

A sermon in the Unraveled series
When Humans Unravel what God Plans for Justice:
Pharaoh hardens his heart
Exodus 5:1-2, 7: 8-23
Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St. Helens, Oregon
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Here's some facts you should know about me: I didn't grow up with the Bible. Of course we had a Bible in the house, but no one read it. I grew up in a tradition where we left scripture reading to the religious professionals, and allow them to tell us what was what. And they did! I grew up with a love for Jesus, and intrigued by the Holy Spirit, and a conviction that God loved me—which is a lot, so I'm grateful. My view of God was that of seeing God as an aging man with a white beard, who regularly caught me breaking some rule.

But I didn't memorize Bible verses as a little kid. I didn't study Bible facts. I didn't learn to recite all the books of the Bible in order, or even the Ten Commandments in Vacation Bible School. I didn't learn about the Ten Plagues of Egypt.

So, when I was planning to preach this sermon, I read this passage from Exodus, and thought, "Oh. That plague. The plague of turning the Nile River to blood. That's a bad one."

And what escaped me entirely was the fact that this is the *first* plague. This is God, right out of the gate, all up in Pharaoh's face, saying, "You want a piece of my people? Take THIS." And the Nile River turns to blood.

And I'll admit it. I'm shocked.

I'm shocked by God. I would have expected God to start small, with the plagues, maybe start with the flies—buzzing around, annoying, maddening, even—and then stinging insects, and later locusts to eat all the food up, later to build up to this one. Because this is bad. Really bad. God has turned the river to blood. People, know this, with each plague, God unravels each of Pharaoh's gods and Egypt's gods.

For a brief re-cap: Moses has grown up. He has left Egypt and met Zipporah, daughter of the Priest of Midian, and gotten married. He's been herding her father's flocks. And he's had an astonishing encounter in the wilderness, and encounter with God, Godself, during which God spoke to him out of the flames of some shrubbery, which was on fire, but did not burn up. And in that encounter God has instructed Moses to return to Egypt, because, in the face of Pharaoh's despicable behavior, his ongoing determination to keep God's people in chains, God is conscripting Moses to be the Divine Spokesperson. To go right up to Pharaoh, and to say, on God's behalf with hands on hips, "GOD TOLD ME TO TELL YOU, 'LET MY PEOPLE GO!'"

And that's where we come into the story today—Moses, with his brother and wingman Aaron, goes to Pharaoh, and does just that. And—just to let Pharaoh know what he's dealing with, Moses takes God's advice and shows Pharaoh just the tiniest glimpse of God's power, turning Moses' staff into a snake.

Pharaoh's not impressed. He has court magicians, they can do that kind of thing too. They promptly turn staffs into snakes (though—they probably look a little sick to their stomachs when Moses' snake eats up all their snakes).

Anyway, Pharaoh stands warned. And his heart is hardened... Pharaoh knows what he wants. What he wants is its people in chains, people without rights, people treated as animals.

Why is his heart hardened? Is it power? Is it wealth? All we know—at this point, anyway—is that his heart will not soften. The answer is no.

So Moses unleashes the first in a series of ten plagues on him.

And it's this one: Moses throws his staff in the Nile River, and all the water in the river is turned to blood. The fish die. The water becomes undrinkable. The water, now blood, reeks in the noon day sun.

In the world of sand and sun, water is life. That is what makes this plague so shocking. To make water undrinkable is to put a stop on the essential ingredient to all life—the water the people drink, from childhood to adulthood to elderhood, that makes possible the functioning of their bodies; the water plants need, in order for crops to grow, for life to be sustained; the water animals need to survive. Water is life. To turn the Nile into blood feels as if God starts out BIG—with the worst plague imaginable. (Which, eventually we learn, it's not.)

Does God have a strategy here—kind of a, “go big or go home” opening statement? Perhaps a “show your big moves in hopes no further action will be necessary” approach? I wonder.

Because, despite the fact that his people are digging in the dirt by the banks of the Nile River in a desperate search for any drinkable drop, despite the fact that every fish in the Nile is belly up, despite the stink and the horror of it... Pharaoh's heart remains hardened.

Pharaoh will not be moved—though no one can survive without water for long.

Pharaoh will not budge—though the people he's supposed to care for are suffering.

Pharaoh will not change—though the power of the God of Israel confronts him with this dreadful sight.

And that's where our passage ends: with Pharaoh unraveling God's plans for justice and restoration. With Moses' plans unraveling, too.

We have pharaohs all around us, my friends. If I asked you to close your eyes and then I went back and described this pharaoh again, you could probably very easily visualize some characters in our current world.

And those pharaohs do need to be called out. Those pharaohs must be challenged and reminded of God's mandate for justice and righteousness. Those pharaohs' palaces must be approached, as did Moses and Aaron, to deliver truth to power.

However, we can't afford to merely focus on the pharaohs that live “out there.” We must simultaneously attend to the pharaohs within us. How might we be called to soften our hearts to the needs of those around us? How might we soften our hearts so that we might be attentive to and honest about the ways the smallest of decisions that we make affect others?

Because the pharaohs around us, the ones that sit in the seats of power, did not arrive there by mere happenstance; we put them there. We elected them. We emboldened them either by what we have done or what we have chosen not to do; by what we have said and what we have chosen not to say, when others around us are suffering. We, the Church universal, are not free of blame.

So, as Christians in this trying time, as Christians who have sometimes chosen convenience over justice, we have a choice to make. We can make the choice to soften our hearts to the cries of those around us, the cries of the Rizpahs around us, the cries of the immigrants who are scared to answer their door when ICE comes knocking today, the cries of parents right here in St. Helens/Warren/Scappouse who can't afford medicine for their children because prescription drug prices are so absurdly high.

We can soften our hearts or we can dig in our heels like pharaoh refuse to accept responsibility for our greed. And today's story reminds us this gruesome truth: when hearts are hardened, plagues will come.

So, we must soften our hearts. We must name and claim them. We must challenge both the pharaohs around us and the pharaohs within us. A hard heart cannot be molded into the heart of God. But a soft one can be shaped into a heart that inspires us to be truth-telling in the face of lies, courageous in the face of pharaoh, and resilient in a sea of suffering.

And—let's be honest. This kind of impasse seems to describe much of history. God creating human beings for one kind of existence, and humans, being human, going off on another path entirely. Humans choosing the path that will bring the most pain, the most harm, the most devastation.

This is the moment when so many of us lose heart, lose hope. This is the moment so many of our “unraveling” stories have pointed to... Job, with his many terrible losses; the exiles, in what feels like a

hopelessly foreign land and life; Peter, filled with uncertainty and falling into the deep.

Yet here, in fragile moments like these, God always chooses to weave us back together. God always chooses to help us out of the abyss. God always shows us the path to life.

And there can be a point when we can't see the path, when the pattern of God's design is obscured to us. But we know the end of this story. This story returns to water, and in the stories of God's people, water is life. *Water is the material of miracles.* And God's promise in this story is that the water will return, and renew, and refresh. Not only that, God will use the water as the vehicle for deliverance: what was turned into a symbol for death will once again bring life.

That is God's ongoing promise. You can say, God is always re-forming us, making us ready for such moments. In the presence of uncertainty, or loss, or even abject evil, God invites us to hope for what is beyond this moment.

- Beyond what we see now: Life.
- Beyond the news update at the top of the hour: Hope.
- Beyond the hardship, and the loss, and the frustration: Peace.

It is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. It is the living faith that trusts in the God who will weave us back together into something more beautiful than we can imagine. We wait for it. God loves us so much to not leave us where we were. God loves us so much when we come unraveled, we are not left as we were. We hope in it. We trust in it. Thanks be to God.