



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Who is the Lord?

Exodus 5:1-6:1

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As we looked at Exodus 4 last Sunday, we were reminded of the covenantal relationship we have with God. Through our union with Jesus the Messiah, we are his people—his sons and daughters. That says something about the Lord's commitment to his people. As he promised to Moses: He will be with us. Jesus is the fulfilment and culmination of that promise. He is "Emmanuel", literally "God with us". The Father gave his Son, not just to be born one of us, but to die and rise again for our sake. God is committed to us. But the same covenantal relationship also highlights our obligations to the Lord. He didn't deliver the Israelites from Egypt just because he doesn't like oppression or just so that they'd be free. Freedom is not an end in itself. The Lord said to Moses that he was going to deliver his people *so that* they could serve him. That's what we were created to do in the first place. It's the vocation we rejected. But it's the vocation the Lord redeems us to fulfil. So Jesus doesn't just die so that our sins can be forgiven. He also fills us with God's Spirit, to make our hearts new so that we can live the life of God. It's the beginning of new creation and it gives us hope so that we can live in faith that one day the Lord will complete what he has begun.

But that's where we so often run into a problem. We have God's promises of new creation, but we don't see them fulfilled. Think, for example, how many times the Psalmist cried out to God—just as the Israelites had—“How long?” “My enemies are out to get me!” “The wicked prosper and oppress the righteous!” “The waters are up to my neck! Help me, O Lord!”

And it wasn't just an Old Testament problem. Jesus said, “Blessed are you when you are persecuted for the sake of my name.” He said things like, “The servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they *will* persecute you.” In Acts we read of the martyrdom of Stephen and all the abuse that Paul received, all for proclaiming the good news about Jesus. In Revelation, we see the great host of early church martyrs. They live in the presence of God, but they are martyrs nonetheless. We have a promise, but so often it seems as though God is absent. I think what we read in Exodus 5 speaks to this. You'll remember that in Chapter 4, Moses and Aaron made their way back to Egypt. They met with the Israelite elders. Aaron told them all that the Lord had said and Moses performed the signs the Lord had given him and, the narrator says, “the people believed”. They recognised that the Lord had heard their cries, that he had come to deliver them, and they worshiped. Now look at 5:1.

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’”

So Moses has gone from “They won't believe me and they won't listen to me” to speaking and doing signs for the Lord and then being positively received by his people. He had been sceptical and now he's riding high. The text doesn't say how he and Aaron managed to get an audience with Pharaoh. The text almost gives the sense that they marched right into the palace. However they got into see Pharaoh, they approach him with confidence. God had turned the hearts of the Israelites; now he's going to turn the heart of Pharaoh. Aaron announces: “The Lord, the God of Israel says, ‘Let my people go!’” Despite the warnings the Lord had given them, telling them that Pharaoh wasn't just going to say yes right away, it seems like that is what they

were expecting. But that's not what happens:

But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.” (Exodus 5:2)

Pharaoh shuts them down. “Pfft. The “Lord”? I don't know him. He has no power in Egypt. No, the Israelites will stay right where they are.” It's a brush-off. A “You're wasting my time”. Now it's not that Pharaoh didn't know *who* the Lord was. He knew the Israelites had their own god. It's that he doesn't care. He and his gods were more powerful. If the Lord were really all that great, he wouldn't have let his people fall into bondage.

This deflates Moses and Aaron. They went in with confidence, knowing it was the will of the Lord to deliver the Israelites. The Lord would speak and Pharaoh would cower and obey. How often has that happened to you? Okay...so not before a mighty king, but how often do we go into something confident that the Lord will make it happen because we know it's what he wants? I'll tell So-and-so about Jesus and he'll believe. I'll confront So-and-so about his sin and he'll repent in dust and ashes. I'll start a church to reach out to lost people and it will spark a revival. I'll move to Courtenay and preach the gospel and God's kingdom will grow and grow. Whatever it is. We'll do it and God will cause it to bear fruit because it's what he wants. But we people instead respond: “No, I don't think so.” “Jesus? I don't know him.” “Did you just call me a sinner? Hey, judge not!” It doesn't happen. It's easy to get discouraged. It's easy to give up. And yet Pharaoh's words here highlight *why* God is allowing things to happen this way. Pharaoh does not know the Lord. Pharaoh's refusal becomes the opportunity for the Lord to act and, when all this is done, not only will Pharaoh know the Lord, the whole world will know the Lord, the God of Israel.

But at this point, Moses and Aaron are deflated and reduced to begging:

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.” (Exodus 5:3)

“Please,” they plead. “The God of the Hebrews has met with us.” It’s interesting that they switch from “the Lord, the God of Israel” to “the God of the Hebrews”. “Hebrews” was Pharaoh’s name for the people, not the Lord’s. “Please let us go or he’ll punish us and, well, that’ll be bad for you, because if the Lord wipes us out, you’ll lose more than three days of our labour.”

As I’ve been poring over this passage, it strikes me that the reason for putting things in terms of a three-day journey may have been more than a negotiating tactic. Pharaoh understood Moses to be saying that the Israelite’s would return after going out to the wilderness to worship. When he does finally give in, Pharaoh sends them out, but then goes out after them with the army—not so much because he changed his mind, but because they didn’t come back after three days as he had expected. The Lord will show his mighty hand to Pharaoh and to Egypt, but that’s not enough. Pharaoh’s army must be destroyed, too, and this gives that opportunity. But at this point, Pharaoh’s having none of it. These people belong to him, not to the Lord. Look at his response in 5:4-9.

But the king of Egypt said to them, “Moses and Aaron, why do you take the people away from their work? Get back to your burdens.” And Pharaoh said, “Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!” The same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the

people and their foremen, “You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as in the past; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. Therefore they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’ Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.”

Pharaoh’s no dummy. What he does here is intended to drive a wedge between Moses and his people. It also gives us a sense of Pharaoh’s power. Moses and Aaron speak for the Lord, but Pharaoh not only dismisses them, he responds by heaping even more heavy labour on these “peasants”. That’s the sense of that phrase “people of the land”. And, notice, everyone obeys. Pharaoh’s taskmasters receive the command, they pass it down through the bureaucracy to the Israelite foremen, and they pass it down to the workers. And no one questions it. Everyone just does what mighty Pharaoh commands. The Israelites were tasked with making bricks. They used mud and silt dredged from the Nile, but they needed something to hold the mud together. Up to this point, the Egyptians have been providing the straw. Now Pharaoh commands that they’ll have to gather the straw themselves—gathering windblown stubble is the sense of the word—and they’ll still have to meet the same quota. Look at verses 10-14:

So the taskmasters and the foremen of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh, ‘I will not give you straw. Go and get your straw yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced in the least.’” So the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, your daily task each day, as

when there was straw.” And the foremen of the people of Israel, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten and were asked, “Why have you not done all your task of making bricks today and yesterday, as in the past?”

This is not how Moses and Aaron saw things going when they marched confidently into Pharaoh’s presence that day. Pharaoh will not be moved. Moses is no match for him. When Pharaoh speaks, even the Israelites obey—or least they try to. Is the Lord absent? Is he forgetting his promises? Not at all. As so often happens, the Lord gives Pharaoh enough rope to hang himself. He allows Pharaoh to rise to his full height, but will then reveal that mighty Pharaoh is a man of straw in comparison to the Lord.

Like so many oppressors, Pharaoh knew how to drive a wedge into the unity of the people. It’s the Israelite foremen who end up being beaten when the people aren’t able to meet their quota. They go to Pharaoh:

Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, “Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ And behold, your servants are beaten; but the fault is in your own people.” (Exodus 5:15-16)

Why are you beating us? It’s not even the fault of our people that they’re not meeting the quota! *Your* people aren’t giving them the straw they need. And Pharaoh says,

“You are idle, you are idle; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.’ Go now and work. No straw will be given you, but you must still deliver the same number of bricks.” (Exodus 5:17-18)

“Get back to work, you lazy bums! If you’ve got time to come and bug me about things that are never going to happen, you’ve got too much time on

your hands!” But, of course, Pharaoh’s real purpose is to drive a wedge between Moses and the people. Moses and Aaron had gone with the foremen and were waiting outside. None of this was going as planned—at least as far as they were concerned. Maybe Pharaoh would listen to the foremen. But he didn’t and now they emerge from the palace angry with Moses. Look at verses 19-21:

The foremen of the people of Israel saw that they were in trouble when they said, “You shall by no means reduce your number of bricks, your daily task each day.” They met Moses and Aaron, who were waiting for them, as they came out from Pharaoh; and they said to them, “The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

“Look what you’ve done, Moses!” they shout at him. You came to us with all this talk of the Lord. You did some tricks. We trusted you. And now we’re worse off than before! You’ve made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh.” Of course, they stank in the sight of Pharaoh before. And they call down the judgement of the Lord on Moses even though it was the Lord who had performed the signs that had convinced them and moved them to worship. It’s remarkable how quickly the Israelites have gone from worshipping the Lord to cursing Moses. This is a right mess!

But the Israelites aren’t the only ones angry with how things have played out. Look at verses 22-23:

Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all.”

The Lord made a promise and Moses worshipped. Moses went and spoke the word of the Lord to the people and performed his signs and they worshipped. But as far as they can tell, the Lord hasn’t made good on his promise. They get angry with Moses and now Moses turns in anger to the Lord. “You sent me to Pharaoh to declare your word and to deliver the people, but the opposite has happened!” It’s remarkable how we so often only hear the things we want to hear. The Lord had said that Pharaoh’s heart would be hardened, but all Moses and the Israelites heard was deliverance and the way they heard is was “Deliverance *right now!*” But that’s not how the Lord works. In everything he does, the Lord’s motive is not simply to act, but to make himself known, whether that’s in blessing or judgment. Moses and the Israelites don’t understand that yet. And so, in 6:1, the Lord graciously responds to Moses’ angry rant.

But the LORD said to Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land.”

If Pharaoh had simply said, “Okay, you can all go,” the Lord’s power would never have been made known. Pharaoh and the Egyptians would never have been held accountable for their wickedness. And the nations and peoples of the world would know nothing of the might of the Lord. No, the Lord had to provoke Pharaoh to rise up to his full height so that he could then judge Pharaoh and reveal just how puny and powerless he and his gods really were. On account of the Lord’s strong hand, Pharaoh will be moved to use his authority to send them out. In fact, once Pharaoh has seen the might of the Lord, he will make an about face and declare that the Israelites must leave Egypt.

At the time, neither Moses and Aaron, nor the Israelites grasped this. They

had God’s promise before them and *assumed* that God was going to work a certain way. They assumed that their deliverance from Egypt would be an easy thing. It’s particularly interesting that the Lord had even warned Moses that Pharaoh wasn’t going to release them quickly or easily. But Moses seems to have tuned that part out or forgotten it. Time after time in the Old Testament we see God working this way. In God’s providence, evil people are repeatedly permitted to oppress his own people—his sons and daughters—and deliverance comes neither quickly nor easily. Often it comes at great cost. And each time we see with hindsight that through it all the Lord made himself known. Wickedness, rebellion, and idolatry are exposed and judged. God’s people are disciplined in the process, repent, and return to faithful service—at least until the next time. And the glory of the Lord is made known as he judges the wicked and vindicates the righteous.

This pattern that weaves its way through the Old Testament leads us straight to the Cross. In the culmination of Israel’s story, God himself is born one of his own people, to be their representative. Evil rises to the occasion. Like Pharaoh, but much worse this time, at the Cross, evil rises to its full height and exercises its full power to strike down God himself and the representative of his people. Jesus died. Evil rejoiced. God’s people mourned. The worst had happened. God had lost the battle. And then on the third day God acted. He raised Jesus from the dead. Life and new creation burst from the grave. God vindicated himself, his Son, and his people. And it sent a shockwave through a world that has never been the same and never will be. But to win the victory, God had to let Evil do its worst, Jesus had to die, the world had to be plunged into darkness for three day.

As Easter people we should know this full well. The Church even reinforces

it in our life every year. We don't just show up on Easter Sunday to celebrate. To get to the joy of Easter the Church leads us through the penitential season of Lent. We walk through Holy Week and recall the story of God's great act of redemption, from his triumphal entry, to his last supper and betrayal, to his brutal beatings and his crucifixion, to those three dark days when he lay dead in the tomb. *After* that the joy of Easter breaks, the victory of God hits us with all its power. The same happens each week as we come to the Lord's Table. Here our faith-filled hope is restored as God reminds us of his promises of life and new creation, but the bread and wine first take us back to the cross and to the sacrifice of Jesus that has made new creation possible. Brothers and Sisters, God's deliverance does not come easily.

We need to remember that when we're tempted to become discouraged when there seems to be no response to our gospel proclamation, when we try to bring the gospel to bear on our relationships and things only get worse, when we try to bring the gospel to bear on our national life and face rejection for our efforts. We need to patiently wait on the Lord's timing. We need to remember that when he acts, he acts to make himself known. And we also need to remember that Lord brings both blessing *and* judgement. We pray and pray and expect revival, but history shows that while a remnant of the faithful will always remain, when God deals with a wicked people like our own, it is often in judgement that he comes—just as it was with Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

We also need to remember that it is the Lord who accomplishes the work, not us. Moses went into Pharaoh's presence confident in the Lord, but when Pharaoh said "No", Moses turned to pleading and begging. Christians too often make the same mistake when the Lord doesn't seem to be answering our prayers or expectations. Last Fall I spent some

time reading several of Iain Murray's classic works comparing "revival" and "revivalism". He compares the First Great Awakening, which took place in the 1730s and 1740s to the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th Century. The first was unexpected, but it had a tremendous impact where it took place. There were great manifestations of repentance and faith. The Second Great Awakening, likewise, was unexpected. It also brought great manifestations of repentance and faith. But revivals come and go. It's hard to say why God chooses to act this way, why he brings a revival in one place and time and not another, and why they seem to end as quickly and unexpectedly as they began. But as the Second Great Awakening began to peter out, people noticed. Rather than allowing God to act, they turned to human means in an attempt to keep it going—putting pressure on people and using manipulative tactics thinking it would bring true repentance and conversion. It didn't. But in the process, particularly in North America, we exchanged "revival"—an act of God—for "revivalism"—our attempts to manipulate people into repentance and conversion—to the point that it's now common for many churches to actually schedule a "revival". The rotten fruit of revivalism is everywhere. It has turned worship on its head, it has purged our preaching of any talk of sin, it waters down the word of God lest people be offended, and it guts the gospel of the obligations it places on us lest we make Christianity too difficult for people. It uses human means to accomplish the work that only faithful prayer and preaching of the word, coupled with the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit can do. Pharaoh has said "No" and rather than trusting God to act, we have watered down the word he has given us. We've recognised that we stink in the sight of Pharaoh, so we've tried to make ourselves more appealing to him. We've lost our boldness and appeal to the unrepentant with our own words

rather than God's. Brothers and Sisters, when we do this, we're liable to bring God's judgement on ourselves as we to bring it down on Pharaoh.

Brothers and Sisters, we need to trust in the God who has raised Jesus from the dead. As you come to his Table this morning, remember his call to us to be faithful—to be uncompromisingly holy, to uncompromisingly proclaim his word and not ours, and to proclaim the good news about Jesus with boldness. But let us also remember that he brought our redemption through great sacrifice and great darkness and that it was he who raised Jesus from the dead and he who gave his Spirit to the Church to empower our ministry and witness. Let us never forget that our work is to be faithfully obedient and that the renewal and hardening of hearts, the bringing of revival and the bringing of judgement are his.

Let us pray: Mighty Father, in our Collect today we prayed that we would not put our trust in anything that we do. We pray that again. Let us not trust in what we do. Teach us to trust in your promises, in your wisdom, and in your goodness. Give us the grace, give us the faith, and give us the hope to be steadfast in obedience to your word, that even in the darkest hour we will stand firm in faith and without compromise, trusting you to act as you always have and as you have promised to do. Through the Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.