

## Lest We Forget

### Exodus

Up until now we've been able to enjoy a certain lightheartedness in our look at the patriarchs and the life of the brand new nation of Israel. Only now do we begin to get a glimpse of the God who turns some people off; the side of God that stands as a reminder to us all that our behavior has consequences, that God is, in fact, a God of justice as well as grace, and at some point in time we will be judged by how we treat our neighbor.

Much has happened since the burning bush. Moses and Aaron have gone back to the "city" and confronted Pharaoh, and Egypt has been plagued. The problem is that it all makes such a great story that it is easy to forget that the plagues aren't just a series of miraculous tricks designed to intimidate Pharaoh into letting the Israelites go. It's a battle of the gods – who is mightier? Who is the only real God, Moses', or the gods of Egypt? It goes back to that question from a couple of weeks ago: whom will you serve? The Egyptians aren't just being coerced into letting their slaves go free, they are being introduced to the only true God, and given the chance to leave their idols behind and follow him.

But they won't. Or more specifically, Pharaoh won't. His heart is hardened. That's an interesting phrase, isn't it, especially since it is said three different ways: Pharaoh's heart was hardened, Pharaoh hardened his heart, and God hardened Pharaoh's heart. But, ultimately it all means the same thing: Pharaoh's stubbornness and pride and desire for power won't let him let go. Maybe you can think back to a time when you might have said later that your heart was hardened – maybe after an argument when you refused to give in or compromise, or someone wronged you and you just couldn't bring yourself to forgive them and let go of it, even if it ate away at you.

Today's text brings us to the last of the plagues, and the most horrifying. Egypt has basically been struck down at this point. Crops have been devoured and ruined by hail. Their livestock have died. The people are sick and darkness has covered the land, probably both literally and metaphorically. And still, Pharaoh won't give in, despite the pleas of his people and his officials. So God plans one last, terrible plague to strike them exactly where Pharaoh once struck Israel – their first-born. And while we can't dismiss the horror of the plague, today's reading asks us to push past the terror and our discomfort with it and look not just at this one moment, but at the whole purpose of God in the Exodus.

And actually, the verses assigned to us this morning really aren't a description of the plague. They serve two purposes. First, they are instructions for Israel's preparation for the plague. It outlines in detail the dinner they are to prepare for their last, hurried meal of lamb and bitter herbs in Egypt. But this is also the first-ever written religious education curriculum. Not only are they to do this now, to prepare for God to pass over them, they are to do the very same thing every year. God is giving them ritual so that they can retell the Passover story every year in order to teach their children what God

has done for them. The liturgy for the modern Seder meal is full of questions the children ask about the meal and the Exodus: why this night is different from all the other nights? Why do we eat this, and why do we drink that? What is the meaning of this meal?

It's really not so different from some of the rituals we have in the church. And yes, I know it sounds strange to talk about rituals in a Protestant church, but we do have them. Like the Christmas pageant. I have to confess that I didn't used to be a fan of the Christmas pageant. Ivory tower snobbery, I'm afraid. And as cheesy as those pageants can be, with pint-sized Herods and Gabriels who can't remember their lines and parents climbing all over each other snapping photographs, those kids grow up knowing the wonder of the story that the king of the universe loved us so much that he came down from heaven and was born in a stable, not a palace, to peasant parents, not royalty or multi-millionaires, and was welcomed by grubby shepherds and glorious angels alike. That story becomes a part of them.

And people who follow the discipline of walking all the way through Lent and Palm Sunday and Holy Week and Easter come away with a profound sense of the depth of Jesus' self-sacrifice, and their own gratitude and commitment to God.

And every time we gather at this table we tell the story of God's great love for us, that pursued us when we went after other gods and our own desires, and how on the very night that Jesus was betrayed by his own followers, he gave his own life for us; through a body broken, and blood poured out for us, we are justified by God.

And yes, even stewardship season, believe it or not, is a ritual that gives us the opportunity to tell our story. We don't just ask for your money so we can pay the staff and turn the heat on; we talk about what God has done for us, what God has given us, how much God has given us, and only then do we ask what a fitting response to God's goodness ought to be.

Why do we do all that? The pageants and the church seasons and the sacraments? Because it's important to remember. Not just the details of great stories about locusts and frogs and martyrs and miraculous escapes and empty tombs, but that we were once slaves, oppressed, captives, and that God set us free. We once served Pharaoh, and our wallets, and our desires, and our fears, and the expectations of others, and our prejudices, and our pride, but now we serve only God. Now we are free people. Nothing else binds us. Nothing else controls us. We are liberated.

But we can't ever forget those years in Egypt. We can't ever forget that we were captives; oppressed, beaten down, that we led bitter, bleak, desperate lives. We can't ever forget that it was God who led us out of Egypt. That it was God who freed us from sin. That it was God's body broken and blood shed, and God who gave us every single thing we have.

Why? To make us grateful, and to make us generous. To keep us from getting high and mighty, thinking we deserve the life we have. To keep us from oppressing people who are different, and who threaten us. To remind us that we serve God, and only God.

Testimony – that’s what we’d call it if we weren’t Presbyterian, but since we are, and since we live in East Tennessee, we’ll just say that it is telling our story – the story of how God bent down and saved us; from ourselves, from our less noble thoughts and desires, from the unkind hands or words of another, from physical danger, from poor choices, from neglect, from oppression. Every one of us has a story. Our story, that we tell together at Christmas and Easter and at the Table, and our own stories. Do you know your story? Do you know what God has set you free from, and just as importantly, what God has set you free for? I hope so. But knowing it isn’t enough. You have to tell it. Often. You need to hear it again, and again, and again, so you never forget what God has done.