

Exodus 14:19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them.

20 It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. 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.

22 The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

23 The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.

24 At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.

25 He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

26 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers."

27 So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea.

28 The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.

29 But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

30 Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

31 Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Matthew 18:21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;

25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'

27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'

29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

John 6:16 Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea,

17 and after getting into a boat, they *started to* cross the sea to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

18 The sea *began* to be stirred up because a strong wind was blowing.

19 Then, when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat; and they were frightened.

20 But He said to them, "It is I; do not be **afraid**."

21 So they were willing to receive Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I. Give me words that I may speak give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Amen.

I have to admit that I have stolen something. I have stolen the story I am going to tell. I heard this once before, but I was reminded of it this week by the Rev. Dr Nick Carter, president of Andover Newton Theological School.

On June 30, 1859 Jean Francois Gravelet, better known as the Great Blondin stretched a 3 inch rope across the Niagara Falls and he proceeded to get up on the rope and he walked across over the 160 foot chasm and he got to the other side.

A few weeks later he said he wanted to try again, this time pushing a wheelbarrow and he said to the crowd gathered around him, do you think I can do it. They said, sure we think you can do it.

Then he said I'd like to do it with a person in the wheelbarrow. Do you believe I can do it? Yes, they said, we believe you can do it.

And he said which of you is going to get into the wheelbarrow? At that, the crowd went silent. Their belief was tempered by a dose of fear.

We know what it is to be afraid, don't we?

Some people are afraid of heights, or confined spaces, others are afraid of the dark. This week my wife was scared by a flying squirrel that got into the house.

I've been afraid to go to the gas station to fill my car lately. Most of us are afraid of how much it will cost to heat our houses this winter.

Some political candidates may be scary, and the fact that we still have a month and a half left till the election is also frightening.

Perhaps coming to church can be scary. Meeting new people can be difficult for some people. Will I fit in? Will people like me? Will I like them?

What happens if they ask me to get involved in something? Maybe I don't know enough to teach Sunday school. I've never sung in public before, why should I sing in the choir?

Someone may ask me to serve on a committee.

The Israelites left their captivity. They travelled into the wilderness, and I'm sure they had some fear. They were moving into the unknown, and that, in itself, can produce some anxiety. They were being chased by the armies of Pharaoh, and that added to their fear. They were pinned beside the Red Sea, and now things were looking really bad.

This passage begins by saying **The angel of God who was going before the Israelites.**

This was how they knew where to go as they fled from Egypt. The stories say that as they went a cloud went before them by day and a pillar of fire went before them by night, this was what led them as they went. This is what led them to the water's edge with the Egyptians right behind them.

I often wish we had a cloud to follow or a pillar of fire to guide us. That way we would know where to go. We could be sure what God wanted us to do.

This is what the Israelites had and yet when they saw the scriptures say **As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened; so the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD. Then they said to Moses, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?"**

This all takes place just before the reading we heard earlier. The people have forgotten about God already, even though they have been led by God with the smoke and the fire.

Moses reminds them of who and whose they are

Moses said to the people, "Be not afraid! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD

God's people are always being led. God was leading them, and God is leading us.

We have quite a bit going on here in First Church.

Today is Rally Sunday when we celebrate our ministries and our activities here in First Church.

Today is the day we officially begin our Sunday School year. This is the ministry of passing on our faith to the next generation.

The Nomads will begin their year with a meeting this evening to discuss next year's mission trips. This is a ministry of helping others and of opening the eyes of young people and adults to the realities of the world beyond Monson.

We have a prayer shawl ministry that knits and crochets shawls as a way of sharing love and prayers with others.

Our ladies group, the Hearts Willing Club gathers to have activities together, to raise money for special needs and projects and they reach out to those in need.

Yesterday, a new group called Alone Again met for the first time, this is a group for are either widowed or divorced and are facing the reality of missing a companion.

We have a music ministry that brings the blessings of beautiful sounds to our worship and to special events.

There is a group meets to make breakfast every Sunday morning.

We provide one meal a month to Loaves and Fishes in Springfield.

We have a group that meets to learn about the ways the visual arts are connected to Christianity and its history.

First Church supports Crop Walk and we will be walking to help meet the needs of the hungry people of our world October 19th.

On October 18th is our first ever Pumpkin Festival, this is a fund raiser for the church, but it is much more than that. It is an outreach to the community and an opportunity for us to come together as a community to have fun and fellowship in service.

God is still speaking.

This is the motto of the United Church of Christ.

God is still speaking is our belief, a belief that comes down from our Congregational forbearers, a belief that affirms that God is alive , God is in our midst , God is leading us today.

When Peter Wells, our Western Area Associate Conference Minister was here early this year he spoke about how God is still speaking here in Monson.

He listed off the ministries we have here in First Church.

God is still speaking here in Monson in the various ministries we are celebrating here this morning.

We could think of these ministries as the smoke and fire that God is using us to guide us to our promised land, a new life filled with endless possibilities.

We have lots of ways to become involved in God's work here at First Church.

The Christian Education Committee has been hard at work looking at how we begin the year without a superintendent. At times they may have felt like they were on the edge of the sea with no place to go. But this is an important ministry here at First Church. We want to see our children learn about their faith. We believe that God will bless this ministry and help us find a way that it can happen.

Perhaps you want to travel with the Nomads of Hope. This may be a scary proposition for some. There is the travel to an unknown place and new people to meet. There is the financial commitment. This ministry requires a huge commitment in organization that needs to happen if the trips are to be a success. Be not afraid, come and find out more about the program.

Perhaps you always wanted to knit or crochet but felt like you did not know how. Be not afraid, the group that gathers would love to pass on their knowledge to you.

You might find yourself being led to sing in choir but you wonder if your singing is good enough. Be not afraid, try it out.

You may be asked to serve on a committee, be not afraid, it is a wonderful way to get to know your sisters and brothers in this church.

You could help with pumpkin festival, be not afraid, this is meant to be a fun time.

If you feel like you are being led to make breakfast, learn about art, or walk in Cropwalk, or join the Hearts Willing Club, or work on the Habitat project, or work on the gardens, or join in any of the other ministries here at First Church. Be not afraid.

Maybe you have a burning desire to participate in a ministry we don't yet have, maybe you are the one to make it happen. Be not afraid.

Be not afraid, this is the most frequent command given by God in the scriptures. It is very common in the Gospels. The angels say it to Mary and to the shepherds; Jesus says it to the disciples over and over again.

Moses knew that when God is in the lead, we will do best to follow. Jesus had the same message. Do not be afraid, for when God is in charge, when we seek God's will, the storms of life are stilled and we will find our way.

Let's get in the boat even when a storm seems to be coming. Jesus will be there with us. Let's walk right to the water's edge even if Pharaoh is right behind us, God will make a way for us.

Get in the wheelbarrow.

Be not afraid.

Get in the wheelbarrow, or get in the boat, or walk across on dry ground, because that is where God is calling us to be. God is leading us to new possibilities.

Being safe on the shore is nice, but it does not get us anywhere, God will help us if we first place our trust in the one we call Lord and Savior.

Jesus is the one who has showed us that God is more powerful than death, the empty tomb reveals a God worth following; why should we live in fear?

We can head out in the boat, or go across on a wire or perhaps God will part the waters for us and make a way where we thought none was possible.

Be not afraid, let's follow where God leads us!

AMEN.