

**17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost 2008; Proper 18A**

Exodus 12:1-14; Ps. 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matt. 18:15-20

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As we move through the Bible hearing the big stories of the Old Testament as given in the Revised Common Lectionary, we transitioned last week from the first to the second book of the Bible, from Genesis to Exodus, with the story of Moses, God, and the burning bush. A reluctant Moses accepted God's assignment to be Yahweh's instrument in liberating the children of Israel from the oppressive hand of the Egyptians. Moses had been unassumedly tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, in the land of Midian. Now, he was to pack up his family and belongings, journey back to Egypt, and inform the elders of Israel that God had heard the cries of his people and would indeed set them free.

As you probably know, this process of liberation was not as easy as it may have first sounded. Miracles and wonders were performed as a series of plagues were inflicted on the Egyptians in an effort to get the Pharaoh to relent and to let God's people go. Our OT lesson today has leapfrogged from God's calling of Moses at the burning bush all the way to the 10<sup>th</sup> and final plague, skipping much of the drama and suspense of this great story – that of the Nile turning to blood, the frogs, gnats, flies, death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness.

I'd like to read a small portion of the plagues story from a translation by Hebrew scholar Everett Fox that attempts to reflect the rhetoric, the rhythm, and in some cases more direct translation of the original Hebrew language. In this drama of the plagues, each scene is generally characterized by four parts: First, Yahweh coaches Moses on what he is to do to convince Pharaoh; the next part is indicated by the often-repeated demand, "Send free my people, that they may serve me!"; next, there is the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart; and finally, the unleashing of each plague...

This brings us to today's lesson and to the leading edge of the climax of this great liberation story, which is not only foundational to the Jewish faith tradition, but it's a story that many other peoples who have suffered abuse, like that of African Americans in this country, have incorporated into their own narratives.

In this process of liberation in the book of *Exodus*, a new and decisive element is introduced into the Hebrew Bible. It tells of a God who, using human agents, acts directly in history – a God who promises, liberates and guides the people. We got a taste of this God in the

story of Noah and the Great Flood, but mostly in the book of Genesis we see a God who works his will in the background, through intra-family affairs and conflicts. In the book of *Exodus* God frees his people, not covertly but head on by taking on Egypt's rulers and gods.

The plagues themselves, besides acting as agents of drama and suspense, have generated much interest among theologians and scientists alike. Although I'm not one to seek scientific explanations for Bible stories, I think it is interesting to do so with the plague scenarios, because of their ecological relationships. Old Testament Scholar Terence Fretheim, in fact, describes the plagues as "ecological signs of historical disasters."

In the first plague, for example: *Moses struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was turned into blood. The fish died and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians couldn't drink its water.*

We've all heard of red tides, and perhaps we've seen flooded rivers so loaded with red silt or clay that they appeared blood red. Whereas red tides don't occur in flowing rivers, red algae could certainly bloom in the Nile Delta, an estuary environment, particularly during the hot Egyptian summer when floodwaters carried nutrient-rich soil – just the right combination for a toxic red algae bloom.

Which, of course, would lead to the second plague: an invasion of frogs. The plague of frogs would be a natural consequence of the mass die-off of the fish: the decaying fish would pollute the waters of the Nile, forcing the frogs ashore in search of the insects to eat.

After the plague of frogs came a swarm of gnats, and then flies. The mass die-off of fish and the decaying bodies of the frogs that would have died of starvation and dehydration, were followed not surprisingly, by swarms of gnats and flies. Because their natural predators, frogs and toads, had suffered a mass population collapse, the gnats and flies were free to breed unhindered, producing exponentially, growing into swarms and ruining the land.

The horrors continue to worsen in the fifth plague, the death of the livestock. This could have been caused by a number of viruses spread by fly, midge and mosquito larvae that would have proliferated after feeding on the decaying flesh of the dead fish and frogs.

And then the sixth plague: boils. Unlike the fifth plague, which affected only certain animals, this plague of boils afflicted both animals and humans. There are a variety of possible causes of boils and sores on the skin, one very plausible one being bites from the hordes of flies, gnats and mosquitoes.

Pharaoh's heart is still hardened, and so comes the 7<sup>th</sup> plague: darkness. Violent hailstorms in the Middle East, with hail diameters exceeding 5 inches and piling on the ground several inches thick, killing humans, animals, crops.

And then came the locusts. You've probably heard about plagues of locusts devastating crops in Africa, Central Asia or even the Midwestern U.S. Interestingly, at least some species of locusts need damp sand in which to lay their eggs. After the hail and rain stopped, when the ground was still wet, the locusts being brought in by an east wind would have found perfect conditions for laying their eggs. And thus followed the plague of locusts.

And then came the darkness. Sandstorms in the Middle East are not uncommon. They can be quite intense, actually blotting out the sun, lasting for three or four days, and leaving sand piled up like wind-driven snow. The first of the sandstorms each year in Egypt normally occurs in March. This first dust storm of the year often produces a particularly dense and dark dust cloud, because all the red earth deposited by the Nile floodwaters has dried out and is whirled up into the air. The ninth plague could have easily resulted from a particularly heavy Nile flooding six months earlier – the one that initiated the plagues.

Finally we move to the culminating 10<sup>th</sup> plague, the death of Egypt's firstborn. Even this horrendous occurrence could have had a natural cause: eating contaminated grain. Certain poisonous fungi that grows on organic substances like crops and thrives in damp conditions, when eaten, causes internal bleeding. In a food-scarce environment, first-born sons would have been fed first and would have died almost instantly.

Even with an ecological understanding of how the plagues could have occurred, you might be asking, "How could the Israelites have been left unaffected by the plagues?" Well, the Israelites didn't live in the Nile Delta but in Goshen, an area away from the prime property next to the waters of the Nile. The nature of most of the plagues could have had them localized to an area very near the Nile.

This may seem to be carrying things a bit too far. Why do we need a scientific explanation for our religious stories, anyway? Perhaps we don't, but hearing the science and the ecology makes the story more relevant to our own times. Made me think of the classic wildlife management scenario that I learned studying for my first career. Every seven years or so the snowshoe hare population in the Northeast grows to such a high level that they decimate the young willow shoots, their primary food source. The following year the snowshoe hare

population plummets because of starvation. And the next year the lynx population does the same, because of the loss of the lynx primary food source, the snowshoe hare. With the hare population way down, the willows are given the opportunity to regenerate, gradually bringing up the numbers of snowshoe hare and then lynx.

Nothing remains static in nature, and there are some pretty dramatic natural fluctuations from which nature can rebound. We've seen this in the aftermath of the Mt. St. Helen's eruption and Yellowstone fires. Anthropomorphic influences can be so catastrophic or chronic, though, that species are decimated to the point that they will never return to healthy levels.

The extinction of species has happened at warp speed in our time. And there is no greater example of global ecological interactions than those illustrated by the multitudinous interwoven effects that are resulting now from human-induced global climate change.

Let's focus now for a moment on human ecology and address two difficult themes in our today's lesson of the plagues: the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the death of Egypt's firstborn.

Like me, some of you probably experienced difficulty hearing of God's action in the plague stories of hardening Pharaoh's heart. If we read the story closely we see that before the sixth plague it is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart. Pharaoh's obstinence results from his own willful resistance to God's desire for Israel's freedom. God becomes the hardener of Pharaoh's heart only as an intensification of the Pharaoh's own character.

Everett Fox says it well, "When one notes the pattern within – that Pharaoh does the hardening at the beginning, God at the end – the intent begins to become clear. The Plague Narrative is a recounting of God's power, and Pharaoh's stubbornness, which starts out as a matter of will, eventually becomes impossible to revoke. The model is psychologically compelling: Pharaoh becomes trapped by his own refusal to accept the obvious. Despite the prophetic idea that human beings can be forgiven, we find here another one – that evil leads to more evil, and can become petrified and unmovable."

The story of the final plague, the death of Egypt's firstborn, is the tragic, final act of struggle between Yahweh and Pharaoh, and it is understood in *Exodus* as the ironic, perhaps inevitable, boomerang effect of Pharaoh's own deadly intent toward Israel. Pharaoh had commanded the death of all firstborn Israelite sons as an ongoing genocidal policy. God refers to all Israel as God's own firstborn and declares the death of Egypt's firstborn as the penalty for

Pharaoh's crime. Pharaoh has set in motion the violence that finally takes the sons of oppressed and oppressor alike. We can look at the wars of our own time to see this terrible truth.

Oppression costs its victims and beneficiaries alike.

As Nelson Mandela so eloquently stated after his almost three decades in prison in South Africa ...

*It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.*

So, where do we fit in all of this? Probably, like Moses, most of us embody both the oppressor and the oppressed. Just being citizens of this country, we live within webs of unjust systems – systems of privilege. Like Moses, though, we are given the opportunity to be agents of God, agents of goodness, in the world. Opportunities that can be dangerous and difficult. In Moses' time the fate of his people were at stake. In ours, it may be the fate of all Creation.

#### SOURCES:

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