

Horse Sense (December 2006)

Last month I shared with our Friday night congregation the story of the extraordinary rescue of 100 horses trapped by North Sea flooding in the Netherlands. Actually, the rescue wasn't really all that extraordinary, it was simply inspiring. And instructive.

In the wake of strong storms, a horse farm in Marrum, Netherlands was quickly inundated. More than 100 horses (including foals), surrounded by water on all sides, did what was logical—they went toward higher ground. The problem was that the higher ground soon became an island. Large enough to hold them, but so small they had no where to walk. For three days they were trapped on this new island. Eighteen of them died. Finally, someone had the idea to get trained horses that were not afraid of water (which by this time was only knee-deep) to go to the trapped horses and “lead” them off the island. It was so simple that it was brilliant.

[If you type the string below into your web-browser, you can see video footage of the rescue (but do it soon because you never know how long these pages stay accessible on the Internet). While I confess the video's background music helps, the scene looks like it was directed by John Ford.]

<http://video.google.nl/videoplay?docid=-4584913278289860160>

As my friend Diana Clark, Rector of Saint John's Episcopal Church, taught me, this story is a microcosm. How often do we end up trapped in a place where there appears to be no escape? Surrounded by raging waters, tumultuous and cold, we cluster together and decry our fate. We whinny in fear and trembling, not knowing what to do or where to go. Reminiscent of Emma Lazarus' “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” we simply stand still locked by the waters of our indecision. Who will come to the rescue? Who will show us how to brave the waters to freedom? Who will courageously go into the waters so that we may follow?

Ironically, the lesson of the “island” metaphor is rooted in the words of John Donne, who taught that “no man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” What connects us to each other, and ultimately what transforms the world, is the willingness to reach out to others. And while

the drama of that video is seeing those horses prance through the waters to freedom, what makes it all possible are the four horses that so easily get lost in the larger picture. And that is the story. As George Eliot concluded in her book Middlemarch, “the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts...”

The midrash tells of Nachshon who waded into the waters of the Red Sea as the Egyptian army advanced upon our people. While the “published” version of the story has Moses lifting his staff over the waters to part the sea, the rabbis suggest otherwise. According to the rabbinic legend, when Nachshon had gone into the sea far enough for the waters to cover his nose (and thereby blocking his last chance at breathing), then (and only then) did God part the Red Sea. Moses waving his magic wand (at coincidentally the same moment) was just for effect. It was in fact Nachshon’s courage and faith that paved the way for redemption.

For the Jewish people, to be a “survivor” in the real world (as opposed to Reality TV) means getting off the island. It means even destroying the island. It means we must not merely bear responsibility for each other, we must actually care about each other. It means we must care when Palestinians and Shiites die as much as we care when Americans and Israelis die. It means we must really care about what happens in Darfur, and Chad and Sudan (and not just say that we do). And it requires that we not wait for someone else to go first. Indeed, don’t think the metaphor of the stranded horses is just about the need to save people trapped on their islands of despair, because through our indifference we create our own islands of isolation. Perhaps we too need saving?

If you will take the time to watch this video you will see that the very best part comes at the end when the horses, now on dry land, break into open gallop. Not unlike the classic Western where the hero rides off into the sunset, the image of these trapped horses running free reminds us that that is ultimately of what we all dream. But the point of this story is that it will never happen until people are willing to do for each other what the horses that weren’t afraid of water did for the horses trapped by water. It’s really such a simple lesson. All it takes is a little horse sense.