



LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Remember the Marvellous Works that He hath Done

Exodus 7:8-10:29

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March 10, 2019 – Lent 1

Last week we looked at Exodus 6 and the first part of Exodus 7. Things weren't going as Moses had expected. He'd stood before Pharaoh and demanded on behalf of the Lord, "Let my people go." And instead of letting the Israelite go, Pharaoh made their work harder. The people became angry with Moses and Moses became angry with the Lord. And so the Lord reminded Moses: I am the Lord. I am with you. I am the God of your fathers, the God who entered into covenant with them. I am the God who keeps my promises. And he also reminded Moses that Pharaoh was not going to let Israel go easily. Pharaoh's heart would be hardened. Things would get worse before they got better, but the Lord was doing this so that Israel, Egypt, and the watching Nations would know that he is the Lord. The God of Israel is going to reveal himself in all his glory. So Moses and Aaron, we're told, obeyed the Lord and went back to Pharaoh. We'll pick up today at Exodus 7:8, where the Lord gives instructions to Moses and Aaron as to what they're to say and to do.

Then the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'" So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also

did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exodus 7:8-13)

Last time the Lord had said to Moses, "You will be God to Pharaoh." Moses was to be the Lord's representative in such a way that in him, Pharaoh was meeting the Lord face-to-face. The Lord is meeting Pharaoh on Pharaoh's own terms. And knowing that Pharaoh isn't going to accept Moses as a divine messenger without proof, the Lord commands Moses to have Aaron throw down his staff. Aaron does just that and it turns into a snake. The narrator might just be going for variety, but the word he uses for snake is different than the word he used back in Chapter 4. The Hebrew word here has the sense of some kind of reptile monster. Some translate it as "crocodile". The Greek version of the Old Testament uses the word for "dragon". It wasn't a mere snake this time. But Pharaoh isn't impressed. He calls in his own magicians, they throw down their staffs, and they turn into monstrous snakes as well. Okay...the Lord really does have power, but Pharaoh can match it. But then Aaron's snake somehow eats the others. If you've ever watched a snake eat, it's not a fast process. How this happened isn't explained, nor is how long it took. Even if it took a while, I don't think it's hard to imagine the whole court standing there in awe, watching as it happened in slow motion. When Aaron's rod turned back into a staff, did it have a bunch of bulges in it? The narrator doesn't say. None of that is important. What's important is that the Lord bested Pharaoh. The snake was sort of the national symbol of Egypt and the Lord's snake ate all of Pharaoh's snakes. But despite the show of power, Pharaoh's heart is hardened. He will not listen. This sets the stage for ten more signs.

We'll look briefly at the first nine of these signs this morning, because it makes the most sense to cover them as one unit. To do that we won't be able to read the entire passage which runs from here through Chapter 10. We'll hit the high points. The way the story is told, the signs or plagues fit a repeating three-fold pattern and I'll explain that as we work through the first three plagues. Look at 7:14.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned into a serpent. And you shall say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, "Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness." But so far, you have not obeyed. Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile.'" And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.'" (Exodus 7:14-19)

Before the first, fourth, and seventh signs—the first in each set of three—Moses and Aaron are told to go in the morning to confront Pharaoh. Each time they issue a warning: Because you have not obeyed the Lord and let his people go, such-and-such sign is about to follow." Each time the purpose is that "you shall know that I am the Lord". This first sign strikes at the Nile—the life-blood of Egypt. It's fitting. The Nile was God's gift to

Egypt and the source of her fertility and prosperity. Egypt would have been a desert without the Nile. And yet the Egyptians had turned God's gift into a place of murder when the previous Pharaoh had commanded the baby boys of the Hebrews to be drowned in it. And as I said last week, the point of these signs or plagues seems to be to undermine Pharaoh's power and his claims to divinity. Pharaoh claimed to be the source of Egypt's harmony and prosperity, but through these plagues, the Lord exposes Pharaoh for taking credit that belongs only to the Lord.

So—we read in verses 20-21—at the Lord's command and in the sight of Pharaoh, Aaron stretches out his staff and the waters of Egypt turn to blood. It doesn't say that water became *like* blood; it says it became blood. Some people try to come up with naturalistic explanations for these signs. It was silt or an algae bloom that turned the water red and made it undrinkable. Or, the magicians knew a trick to make snakes as stiff as rods and, when they threw them down they started to squirm again. But that misses the point of the story. The narrator's point is that these signs manifest the power and sovereignty of the Lord. He's real. He's not just the tribal deity of the Israelites. He even has power in mighty Egypt. He is the Creator and he has power over his creation.

But not to be outdone, Pharaoh summons his magicians. Where they got fresh water isn't a concern in the story, but somehow they find fresh water and they turn it to blood as well. Interestingly, you'd think that Pharaoh would call on them to reverse the Lord's sign and make the water drinkable again. Clearly, they can't do that. All they can do is make what the Lord has done worse by making more blood. Regardless of the sign, Pharaoh refuses to obey the Lord. We read in verses 23-24:

Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.

Seven days later Moses and Aaron were sent back to Pharaoh:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. But if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your country with frogs. The Nile shall swarm with frogs that shall come up into your house and into your bedroom and on your bed and into the houses of your servants and your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your servants."'" And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals and over the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt!'" 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 made frogs come up on the land of Egypt. (Exodus 8:1-7)

This the pattern for the second, fifth, and eighth signs. Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and issue a similar warning: "Let my people go that they may serve me, but if you refuse..." This time frogs swarm or teem out of the Nile and overrun the land. It's not the cutesy annoyance in the kid's Bible storybooks, with smiling frogs peeking out of slippers. It was every bit as awful as the Nile turning to blood—and then some. The frogs were everywhere and in everything. They stank. They carried disease. It was awful. And, once again, Pharaoh's magicians show that they have power, but they can't reverse

what the Lord has done. All they can do is multiply the frogs—which I'm sure made Pharaoh even more angry. The plague of frogs also might have been aimed at the previous Pharaoh's murder of the Israelite children. The Egyptian's goddess of childbirth, Heqet, was represented by a frog. The text says that the frogs teemed over Egypt just as the Israelites had teemed despite Pharaoh's best efforts to control them.

It's important to note: Pharaoh and his magicians had real power. The world was different before Jesus. St. Paul writes about the false gods of the pagans being demons. There was a wickedness the likes of which we rarely see today rampant in the ancient world. In his resurrection, Jesus broke the power of the demonic world and where the gospel goes the devil is bound. And yet, what we see here is that even those wicked powers were held in check by the Lord. With the frogs, though, Pharaoh's façade starts to crack. In verse 8 he says to Moses, "Plead with the LORD to take away the frogs from me and from my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD." Moses agrees. The next day, just as Pharaoh asked, the frogs died. They died everywhere and made an even worse mess dead than they did when they were alive. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he refused to let the Israelites go.

The third plague—like the sixth and the ninth—comes without warning. Look at 8:16-19.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.'" And they did so. Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt. The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, but

they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

The dust of Egypt becomes gnats—or lice or some other nasty little insect. They swarm everywhere and on everything. Pharaoh summons his magicians, but this time they’re powerless. Why could they duplicate the blood and the frogs, but not the gnats? I think the best explanation is the source of the sign. The Nile was the source of Egypt’s power, politically, economically, and religiously. The earth was not. The earth in Egypt was worthless without the Nile. Pharaoh may have had limited power over the river, but that power does not extend beyond it. Pharaoh—despite his claims—is not the lord of Creation. That title belongs to the Lord, the God of Israel, and here he manifests that truth. Here he truly makes himself known as he said he would. Pharaoh still won’t listen, but his magicians crack and acknowledge: “This is the finger of *Elohim*.” *Elohim* is a name used by the Lord, but it’s also the generic Hebrew plural of “god”, so it’s not clear whether the magicians are specifically acknowledging the Lord or just that there is a divine power behind Moses and Aaron whom they do not know. Either way, the Lord is beginning to break through to the Egyptians.

Six more signs follow in this pattern. After the gnats, the Lord sends Moses and Aaron to present themselves before Pharaoh before a plague of flies—probably some kind of biting fly. This time Pharaoh’s magicians don’t even try. This is the Lord’s doing and there’s nothing they can do about it. But something interesting happens this time. For the first time the Lord differentiates between the Egyptians and the Israelites. Look at verses 22-23:

But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth. Thus I will put a division between my people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall happen.

The magicians had acknowledged that these signs were the finger of God. Now, as the Israelites are conspicuously spared, the Egyptians will know that it is the Lord, the God of Israel whose finger brings this calamity. Pharaoh asks Moses to plead with his God and, after some failed negotiation, grants permission for the Israelites to go into the wilderness to worship the Lord. But, not surprisingly, he changes his mind once the flies are gone.

In 9:1-7 we read of the fifth sign. A plague falls on the livestock of the Egyptians. As the livestock of the Egyptians died, Pharaoh sent his men to scope out the land of Goshen, where the Israelites lived. I don’t think he was at all surprised to find that the plague hadn’t touched them. Still, his heart was hardened and he refused to let the people go.

Next, the signs, which at first only touched the land, then the livestock, now finally reach the Egyptians themselves in disease. Moses takes the ash from a kiln—most likely the sort of kiln where the Israelites’ bricks were baked—and throws it into the air. It spreads over the nation and it manifests as horrible boils where it falls on the Egyptians. Pharaoh again refuses to obey the Lord, which presumably means that he summoned Moses. For the first time, Pharaoh’s magicians aren’t present, because of the affliction. Whether through embarrassment that the Lord has bested them or simply because of infirmity, the magicians have left the picture and Pharaoh is on his own as the Lord confronts him.

The seventh sign strikes in 9:13-26. The Lord sends Moses to Pharaoh to say that on the next day a hail storm the likes of which Egypt has never seen will strike the land, destroying the crops and any human being or animal left out from under cover. In 9:27 Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron, he admits his guilt, and pleads with them. But, once again, the Lord stopped the storm and Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go.

In Exodus 10:1-2 the Lord again assures Moses that he is with them and that Pharaoh’s continued refusal is all according to plan:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.”

Again, none of this is arbitrary. The Lord’s goal is to make himself known to a people who had rejected and then forgotten him. This has been his goal since he called Abraham. He will make himself known through Israel as he delivers her from her bondage and creates a nation and people for himself, but he also makes himself known as he judges Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

Again, Moses goes to Pharaoh to declare the word of the Lord. This time a plague of locusts the likes of which no one in the world has ever seen will overwhelm the land. Pharaoh’s advisors are crushed by this news. They’re done. They’ve had enough. The Lord has won. They plead with Pharaoh in verse 7, ““How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve the LORD their God. Do you not yet

understand that Egypt is ruined?" But Pharaoh's heart is hard. At first he seems to relent. In 10:8 he says, "Go, serve the LORD your God." But then he insists that only the men go. And with that the locusts swarm Egypt. Again, Pharaoh summons Moses back, admits his guilt, and pleads with him to bring an end to the locusts. The Lord keeps his word, but—of course—Pharaoh changes his mind once the locusts are gone.

The Lord manifests his power in a ninth plague as he blots out the sun. We're not told how it happened, only that a darkness so deep you could feel it fell over the entire land of Egypt with the lone exception of Goshen, where the Israelites lived. The darkness may have been striking at the sun god, Ra. He was the chief god of Egypt's pantheon and Pharaoh was thought to be his incarnation. One, final time Pharaoh summons Moses and pleads with him. This time he tells Moses and the Israelites to go, but even still he refuses to full obey. "Go," he says, "only let your flocks and herd remain behind" (Exodus 10:24). And Moses responds, "No. What are we supposed to sacrifice if we don't take our livestock with us?" Pharaoh's heart is hardened yet again and, in verses 28 he angrily commands Moses, "Get away from me; take care never to see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die." Moses responds and there's an ominous tone to it: "As you say! I will not see your face again."

There's one more sign left, but it stands on its own and we'll pick up with it next week. But what do these signs mean to us some three thousand years later? We're not Israelites oppressed by Pharaoh. For that matter, we're not Pharaoh, either. One of the most profound things I've read about these signs over the last couple of weeks was a short passage in Pete Enns' commentary in which he says simply that the best ways we can apply what we read here is simply to

stand back and says, "Wow!" Sometimes we read a part of the Bible and get lost in trying to figure out in some complex way what it's saying to us or what we should do with it when the most important thing we can do is to just let it sink in and be in awe of God. Enns writes, "The point of the plagues for today is not so much in what *we* do with it, but in having our hearts and minds opened to what *God* has done and thereby understanding *him* better. Who else but the supreme judge of the universe can make the heavens and the earth do his bidding?"¹

As we worked through these signs, did you see the Lord of Creation at work? He who created the waters and the land and the sky turned his creation back on a rebellious people. The Nile, meant to be a blessing, but used by the Egyptians to oppose the Lord and to murder his people, was turned into a menace to them. The earth the Lord had made to grow crops was turned against the Egyptians as horrible pests and diseased boils. The sky turned on them, too, bringing flies, locusts, and deadly hail. Finally, the very sun that God had created to give life to the world was blotted out.

The Exodus from Egypt is the prototype of deliverance that culminates with the death, resurrection, and final return of Jesus and here we get a sense of God's plan as he reaches back into the beginning and arms himself with his own creation in order to judge and to deliver as he moves his project of recreation forward. It shouldn't be surprising that the prophets spoke in similar language of creation itself heralding the coming of the Messiah. Even at the death of Jesus, the Lord caused the earth to quake and the sky to darken. Signs of judgement for those who crucified Jesus, but manifestations of God's presence in the midst of those awful events. Even

as those disasters struck fear in the hearts of many—think of the curtain in the temple being torn in two—they heralded God's work of redemption. The holy of holies was revealed. The stone was rolled away from the tomb. And new creation burst forth and the world has never been the same.

As I said earlier, these four chapters are too much to cover in detail this morning, but they're not too much for you to sit down and read in one short sitting this week. I encourage you to do so. Then read them a second time. Be overcome by the glory of the Lord. Be "wowed". Think, then of the cross of Jesus and consider that the plagues poured out on Egypt pale in comparison to the empty tomb that first Easter. Think on what the Lord, in his mighty faithfulness has done for us. And then flip over to Psalm 105. It's a psalm sung by the Israelites to praise the Lord for his mighty acts in the Exodus. Read Psalm 105 and sing with the Israelites, giving praise to the God who saves:

**O give thanks unto the Lord, and call upon his Name; tell the people what things he hath done.
O let your songs be of him, and praise him;
and let your talking be of all his wondrous works.
Rejoice in his holy Name; let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord.
Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his face evermore.
Remember the marvellous works that he hath done;
his wonders, and the judgement of his mouth;
O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen.
He is the Lord our God; his judgements are in all the world.
He hath been always mindful of his covenant and promise, that he made to a thousand generations. (Psalm 105:1-8)
Amen.**

¹ *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), page 236.