthex and fill it to help the church's food pantry.
- **GOT SNEAKERS??** The sneakers that we all collect will help raise money to support our church's general fund AND will help our environment by keeping sneakers out of landfills. Bring the sneakers (athletic shoes only) to the church and put them in one of the blue bins...either by Door D (inside) or in the narthex.

Prayer List

Anthony
Brady Vanes
George Griner
Guy Hendricks
Holmes
David Markley
David Kingen
Diana and Ray Mendoza
Janet Orem
Cindy Waltz and Sister
Yvonne Suroviak
Georgette and Garry Sknerski
Jakob Holden
Denise Matthys
Jan Oprea
Florance Cody
Kathy & Chuck Pumnea
The Windstrups
Rick Parker
Gary Everhart
Darlene O'Brien
Doug & Sue Matthews
Janet Terpstra
Glen Nahler
Tom
David Hamblin
Jana Tolley
Larry & Bonnie Perryman

Delta Rose
Winnie Owen
Breeanne
Mom Bechtler
Marian Clayton
Ella P
Rita Stronczek
Keren, Zuriel, and Gedeon
Edna Cruz
Charlie
Jerry & Rena Martinez
Tyler Gall
Luana Sulkowski
Sonny Buono
Tammy
Mike Kelly
Sue Heth
Oscar Ochoa
Jean and Clara
Dave Shelborne
Kali Rosalia
Wendy
Jessica S
Shirley McKnight
Kay Johnson
Loved ones of Bill Holmes

Exodus 13:17-22

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer, for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness bordering the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. ¹⁹ And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely come to you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” ²⁰ They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Romans 14:7-12

⁷ For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

¹² So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

Matthew 18:10-14

¹⁰ “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Bare Feet on Holy Ground

Exodus 3:1-9; Psalm 105; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 11:25-30

It's time for a brief history lesson! I know you love them! If you were able to join us two Sundays ago in Schererville, Pastor Laurel taught us about Joseph saving his brothers and father from famine after wailing with such pain that the whole of Egypt could hear. That pain came because of the harm that his brothers had done to him long before, when they envied him so much that they sold him into slavery and bloodied up his beautiful coat of many colors so that their father Jacob would think he had died. Joseph was ultimately forced into bondage in Egypt. He was a dreamer, though, with the gift from God to share visions of possible futures. The wise warnings he gained from his dreams led to his meteoric rise in the Pharaoh's court. He saved all of Egypt from the famine from which his siblings and father were fleeing. They came to him not knowing who he was, but he knew them. And after that wailing recognition of the trauma they had caused him, he chose to let his love save them. After that, the Hebrews flourished in Egypt.

But then a new Pharaoh arose. He was insecure in himself, and so he turned to hatred of the other as a way to consolidate power. He declared this community of migrants to be invaders who were planning to take over the country and overthrow the "true" Egyptians. He erased the history of these same migrants, like Joseph, being responsible for the thriving of Egypt. He convinced the populace to see them as enemies and to oppress them. The natural progression followed. They enslaved them. Then they started to kill the children to control the population. May we never allow this to happen again! May we be like the women of Exodus who chose to resist! These remarkable midwives named Shiphrah and Puah chose God over king and saved the lives of the children whom Pharaoh had ordered killed. They practiced strategic civil disobedience and stopped a genocide. Then another set of remarkable women followed. Rather than follow the order to drown her son in the Nile River, she tucked him safely into a basket so that he would float. Her daughter kept watch over the baby boy in the basket until he was found by Pharaoh's own daughter, who practiced her own civil disobedience by choosing life over death. And then get this! The baby boy's sister convinced Pharaoh's daughter to get a Hebrew woman to nurse him. And so she conspired to get her mom, the baby boy's mom to nurse him and raise him within the very halls of power that had sought to destroy them all.

Moses grew up. As he grew up, he came to understand the complexities of his identity. One day he left Pharaoh's palace and went out among the people. He saw the plight of the enslaved Hebrews and recognized that they were *his* people. He attacked and killed an overseer, an enforcer of the empire, who was beating one of the Hebrew laborers. In the service of the empire, Pharaoh ignored that Moses was his adopted grandson and sought to kill him. Moses fled to the outer regions and lived much of his life among a group of people called the Midianites, and that identity became even more complex—Hebrew survivor of genocide, prince of Egypt, and now refugee in Midian. When he got to Midian he carried on with his newfound passion for justice and used his power and privilege as a man to disrupt some misogyny at the water well. Some men shepherds were blocking a group of sister shepherds from the water. Moses intervened and helped the sisters to get water to their sheep. He ended up marrying one of them, named Zipporah, and they had a son named Gershom, meaning immigrant or refugee.

A long time passed. During that time one Pharaoh died, and a new one arose. This new Pharaoh gained a reputation for having a hard heart. In the verses leading directly up to today's reading from *Exodus*, our scriptures say, "The Israelites groaned under their slavery" with this new Pharaoh. In the midst of their suffering, though, a glorious thing happened. As the scripture continues, "Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."

And when God remembered the covenant, God acted quickly to liberate the enslaved Hebrews from the Egyptian empire. God found a human being full of complex identities—one who knew the plight of the Hebrews, one who knew the structures and systems of Egyptian power, one who knew what it meant to have to flee a homeland for safety. God found this human being named Moses out shepherding a flock on Mount Horeb and sent a message through a bush that seemed to be on fire but was not burning up. Moses' attention was duly caught, and he stopped what he was doing to gaze upon this miraculous phenomenon. Let's pause for a moment and take that in along with Moses.

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Wow! How many times have I read that passage and not paid attention to the angel? The burning bush itself is such an awesome phenomenon. It must have been a mighty fire indeed for a messenger of God to be standing inside of it! I wonder if that same angel found his way to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace all those years later, once again bringing to fruition the promise of God's salvation. And I wonder if the flames from that same fire danced above the heads of the disciples in Jerusalem all those years after that, bringing to full fruition the promise of God's presence with us always. Happy Pentecost again, loved ones! John the Baptist reminds us that we are baptized with fire along with water. I am certain that this means we face mighty challenges for the sake of the love to which God calls us. But as we see with the burning bush and later in the fiery furnace, God does not allow the fire to consume us. Perhaps the fire of God is more like a bonfire—a source of warmth and light and cooking and community. Wow, see how the fire has drawn me in, just as it drew Moses in? I'm sure he could have stood there forever, basking in the miracle of a warm fire that let the bush keep living.

And then a voice called out. As the scripture puts it, "When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." *Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.* I find myself dwelling on those words a lot. Clearly there was good reason that where Moses stood would be considered holy ground. After all, he was encountering the great God of all the cosmos in that very spot. He was directly hearing the voice of the living God. He was directly seeing the light and feeling the heat from a miraculous fire that could only come from supernatural origins.

The truth, though, is that we can encounter the great God of all the cosmos on every patch of ground on the planet! For, God created it all, and the living God is everywhere. It is but a matter of us opening our souls and spirits and hearts and minds and skin and senses to that presence. I have certainly stood in places that I consider to be holy ground, and I am sure you have as well. Think of the places that are sacred to you. Think of the places where you have felt God's presence palpably all around you. Think of the places where you have felt truly at peace. Think of the places where you have felt truly challenged to change things in your life. Think of the places where you have encountered unconditional love. Think of the places where you have had no choice but to hush in awe and wonder because of the magnitude of something that happened in a place. Think of the places where you have had no choice but to hush in awe and wonder because of the magnificence of God's Creation. Oh yes, I am sure that we have all stood upon holy ground in our own ways in our own contexts in our experiences! I am sure that we have all felt God's presence. Perhaps in those places, in those moments, we have even heard God calling out to us.

"Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And so this survivor of genocide, this fallen prince, this refugee, this hard laboring shepherd, this traumatized human being with the weight of the world upon his shoulders took off his sandals and stepped back onto that holy ground with his bare feet. He stood there, feeling the natural contours of the mountain, digging his toes into the rocky dirt, rooting himself in the same soil as that glorious, miraculous bush. And there God told him that his people would be liberated. It would not be instantaneous. There would be challenges and hardships ahead. But there would also be hope. There would come a day when these heavy-laden laborers could actually rest, could actually live, could actually thrive. And with that the weight of the world was lifted off of Moses' shoulders and a new weight settled in—the weight of God's call upon his life. But this weight was different. He would not have to bear it alone. Centuries later God in the flesh would describe it in this way, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

We Midwesterners are not big on taking our shoes off. Unless, of course, we are going to step onto the pristine carpet in our matriarchs' dining rooms. Or if we are wearing boots covered in mud or snow or salt. In many places around the world, though, it is an absolute expectation that shoes be removed upon entering people's homes and upon entering houses of worship, no matter how nice those shoes might be. I know that there are matters of cleanliness involved in doing this, but I think it goes much deeper than that. For, cleanliness and purity are not really the elements of holiness, no matter how often we have deluded ourselves and others into thinking that is the case. I think it is a matter of showing honor and respect by actually feeling a place, by actually planting our feet in and experiencing the ground that has been prepared for guests. I think it is a matter

of trusting that our shoes and belongings will be just fine there, that our feet will be just fine touching the surfaces. I think it is a matter of saying, “I’m going to get comfortable and stay for awhile because you have welcomed me in. I am going to rest and experience liberation around the fire you have built.”

Now let’s contemplate God urging all of that with Moses. Come, plant your feet in the soil and feel the ground that I have prepared for you. Come, trust me. Come, get comfortable in the warmth and glow of my fire. Come, allow yourself to be fully welcomed and fully loved. For these are the elements of holiness. Take off your shoes! Sit a spell! You’re going to be alright here! “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Dear ones, this Labor Day, let us take off our shoes and feel the earth, the holy ground that is all around. Let us dig in our toes and gather around the burning bush and sit a spell. Let us allow ourselves to rest and feel God’s welcome washing over us, God’s love liberating us, God’s call claiming us. Amen.

God Will Make a Way...with Fire

Exodus 13:17-22; Romans 14:7-12; Matthew 18:10-14

Last week we took off our shoes and joined Moses upon the holy ground around the burning bush, where God was in the fire. God, who would go on to reveal the name “I AM WHO I AM,” YHWH, from those very flames lifted the weight of the world off of Moses’ shoulders by promising that I AM WHO I AM would be present with Moses and the people from that point onward, liberating them from slavery. YHWH would not be working alone, though. Moses—survivor of genocide, fallen prince of Egypt, refugee, shepherd of sheep—would be responsible for shepherding his people to freedom, taking on the same mantle that Harriet Tubman would wear millennia later. We later learn that his siblings Miriam and Aaron joined him as fellow shepherds of the people. After all, movements of liberation always happen in community!

As we gathered around that burning bush bonfire, I promised that we would be warming up to fire as an image of God’s presence, as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, over the next several weeks, leading up to our own annual bonfire and hayride event in October. And so today we witness YHWH moving from the burning bush bonfire to a brilliant, towering pillar of fire. With cloud by day and fire by night, YHWH led the people out of Egypt after the plagues. Now, it was necessary that this pillar of cloud and fire be brilliant and towering, for well over a million people were being led to liberation! There were 600,000 men counted, then add in the women and the children. Oh yes, this was a massive movement of migrants indeed! You see, God does not just call us to love and honor immigrants. God blesses migration and leads people to migration as a means of liberation and salvation! And you can bet that this caravan of migrants would not have been considered “legal.” After all, Pharaoh was chasing them down to detain them and re-enslave them. But I digress.

Back to the necessity of God leading the people in such a brilliant, towering way! The pyrotechnics were certainly needed for such a large group to be able to see what was going on, and they were also needed to inspire confidence in a group of long-traumatized survivors who had no idea where exactly they were going and how exactly they were going to get there. It is one thing to follow a little trio of fellow human siblings who claim to know what they are doing against the massive military might of the empire that had oppressed and enslaved your people for hundreds of years. It is quite another thing to follow your very God in a towering pillar of brilliant fire! Indeed, it is likely that most would not have chosen to try this daring escape without the cloud and fire. For, according to human standards, there was no way! One route would take them through the land of the Philistines, another hostile territory that would have been just as bad as Egypt for them, if not worse given the outsize role the Philistines play throughout the Hebrew Bible as the boogeyman, the arch-enemies of the Hebrew people. The other route would take them to the Red Sea, also known as the Sea of Reeds, where they most certainly would be cornered, trapped, and captured once more by an Egyptian Pharaoh and army newly enraged and wrathful in the aftermath of the plagues.

Oh, but God had a plan! Of course God had a plan! YHWH in the great pillar of cloud and fire led the people to the sea—one of those ways that seemed to be no way at all. And Pharaoh and his military indeed

cornered them there. God, of course, would make a way, but the people were still too broken by trauma to see it. They looked back in great fear and cried out to God. Then they turned to Moses and began a refrain that would come up again and again during their journey through the wilderness. It was a refrain that reflected the bitterness deep within their bones. They said to Moses, "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." Uffffff, those words hurt! I recognize them in myself so frequently. I encounter them in our society so regularly. When the process of liberation gets tough, when we long for the status quo even when the status quo was clearly toxic, when the very possibility of transformation terrifies us, we cry out: "If only we could go back to the way things were!"

Ah, but God's way is not the way of "the way things were!" God's way is the way of liberation from the systems that hold us down. God's way is the way of transformation from what was into what can be. God's way is the way of a brilliant, towering pillar of flame to light up the night and say, follow me into the great unknown with boldness and hope!

The great pillar of cloud and fire moved between the Hebrews and Pharaoh's warriors to protect the million plus migrants. YHWH told Moses to lift up his staff and to stretch his hand out over the waters of the Sea of Reeds. Moses did so, and wonder of wonders, "The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Hebrews went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left." Take a moment to imagine towering walls of roiling seawater to your left and right. Imagine the sheer weight of it, the sheer force of it. Imagine the spray of mist on your skin. Imagine the sounds of the wind rushing to keep the waters separate. Imagine the feel of the sand beneath your feet, on this holy ground that has never been touched by feet before. When the Hebrews had made their wondrous, awe-filled journey across the sea, the walls of water collapsed, covering the Egyptian warriors. And the Hebrews were saved. They were free at last!

And suddenly there was a sound coming from where the women were gathered. The tambourines were shaking, and Miriam the great prophetess stood in their midst and sang out: "Sing to YHWH, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." This song is one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew poetry in existence, preserved through centuries of oral Hebrew before recorded in the text of the book of *Exodus*. And so the great prophetess has sung of liberation and transformation throughout the ages. How marvelous that it was Miriam!

It was she who, as a young child, followed a basket bearing her newborn brother along the banks of the mighty Nile, to make sure he would live. It was she who suggested to Pharaoh's daughter that the baby's own mother be his wet nurse, to make sure that he would know the love of his mother and thus the love of his people. From that time along the banks of the Nile to this time standing on the banks of the Sea of Reeds, she had kept back her song. She had bided her time. She had suffered along with her people through decades of forced labor, making bricks of clay and building structures as Pharaoh's heart became encased in an ever-hardening clay brick itself. She had watched with dismay as her brother fled to Midian, fearing that Moses had abandoned the people after all. In other words, she had gone through an excruciatingly painful period of life for herself and for her people. With bones full of bitterness and spirits close to breaking, the people did not have reason to sing songs of joy and triumph.

But I can see Miriam biting her tongue and gulping back the strains of song every so often when she saw visions of hope, being the prophetess that she was. And then on that glorious day, standing beside a sea that had stood aside for her and her people, thinking back on the incredible courage of women like Shiphrah and Puah and her mother and Pharaoh's daughter who had set the course for liberation with their acts of resistance, remembering that same Moses floating in a basket who stood with hand outstretched separating the waters, the song finally burst forth in full brilliance. It makes me think of our choir, finally singing again after a long hiatus! And of course, it makes me want to sing! I don't know the tune of Miriam's ancient hymn, but the timeless music of Don Moen comes to mind for today's story in particular.

*God will make a way
Where there seems to be no way
He works in ways we cannot see
He will make a way for me*

*He will be my guide
Hold me closely to His side
With love and strength for each new day
He will make a way
He will make a way*

*By a roadway in the wilderness
He'll lead me
Rivers in the desert will I see
Heaven and earth will fade
But His Word will still remain
He will do something new today*

*God will make a way
Where there seems to be no way
He works in ways we cannot see
He will make a way for me*

*He will be my guide
Hold me closely to His side
With love and strength for each new day
He will make a way
He will make a way*

Loved ones, God indeed calls us to rest, to take off our shoes and sit a spell around the fire, basking in the warmth and glow of God's liberating love. AND God calls us to move, to get up and break free of the oppressive status quo that keeps us stuck. There are times in life when we find ourselves in positions for which there seems to be no way out and no way forward. We lose the ability to imagine something better. We become fearful and lose hope. When that happens, may we dare to open the eyes of our hearts to the presence of God beckoning us forward. The brilliant, towering pillar of fire may not be visible in the same way that it was for the ancient Hebrews, but that does not mean that the light has gone out! The light is always there, for God is always there. It is the light that shines in the eyes of children whose imaginations far outshine ours! It is the light that shines through the kindness of neighbors and strangers alike. It is the light that shines in the songs of prophetesses and prophets who choose joy as resistance. It is the light of a Church that chooses radical love even when doing so comes at great risk and great cost. It is the light of God's way in a world in where there seems to be no way. May we follow that light! Amen!

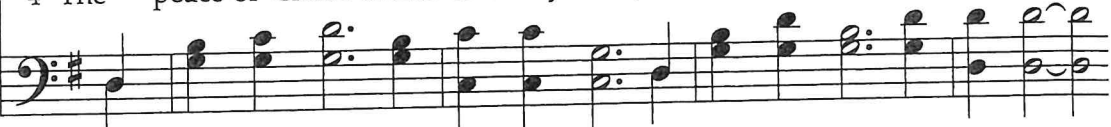
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My Life Flows On

How Can I Keep from Singing?



1 My life flows on in end-less song, a-bove earth's lam-en - ta - tion.
 2 Through all the tu - mult and the strife, I hear that mu - sic ring - ing.
 3 What though my joys and com-forts die? I know my Sav - ior liv - eth.
 4 The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a foun-tain ev - er spring-ing!




I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new cre - a - tion.
 It finds an ech - o in my soul. How can I keep from sing-ing?
 What though the dark-ness gath-er round? Songs in the night he giv - eth.
 All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from sing-ing?



Refrain



No storm can shake my in-most calm while to that Rock I'm cling-ing.




Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from sing-ing?



William Williams, 1745

Stanza 1 trans. Peter Williams, 1771

Stanzas 2-3 trans. William Williams, 1772

John Hughes, 1907

1. Guide me, O Thou great Je - ho - vah, Pil - grim through this
 2. O - pen now the crys - tal foun - tain, Whence the heal - ing
 3. When I tread the verge of Jor - dan, Bid my anx - ious

bar - ren land; I am weak, but Thou art might - y; Hold me
 stream doth flow; Let the fire and cloud - y pil - lar Lead me
 fears sub - side; Death of death, and hell's de - struc - tion, Land me

with Thy power - ful hand; Bread of heav - en, bread of heav - en,
 all my jour - ney through; Strong de - liv - erer, strong de - liv - erer,
 safe on Ca - naan's side; Songs of prais - es, songs of prais - es

Feed me till I want no more, Feed me till I want no more.
 Be Thou still my strength and shield, Be Thou still my strength and shield.
 I will ev - er give to Thee, I will ev - er give to Thee.