

Stiff Hearts and Prophetic Voices

Exodus 5:1-6:1

Narrator: The Lord said to Moses in Midian,

God: “Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead.”

Narrator: So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses carried the staff of God in his hand. And the Lord said to Moses, **God:**

“When you go back to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have put in your power; but I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go...

Narrator: Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said,

Moses: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’”

Narrator: But Pharaoh said,

Pharaoh: “Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.”

Aaron: “The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, or God will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.”

Narrator: But the king of Egypt said to them,

Pharaoh: “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors! Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!”

Narrator: That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors,

Pharaoh: “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. ⁸ But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’ ⁹ Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.”

Narrator: So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying,

Taskmaster: “Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.”

Narrator: And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and were asked,

Taskmaster: “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?”

Narrator: Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried,

Supervisors: “Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people.”

Pharaoh: “You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.’ Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.”

Narrator: As they left Pharaoh, they came upon Moses and Aaron who were waiting to meet them. They said to them,

Supervisors: “The Lord look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

Narrator: Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said,

Moses: “O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? ²³ Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.”

Narrator: Then the Lord said to Moses,

God: “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.”

Holy wisdom, holy word.

Thanks be to God!

There has been an argument in our denomination for years around whether or not we should continue to invest in fossil fuels. Listen to the discourse on the debate floor of our General Assembly and hear some say that we must remain invested because it gives us a place at the table to influence these companies to make some changes. The problem is, we’ve had a place at their table for decades. We’ve named our concerns and convictions, but there has been little, if any, change. The truth is, we as a denomination have been more committed to being chaplains to the empire, rather than prophets who speak God’s demands boldly with our faith and our finances.

For a moment, think about the contrast between a chaplain and a prophet. A chaplain: someone who remains in relationship with the power structure, hoping our hand holding ministry will eventually influence people onto our side. And then there’s the prophet: someone who walks into the belly of the beast and says, “Enough, it is time to let my people go.” If we were to ask ourselves how the white American church has typically functioned how would we answer? If we asked ourselves what we have traditionally expected our ministers and faith leaders to be—chaplains or prophets (or both?)—what would we say? Wonder, what is God calling us to be today?

So now look at Moses. He is called the great prophet of Israel. And to be honest, for the longest time I had no idea why Moses was even called a prophet. After all, he is not an orator like Dr. King. His voice doesn’t ring through the air like Rev. William Barber’s. He doesn’t have the spunk of an Angela Davis. But he is named Israel’s greatest prophet because he walks into the gut of the empire and says, “What is happening is not right! And God has some demands!” That’s what makes him a prophet. Come to think of it: some of you have prophetically walked into the heart of power structures and said, “No, what you’re doing isn’t right!” You have challenged physical force with soul force. You’ve used your voices and gifts and dollars to challenge what isn’t right. It’s what makes Moses a prophet and perhaps it is what makes us prophets as well.

But notice how Pharaoh responds: he basically says, “Meh. Never heard of this God.” So not only does he reject Moses’ request, but he makes life harder on the Israelites to make sure they don’t get any funny ideas about catching the word of a revolution. Watch what Pharaoh does: he calls the Israelite supervisors, who are in charge of swaths of Israelite slaves, into his office and says, “The Israelites never had it so good. The only reason they want to leave is because they are

lazy!” He increases their workload, and then when the Israelite supervisors can’t make them work any harder, Pharaoh punishes them too! You can see his manipulation on Twitter now: “No one has done more for the Israelites than I have. And now they have the nerve to complain! Let’s teach these lazy people a little something about work ethic!”

Friends, this is what oppressive systems do: they blame the oppressed for their own oppression while making it impossible for them to escape it. The oppressor turns oppressed groups against each other; it takes away employment opportunities; under resources their schools; redlines their neighborhoods; provides a lack of transportation; makes them work harder for unlivable wages; starves them out with food deserts; tries to keep them out of the suburbs and other affluent areas; then makes it more difficult for these communities to vote; all while gaslighting them into believing they are responsible for their own oppression. So it is no wonder that at the first sign of non-compliance, Pharaoh makes them pay.

I heard an interview with a woman who married an undocumented immigrant who was waiting to get his green card. After COVID caused her to lose her job she kept checking the mailbox for her stimulus check. She waited and waited, but it never came. Finally, she got on the phone and called them. She was told that any citizen who marries an undocumented immigrant was not eligible to receive the stimulus check. She was being punished. We are rewarded when we play by the system’s rules and we are punished when we don’t. It is how oppressive regimes operate.

Of course, Moses quickly learns the path to liberation is an uphill climb. Perhaps at first Moses was naïve. He thought he could wave his godly staff and suddenly Pharaoh’s heart would soften and his eyes would open to the suffering he has caused. And maybe he would say, “Oh, Moses how foolish I’ve been. I turned people into commodities for the sake of the economy. I’ve been a real jerk.” But, we know that’s not the way it works. Sometimes there is a hardness that can’t be penetrated. Not even with rationality or science or reason. Perhaps not even with love.

Our bible says God stiffens Pharaoh’s heart. In the Hebrew there are three words used to describe the state of Pharaoh’s heart. The word mentioned here, means to accentuate or to magnify what is already in his heart and mind: stubbornness, shrewdness, the inability to be unimpacted by reason or empathy. And it seems that in the midst of COVID-19, and protests, and doubling down on political ideologies, there is a magnifying hardness in all of our hearts. I have bumped into quite a few stiff hearts these days, including my own.

But here is the interesting thing: the word used for Pharaoh’s heart is also used in other places to describe God’s heart. A heart which becomes accentuated and magnified for love and justice. A heart which will not give up until those who are suffering under the weight of injustice are set free. God’s unswerving, unwavering heart. A heart which cares more about freeing the oppressed, than it does about making sure the oppressor’s feelings aren’t offended.

When I listen to some of you describe how you’re feeling these days I hear words like, “stressed, anxious, exhausted, angry.” These are my feelings too. You should know: my initial impulse is to comfort you and tell you everything is going to be okay and that God will provide—and part of me believes it is true: it will eventually be okay and God will provide. And while we manage, or barely manage, all the chaos around us, another part of me wonders if the feelings we are

feeling, are also the feelings of a people who are more like prophets than we realize. Feelings of weariness and self-uncertainty and wrestling with God. Feelings of struggling to keep our hearts kind and compassionate while also being firm and unwavering. Feelings of heartbreak and exhaustion when someone tells us we are too radical, or divisive, or that faith has nothing to do with politics. Again, an empire of oppression always prefers a hand holding chaplain to a truth-telling prophet.

It has been said the civil rights movement of our time is happening right now. We are in the midst of the struggle right now. So church, in the midst of the feelings we are feeling, I offer you this blessing: keep your hearts soft, but also firm in love and justice. Let God's song get stuck in your heads and pump through your arteries. Keep feeling the feelings, trusting they are part of this calling.

For God's promise is within us—beating through the veins of the prophets who walk into the heart of the empire, naming God's demands and then doing what is necessary to make them a reality. Amen.