

12 July 2020

**Exodus**  
Exodus 5-15

In our story today, we retell how God used Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. But we are not the first to retell the story. We read from Psalm 77, verses 11-20.

- <sup>11</sup> I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;  
I will remember your wonders of old.*
- <sup>12</sup> I will meditate on all your work,  
and muse on your mighty deeds.*
- <sup>13</sup> Your way, O God, is holy.  
What god is so great as our God?*
- <sup>14</sup> You are the God who works wonders;  
you have displayed your might among the peoples.*
- <sup>15</sup> With your strong arm you redeemed your people,  
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.*
- <sup>16</sup> When the waters saw you, O God,  
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
the very deep trembled.*
- <sup>17</sup> The clouds poured out water;  
the skies thundered;  
your arrows flashed on every side.*
- <sup>18</sup> The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
your lightnings lit up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.*
- <sup>19</sup> Your way was through the sea,  
your path, through the mighty waters;  
yet your footprints were unseen.*
- <sup>20</sup> You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

As we've been visiting the stories of Genesis and Exodus this summer, I've generally just launched into the story. After all, one of the goals of this series is to let the Bible speak for itself, without commentary from me or anyone else. But today I feel the need to say a word of introduction: the plagues of Egypt is one of the Bible's more troubling stories. As early as the second century, a theologian named Marcion read this story and, appalled at its picture of God, concluded that the Old Testament God could not possibly be the same one that Jesus spoke of. He was just too harsh. And the stories are still a problem. Some Christians bend themselves into knots trying to justify God's behavior in these chapters; most Christians just pretend these stories don't exist. I don't want to do either. There is much here that I, like Marcion, find abhorrent, but there is also deep wisdom, and I know no way to present the latter without including the former. So, I'm just going to tell the story as it is. But I'm giving you permission to struggle with it. I do too.

Moses and Aaron arrived in Egypt and, as we saw at the end of last week's story, were welcomed gratefully by the elders of Israel, who gave thanks to God that he had heard their cries for help. But when Moses and Aaron took their message to Pharaoh, they were received less cordially. "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent us to tell you to let them go three days journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to him."

"*The Lord?* Who is that? And why should I care? Who let these men in here? Get out!"

As soon as Moses and Aaron were gone, Pharaoh called in the Egyptian slave masters who were over the Hebrews. "Clearly the Hebrews have way too much time on their hands. I want you to stop coddling them. You have to be firm with those people; it's all they understand. Don't give them the straw that they need to make bricks, but keep their quotas the same. Let's see if they still want a religious holiday now!"

"Thanks a lot, Moses!" the Hebrew foremen said. "And may God curse you both."

"Well, God," Moses said, when he was alone. "This deliverance thing you're proposing has started off nicely. Um, you *have* done this before, haven't you?"

And God replied. "I told you I'd have to persuade Pharaoh, didn't I? Listen to me, Moses. I *will* bring the children of Jacob out of bondage. I will do wonders that you will not believe. Pharaoh will harden his heart, and I'll let him. In fact, I'll even help. I'll give him strength to keep his heart hard even when he begins to weaken. No one will ever be able to say that Pharaoh let you go. There will be no doubt that I, and I alone, saved you, and by the time I am done, no nation will ever again be able to ask, 'The Lord? Who is that?' Go back to Pharaoh, both of you, and take a staff."

So Moses and Aaron went back to Pharaoh, and repeated their demands. Then Aaron threw down his rod, and it became a serpent. The king jumped, but then he sent for his own magicians – for the Egyptian wise men and enchanters were famous throughout the world. And when they came, Pharaoh's magicians threw down their rods, and they too became snakes. Sure, Aaron's rod ate all their rods, but it was enough for Pharaoh. He dismissed Moses and Aaron.

The next day, though, as Pharaoh went down to the Nile for his morning wash, there were Moses and Aaron. "O Pharaoh, the Lord says, 'Let my people go.' And so that you will know that it is God who speaks . . ." Aaron held his rod over the river, which turned to blood. It became red and thick. Fish died and floated to the surface.

"Send for my magicians!" Pharaoh commanded, and the official magicians were brought. "Look at what they've done!" The magicians bowed and dug a hole beside the river to get fresh water. Then, by their own secret arts, they too turned fresh water into blood. Pharaoh frowned. "Don't think I'm not impressed," he said, "but couldn't you have . . . ?"

For seven days the water of the Nile was undrinkable, and the Egyptians had to survive on what they could get from seeps and ponds beside the river. At the end of that week, Moses and Aaron returned to Pharaoh. "Let the Lord's people go, or he will bring a plague of frogs on your land." Pharaoh refused to listen, and the next day, the whole land was covered with frogs.

There were frogs in the homes and palaces and kitchens and soups and beds and bread dough and everything that there was that a frog could get into.

“Call my magicians!” Pharaoh demanded. “Look at what Moses did! Frogs everywhere.”

The magicians smiled confidently. “That’s no problem for us, sire.” Then, with their own secret arts, they performed a great magic and produced . . . more frogs.

“You morons!” shouted Pharaoh. “Get *rid* of the frogs! Don’t make more!”

“Oh, we can’t do that, your highness.”

“Send for Moses.” Moses and Aaron arrived, and the Pharaoh said, “Pray to the Lord to remove the frogs, and I’ll let the people go.”

“Fine,” said Moses. “And so you know it’s the Lord’s doing, you choose the day.”

Pharaoh chose the next day, and as that day dawned, the frogs were all dead, in stinking heaps all over Egypt. But Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to let the people go. So the next day, the Lord said to Moses, “Tell Aaron to strike the dust with his rod.” Aaron did, and the dust became a cloud of gnats that swarmed over every face, in every ear and nose and mouth and eye. Pharaoh's magicians said to him, “This is beyond our power. This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh remained adamant.

The next day, Moses dropped by to see Pharaoh again. “They aren’t getting any easier, you know. No? All right. This time it will be flies, and just so you know who’s responsible, there will be flies in every corner of Egypt – except the land of Goshen, where the Israelites live.” And it happened exactly as Moses had said. Pharaoh even sent some servants through the swarms of flies to check, and sure enough they reported that the flies that made life miserable everywhere else in Egypt were not to be found among the Hebrews. Pharaoh sent for Moses. “Why can’t you sacrifice to your Lord in Goshen?” he asked. “I’ll give you a holiday. Just stay in Egypt.”

“You know how the Egyptians despise our people,” Moses said. “They would consider our worship to be an abomination to their gods. They’d stone us. No, we must go to the desert.”

“All right. Pray to the Lord to get rid of the flies, and you can go, a *little* way.”

So Moses prayed, and the Lord sent a wind that blew the flies away, but when they were gone, Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused again.

So the Lord spoke to Moses and said, “Go to Pharaoh and tell him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go into the desert, or on this day tomorrow there will be a plague on all the cattle of Egypt – except for the cattle in the land of Goshen.’” And it was so. Pharaoh refused again to listen, and cattle across the land of Egypt died, except for the cattle of the Israelites. But the heart of Pharaoh was still hardened, and he would not let the people go.

So the next day, God sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh. Dipping their hands into the cold braziers, they threw ashes up into the air. The wind caught them and blew them over the land, and immediately boils began forming on every Egyptian body – deep, sore, red, painful, swollen, bursting, draining boils. And Pharaoh called to a servant, “Send for my magicians!” But the

servant returned alone. “What? What do you mean they can’t come? Why not? . . . Oh, let me guess. They’re covered with boils.” The servant nodded, and Pharaoh said, “Good!” But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and still he refused to let the people go.

“Why do you still resist?” Moses asked. “God could have completely destroyed your country by now, and still might. Let the people go.” But Pharaoh just stared in impotent rage and fear. “The next plagues will be worse,” Moses said sadly. “Tomorrow at this time, the Lord will send hail on Egypt such as you’ve never seen, and every green plant that has poked its head out of the ground will be crushed, and every person or animal who leaves cover will die – except in the land of Goshen.”

And it was so, and Pharaoh sent hurriedly for Moses and Aaron, who walked calmly through the hail to the palace. “All right! I’ve sinned! I’ll let them go! Just stop the hail!”

Moses sighed. “No, you won’t. But that’s your choice. Fine, as soon as I’m out of the city, I’ll hold up my hands and stop the hail. But I can see I’ll be back.”

Sure enough, when the hail stopped, the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he refused to let the people go free. And, as Moses said, the plagues only grew worse. The next plague was locusts – locusts who stripped every tree and every shrub of their last leaves. Nothing green and alive was left. The land was ruined. And it got still worse. The next plague was a plague of darkness: thick, dense darkness that overpowered every flame, snuffed every flicker of light, and drove man and beast to madness. But still, we read, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. His counselors pleaded with him to let the Israelites go, but he refused, and when Moses and Aaron came to him after the plague of darkness, his heart was still black and heavy and unyielding. “Get out! Both of you!” Pharaoh screamed. “The next time I see your faces, you die!”

“There will be no next time,” Moses said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

And the Lord said to Moses, “Call the people together. Tomorrow is the tenth day of the first month. Tell every family to slaughter a lamb – if one family is too small, let them share with their neighbors – and eat the lamb together. Take some of the lamb’s blood and paint marks on your door frame. Remember this date. I want you to come together each year in this month to eat the lamb, with unleavened bread.”

“Unleavened bread? Why?”

“You’ll see.”

And the people obeyed. They ate their lamb and placed the blood on the door frames, and that night a death angel from the Lord visited the land of Egypt and in every household the angel took the life of the first born son – except that the angel passed over every house where there was blood on the door frame. Every first born son in every house in Egypt – from the Pharaoh’s palace to the home of the prisoner in the dungeon – died that night, and a great cry rose from the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh sent word to Moses. “Go! Go away! Now! All of you! Just go!”

There was no time to wait. The children of Jacob rose in the night and fled the land of their bondage. They took their families and their flocks and what could be packed in a hurry.

Women who had set bread dough aside to bake in the morning didn't even have time to work in the yeast, so they took the unleavened dough as it was, and by morning all Israel was gone.

God said again, "Remember this day. Today I have purchased this people. Israel is now my first born son. When you slaughter this lamb, when you eat this flat bread, remember."

God led the people through the night by a pillar of fire that went before them, taking them due east – not to the northeast, the direct road to the Promised Land, but due east, toward the sea. There they made camp, exhausted after their midnight flight. The women baked their bread, without yeast, and the people ate and fell into an exhausted sleep.

But their escape wasn't complete. Once more, Pharaoh hardened his heart. Perhaps by this time, it was past changing. When he saw that his slave force had truly left, then blinded with rage and grief, he summoned his army and took off after them. When the Hebrews woke the next day, they could see Pharaoh's army on the horizon on one side, and on the other side, the sea.

"Is this what you and your God brought us out here for? To kill us all by the sword?"

"Don't be afraid," Moses said. "Just watch to see how the Lord will deliver you today." Then, when he was alone, "God? You *will* deliver us, right?"

"Hold up your staff, Moses. Hold it over the sea."

And the Lord set a cloud between the Egyptian army and the Hebrews, so the Egyptians wandered, lost, in the fog while a great wind blew from the east and swept up the sea in a heap. The people of Israel – their families, their flocks, their herds – hurried down into the dry sea bed and crossed over to the desert that waited for them on the other side. Then the Lord lifted the cloud. The Egyptians saw the Israelites crossing the sea and, with a shout, spurred their horses and drove their chariots after them.

"Now," said the Lord to Moses. "Lower your staff."

And the waters returned to their place.

Moses stood above the sea, gazing over the placid waters where a moment before had surged the army of the greatest empire on earth. And behind him a woman's voice rose in song. It was his sister Miriam – remember her? the one who watched over Moses as a baby? Exodus 15 calls her Miriam the prophet, and she took a tambourine and sang, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has cast into the sea."

Other women joined her, and they danced and sang because their God had delivered them. No one had ever heard of a God who did that sort of thing, who cared enough for the cry of the oppressed to lean down to earth and save.