

Plagues

Exodus 7:8 – 8:12

NARRATOR: The Lord said to Moses and Aaron,

LORD: “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Perform a wonder,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.’”

NARRATOR: So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as the Lord had commanded; Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron’s staff swallowed up theirs. Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. The Lord said to Moses,

LORD: “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’”

NARRATOR: Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river. Seven days passed after the Lord had struck the Nile.

NARRATOR: The Lord said to Moses,

LORD: “Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, the canals, and the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.’”

NARRATOR: So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and brought frogs up on the land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said,

PHARAOH: “Pray to the Lord to take away the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.”

MOSES: “Kindly tell me when I am to pray for you and for your officials and for your people, that the frogs may be removed from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile.”

PHARAOH: “Tomorrow.”

MOSES: “As you say! So that you may know that there is no one like the Lord our God, the frogs shall leave you and your houses and your officials and your people; they shall be left only in the Nile.”

NARRATOR: Then Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh; and Moses cried out to the Lord concerning the frogs that he had brought upon Pharaoh. And the Lord did as Moses requested: the frogs died in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. And they gathered them together in

heaps, and the land stank. But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

For the last several months our lives have orbited around two plagues. One is the virus—the microscopic germ—which has reshaped all of our lives. Our children are now learning through pixels and apps. Our loved ones in nursing homes are shut out from the outside world. Our church buildings and all the life which pulsed within these walls, for the time being, are only memories. It's life during a pandemic. Then there is the other plague which has also arrested our attention. After George Floyd gasped and pleaded for breath under the officer's knee, our hearts grew sensitized once again to the lethal plague of racism. We reflected and lamented. We even said this time feels different. And here we are months later, still in the midst of both plagues. For the virus we await on science and a vaccine to help us. But the second plague—racism—is going to require that *we become the vaccine*.

As we start, notice that in our bible story the plagues and the social justice revolution are knotted together. They are infused. And if we begin to think theologically about it, we might wonder if there is a similar co-relationship occurring today. Now I'm not saying God is responsible for the pandemic and all the precious lives that have been lost. But if we take the story of Pharaoh, Moses and the plagues and place it over what we are seeing today, we have to admit it fits. At a small town in Louisiana, after Hurricane Laura swept through with her category 4 winds. There was a confederate statue that was blown off its pedestal. There on the front lawn of the county courthouse, the confederate general had fallen on its side. The irony is: the town voted a few days earlier to keep the statue in the town square where it has always been. Well, not anymore! The timing is ironic. It might make us wonder if God's Spirit was vetoing their decision. Or perhaps it was merely a poetic coincidence. Whatever we think, the pandemic has lifted the veil exposing systemic injustices which are dependent on white supremacy. Just like in our story, perhaps the plague and the movement for liberation are dance partners.

Now shift focus and watch Pharaoh. Take careful notice to his reaction. Do you remember what he does? He doubles down. And the deeper into the plagues the more stubborn his heart becomes. As time goes on, he teeter totters, flip-flops; he even asks Moses to pray to God on his behalf. Except, Pharaoh keeps going back on his word—he lies and he keeps lying. Why? Because for Pharaoh it is about one thing: winning! He wants to remain in control even if it means his own people lose.

Watch what happens: Moses performs a sign and Pharaoh calls his magicians—the Magi—and they perform the same trick. So Moses touches the life source of the people's water supply and turns it to blood. And Pharaoh orders his magicians to perform the same until the Nile is a deeper crimson red. Then Aaron waves the staff as the frogs cover the landscape. But Pharaoh orders his magicians to do the same. Can we see what's going on? Pharaoh is so caught up in rivalry, so invested in winning, that instead of using his power to reverse the curse and to heal, he doubles

the plagues. And even after Moses performs miracles his magicians can't replicate, he keeps on lying.

Friends, it is a story out of today's news. Our president knew the dangers of the plague and, he more than downplayed it, he flat out lied. He knew what was happening, but he fabricated stories about how it was a liberal propaganda ploy to take him down; how it was a "hoax." Trump lied and 200,000 people are gone.

We were one of the last countries to get hit with the virus. We had the benefit of time. We have 4% of the world's population and 25% of global deaths. If we compared ourselves to other countries per capita we should have—at most!—1/10 of these numbers. This means 90-99% of these deaths could have been prevented. Our president can blame it on obesity or underlying conditions, but he knew the gravity of the plague; yet for the sake of economy and winning...he lied, and as a result the suffering has been multiplied. It is the same story from Egyptian times to ours: when Pharaohs lie, people die.

But here is where God's grace confronts all of us—including Pharaoh. At each plague moment we have a choice. At every turn in the story there is a choice: we can choose to change, to admit we were wrong, to tell the truth; or we can double down and grow hard and believe lies. When the NFL had their first game this week, they held a moment of unity against racism. The players from both teams locked elbows during a moment of silence. Except the solidarity was interrupted by some in the crowd booing, because one of the teams decided to protest by staying in the locker room during the national anthem.

We all get to choose how to respond: whether to act or not act; to stand up or sit down; to speak out or remain silent; to choose healing or hardness.

I saw a short four-minute-film where a young black child—about six-years-old—walks into a doctor's office by himself. Concerned, the receptionist at the front desk asks him where his parents are. The child says nothing, his face is simply downcast and looking at the floor. The receptionist waves the doctor over, who is a Black man, to consult the little guy. The doctor approaches him with his long white coat and stethoscope, gets down at the child's level and says, "What's up little man?"

The child points at his stomach and asks, "Can you help me take this off?" "Let's see what you got," the doctor replied.

So the child lifts up his shirt and there on his little belly is a...bullseye.

As the room falls silent, the doctor just looks at the child and confesses, "that...that won't come off."

You can see the magic of the child's youth drains from his body, as it becomes the moment he realizes he will always be a high-risk target of racism's plague.

And the doctor is right, the bullseye is not coming off. Not after COVID. Not after the election.

Unless.

Unless we who are white choose to become the vaccine.

May we decide to inject the grace of God's healing, peace and justice into our world until the plagues are wiped away and all of us are free. Amen.