

Crossing into 2012

Exodus 13:1-22
Psalms 114

One one one two. Today's date, the start of a pristine 2012 sounds like a game of hopscotch at recess. Yet most of us take the experience of crossing into a new year with as much seriousness as playfulness. At least, those of us who have managed to be at an early church service on the morning after New Year's Eve! We make resolutions. We plan for the future. We turn over new leaves and marvel at the chance to start fresh. The start of a new year is a metaphoric crossroads. We can look back over the path we've taken to arrive at that crossroads and continue in the same direction, or we can chart a new path with our newly polished promises and hopes. Crossroads moments can define us—moments when the decisions which we make, when the actions which we take, determine all that will follow. Crossroads come disguised in many forms. They are not necessarily marked by neon signs proclaiming what we may find when we round the next bend.

Take Ruth Herschman for example. She had established a reputation as the popular Station Manager for KCRW, the National Public Radio station in Southern California when she did something few people with name recognition would do—she changed her name. She changed her name from Ruth Herschman to Ruth Seymour. Seymour was not her married name; it was her family name. And this is how she came to recover it. Ruth had an immigrant grandfather who came to America from Eastern Europe. Her grandfather was an observant Jew, the son of a revered and knowledgeable rabbi. His brother-in-law had already settled in New York, and he had established a business making fur coats. And so the brother-in-law generously offered to hire the man's sons-- five greenhorns--who arrived with him. But there was a catch. The shop operated on Saturdays, on the Sabbath, when observant Jews will not work. When the son of the rabbi learned that his sons were expected to work on Shabbat, he was astonished, horrified. He forbade his sons from working, from defiling the sacred Sabbath. To ensure that his authority would prevail, on Ruth's grandfather's first Friday night in America, he pushed a heavy wooden dining table up against the front door. Fully clothed, he lay down upon it. He may have been on a road in a new country, but he was not about to take—or allow his sons to take—a new direction. He intended to stand guard; but sometime during the long night, he fell asleep. Unfortunately for him, the poor man had never heard of a new urban invention--the fire escape. The boys awoke early. Excited by this new country, the adventure and the promise of it, they quickly climbed out the window and fled from their old life.

That moment, excitedly climbing down the fire escape to the formerly forbidden world beyond, marked a crossroads. Those boys' lives after were never the same as their

lives before. They climbed into a world freed from what they regarded as the archaic and irrelevant trappings of their father's religion.

Yet in the next generation, the granddaughter, Ruth looks back at that crossroads with a different perspective. She finds in that apartment a treasure to take with her as she makes her way through a confusing world. The daughter and not the son, she does not need to escape. The daughter and not the son, she takes on her grandfather's name—Seymour—to wear proudly as an adult. Ruth takes a different path at the crossroads, a path which honors and restores her to her grandfather's faith.

The words from Exodus that we just heard mark a crossroads as well. When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they were not only crossing out of Egypt, out of slavery; they were also entering an unknown future, an entrance made possible by a moment of extraordinary faith.

This moment is marked by triumph, by a celebration in song for the redemptive moment of crossing the Red Sea. Both Moses and Miriam offer different renditions of this song. Moses proclaims, "I will sing to God for God has saved." Miriam, accompanied by her tambourine, chants, "Let us sing to God, this new song of victory."

Moses and Miriam, safely across the Red Sea, turn around and celebrate a moment at the crossroads, a moment of looking backward and looking forward, a moment of redemption. But earlier, in the moment of terror, with Egyptians at their heels and the waters in front, neither Moses nor Miriam are recognized and acknowledged by the rabbis who comment on this portion. The rabbis concentrate instead on the person who first plunged into the billowing sea--a little known figure whose name was Nachshon ben Aminadav. Nachshon is a curious hero. There is a brief notice of him in Exodus as Aaron's brother-in-law. And that's all. But not only is he not singled out at the Red Sea as a hero, he is not even mentioned! Yet the rabbis praise him for being the first in line to enter the water. The rabbis distinguish Nachshon ben Aminadav as the one who leads all of the Israelites to safety.

But, if it is not apparent in the Bible, where do they get this idea? Well, not in Exodus, but in Numbers, Nachshon, the prince of the tribe of Judah, is the first to bring his offering at the dedication of the tabernacle. The rabbis looked carefully at this honor, and they tell the following story about the biblical text, a story known as a midrash.

"When it was time for the tabernacle to be dedicated, in the moment of celebration, Moses confessed to the princes of all the tribes, "'The Holy One has commanded you to bring offerings, but I don't know who should go first.' The princes all looked at Nachshon, and said, 'This man has sanctified the name of the Holy One at the Red Sea. He is worthy to bring the Shechinah, the immanent presence of God. Let Nachshon go first.'"(Bamidbar Rabbah 12:21)

The rabbis are asserting something about Nachshon's character. They reason that if he manifested courage and boldness at one crossroads, than he can do so at another.

Nachshon is rewarded for leadership at the Red Sea by being crowned the “first among princes”. Nachshon’s reward—being the first to act at the dedication of the tabernacle—enables him to become, as well, a ritual innovator. Nachshon’s offering on the first day sets the stage for all the offerings of the princes to follow. And once he is identified as a leader in one realm—the Red Sea—he is counted upon as a leader in another realm—the granting of the offerings. Nachshon, too, faced a crossroads-- whether to have faith and plunge into the waves, or whether to be gripped by fear and remain on the shore. What was that moment at the crossroads like? Imagine ourselves at the shore of the Red Sea. If we were on the shore of the sea that fateful day, how would we have each acted? Confidently? Timidly? Would we have entered the waves gingerly or with fury? Flailing or swimming? How do we approach the crossroads in our lives? Are we coerced by an army from behind or pulled by the unknown ahead?

Perhaps like us, the rabbis aren’t sure. This is not only a biblical scene, but a contemporary one as well. Each description that the rabbis offer of that moment at the crossroads is a story they tell about their own lives, their own time, their own imaginings. And so we can do the same. The rabbis agree that Nachshon was the first to get wet. What they disagree about is how it came to be.

In the story about the dedication of the Tabernacle, the princes convey their admiration for Nachshon. They saw that Nachshon was fearless in his willingness to sanctify God’s name. Some rabbis assert that he was not only fearless; he was also determined. In one description (Midrash Tehillim passage 114: 8), Nachshon is said to have pelted his brothers with stones in order to insure they wouldn’t beat him to the water. This Nachshon was going to be the first at all costs, no matter who he hurt in the process.

The daredevil confidence of Nachshon in this interpretation is in stark contrast to another description of the same moment (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Beshallah 5). In this description, huddled together, a terrified crowd looked behind at the Egyptians. They looked in front at the water. Old and young alike yell with alarm, “I don’t want to go into the sea.” Amidst the jostling, Nachshon jumped up in fear, and losing his footing, he fell into the waves. In his distress, he quoted a verse from Psalms, “Save me, O God, for the waters are come in even to my neck.” (Ps. 69:2) In this version, Nachshon is a drowning man, crying out for God’s help.

Here are three different descriptions of the crossroads. Whether as the hapless victim, the brash show-off or the dignified trailblazer, Nachshon’s entry into the water changes biblical history. Whether his faith in God is expressed by bravado, by cries of terror or by quiet confidence, Nachshon becomes a leader. He braves the waters and is noticed by his community for doing so. He is changed by waves and by his responsibility to the people who will follow him.

Unlike Moses and Miriam, who are groomed for leadership, Nachshon’s leadership is ambiguous and surprising. Only when he enters the waves, when the waters come up to his neck, when he is fighting for his life and his footing, only then do the

waters recede. As we read in Exodus, “And the children of Israel entered the sea on dry land.” Only after the children of Israel entered the sea, did it become dry land. Only after Nachshon’s (perhaps) intentional or unintentional, (perhaps) aware or unaware leadership, did the sea become dry land. Nachshon’s entrance into the waves causes God to create a miracle.

As we too approach the unknown of what will be before us, as we too turn the page and enter this new year, let us consider Nachshon’s experience. It seems to me that he is a leader for our time. Nachshon is one upon whom the mantle of leadership does not fit snugly. He is one who is surprised by his own authority; yet he looks around and recognizes with humility, that he is essential to God’s purpose. Aren’t we all?

Nachshon is a leader for our time--a time when it is possible to enter the waters of change with both surprise and with faith, a time when the landscape is changed and ritual innovation is created by those who have not been the identifiable leaders, when a link to the past is accompanied by an eye toward the future. For Nachshon is not only a prince from the tribe of Judah, he is also the grandfather of Boaz, who, with the biblical Ruth, continues the messianic line through to David. Nachshon reminds us that leadership and innovation may come from many quarters. Nachshon teaches us that a commitment to continuity and to redemption is found by looking forward as well as by looking back.

Taken together, the various description of the rabbis leave Nachshon’s story surprising and ambiguous. In their diverse interpretations, the rabbis point to leadership arising from quarters where it is not expected. The rabbis were not sloppy editors. These Rabbinic teachers were reminding us that we, too, each face crossroads. We too can choose to enter the waves or we can hang back and wait for someone else to lead. And if we enter, it may not be with poise and quiet certitude. It may be with brash impulsiveness. It may be filled with terror at what lies ahead. We may be hanging back, looking around for someone else to go in first; we may be making a mad dash uncertain of what we will encounter; We may be listening to a still small voice, but when we enter the waves, we, and the waves, our world, are transformed. Our crossroads may not be in space; our crossroads may be in time. Our crossroads may be “One, one, one, two”. In our time we cannot wait for someone else to change the world. We cannot demure that we were not born with privilege, nor bred to expect greatness. We cannot blend into the crowd and complain about the future. We are needed way too much for that.

For us, such a moment to enter the waves may come as a cry for social justice, when we unexpectedly find our voice waxing prophetic, it may come as we read a book in which we are seized with understanding about our place in the world. It may come when we look into the eyes of the one we love and decide, yes, I will make my life with this person. It may be when we discover our purpose and commit to carrying it out.

Like Nachshon, we each face a crossroads. Like Ruth Seymour, we are fortified by our religious past and traditions. Like Moses and Miriam, we want to sing and celebrate success. Each of us in this sanctuary has gifts given to us by God. Each of us in this sanctuary has fears or impulses, which may not serve us well. Each of us in this

sanctuary sometimes thinks of ourselves as smaller than we might be. But we have just made our resolutions for a pristine new year. We do or we will each face a crossroads. We are or we will be asked to be leaders in a variety of realms. And if we enter the waves, if we speak and act out of awe and out of gratitude, if we look around and trust our vision, we may, surprisingly, discover at the crossroads, that we too are bathed in and buoyed by the presence of God. And then, may we be privileged to sing a new song in thanks and in reverence. Happy New Year. May 2012 be filled with health, courage and blessing for the journey. Amen.