

# Caught Up in the Struggle

## EXODUS CHAPTER 7:1-18

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1 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'See, I have set thee in God's stead to Pharaoh; and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. 2 Thou shalt speak all that I command thee; and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land. 3 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. 4 But Pharaoh will not hearken unto you, and I will lay My hand upon Egypt, and bring forth My hosts, My people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments. 5 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth My hand upon Egypt, and bring out the children of Israel from among them.' 6 And Moses and Aaron did so; as the LORD commanded them, so did they. 7 And Moses was fourscore years old, and Aaron fourscore and three years old, when they spoke unto Pharaoh.

8 And the LORD spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying: 9 'When Pharaoh shall speak unto you, saying: Show a wonder for you; then thou shalt say unto Aaron: Take thy rod, and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it become a serpent.' 10 And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so, as the LORD had commanded; and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. 11 Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did in like manner with their secret arts. 12 For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents; but Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods. 13 And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had spoken.

14 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Pharaoh's heart is stubborn, he refuseth to let the people go. 15 Get thee unto Pharaoh in the morning; lo, he goeth out unto the water; and thou shalt stand by the river's brink to meet him; and the rod which was turned to a serpent shalt thou take in thy hand. 16 And thou shalt say unto him: The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, hath sent me unto thee, saying: Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness; and, behold, hitherto thou hast not hearkened; 17 thus saith the LORD: In this thou shalt know that I am the LORD—behold, I will smite with the rod that is in my hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood. 18 And the fish that are in the river shall die, and the river shall become foul; and the Egyptians shall loathe to drink water from the river.'

Good evening. Good Shabbas. I greet you with the joy of Abraham, our Father in faith and want you to know what a gift it is to be with you tonight, deepening our connection, and consequently learning more about each other and the God we serve. On behalf of the First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, I bring warm greetings from, Patrick Tirino, our clerk of

session and from the elders of First Church to Rabbi Serge, Sue Gold, the synagogue leadership, and the entire community of the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue on this, the occasion of our third joint celebration of the life and faithful witness of God's servant, Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am focusing on a very small portion of the much larger text assigned for this evening. I'm focusing at the beginning of the Torah portion in chapter 7 because in just these few lines are indicated some critical postures and attitudes that capture the struggle these players are caught up in, the struggles Dr. King battled in his lifetime, and the struggles we continue to resist 50 years after his death. The players in tonight's text are the Hebrew people, enslaved in Egypt and forced to serve the ruler of that land. The players are two brothers, Moses and Aaron, sent by God to demand the release of the captives...sent together because Moses is not confident that he has what it takes to do that which God created him to do. There is a Pharaoh, the supreme ruler of Egypt, a complicated human being, like all human beings are complicated, who waffles...goes back and forth, and forth and back over whether or not he will release the slaves whose labor he and his people have enjoyed for generations. And there is God, the creator of all things. God, who not so long ago, in the words of James Weldon Johnson, looked around and said, "I'm lonely—I'll make me a world." The great God almighty, who is always in the business of life and life affirming activity, comes to these chapters protecting the cosmos that she has created, and I believe there is something to learn, sitting with, walking alongside, putting ourselves in the shoes of each of these players.

This is a story of agency and two brothers who are mouthpieces for the holy. This is a story of second chances and third chances and ultimately ten chances to get it right and let God's people go. This is a story of plagues and hard hearts and multiple pleas to make another choice. Make another choice, Pharaoh. Make another choice. Any other choice than the death-dealing, anti-creation choice, that puts you on a sure and certain crash course with the God of the universe. Like Moses and Aaron, you too Pharaoh, are stamped with the divine imprimatur, the imago dei, the made in the image of God-ness that means this story could end another way...but a poor choice leaves God no choice but to affirm life.

While the book of Exodus is often thought of as a book about freedom and liberation, it is also a continuation of the creation story begun in Genesis. In it, God is righting what is wrong,

reviving what is faint, resuscitating life. In it, God is creating, a people for Godself, a people to serve him, a people to worship her...and no one, no pharaoh, no one will get in the way of God's created order teeming with life. In this struggle, God will protect the cosmos because God is in the business of life.

To upset the societal and ethical order is to upset the creational and cosmic order. It is to be caught up in a struggle that will not end well. Dr. King gave his life to this struggle, speaking truth to the pharaohs of his day. The death dealing, hard hearted pharaohs who flouted the rules of the cosmos by failing to live as God created them. There were and are pharaohs who betray the agreements of a just and loving society. Surely failing to live as God created him was Bull Connor, the Commissioner for public safety in Birmingham, Alabama in the 60s, who turned water hoses and dogs on student protestors and arrested and jailed children as young as 6 years of age. For 35 years this "public servant" worked to enforce legal racial segregation and to deny civil rights to our nation's African-American citizens. Surely hard heartedness was alive and active when FBI director J. Edgar Hoover sent Dr. King a letter saying he was a fake and a fraud and the only way out that would allow him to maintain his integrity was to kill himself. Hoover's abuses of power and harassment of activists like Dr. King subverted what God imagined for him. Surely the current inhabitant of the White House is failing to live into his image of God-ness, as he brings us back again and again to a time in history we thought we had left behind more than 50 years ago.

Dr. King spoke into this human brokenness and struggle, knowing that to upset the societal and ethical order is to upset the creational and cosmic order. It is to be caught up in a struggle that will not end well. Make another choice, Pharaoh. Make another choice. Any other choice than the death-dealing, anti-creation choice, that puts you on a sure and certain crash course with the God of the universe.

In his sermon, *Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam*, Dr. King said this about pharaohs on crash courses with God,

"I am disappointed with America. And there can be no great disappointment where there is not great love. I am disappointed with our failure to deal positively and

forthrightly with the triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism. We are presently moving down a dead-end road that can lead to national disaster. The home that all too many Americans left was solidly structured idealistically; its pillars were solidly grounded in the insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage. All men are made in the image of God. All men are bothers. All men are created equal. Every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. Every man has rights that are neither conferred by, nor derived from the State--they are God-given. Out of one blood, God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth... And don't let anybody make you think that God chose America as his divine, messianic force to be a sort of policeman of the whole world. God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment, and it seems that I can hear God saying to America, "You're too arrogant! And if you don't change your ways, I will rise up and break the backbone of your power...Be still and know that I'm God."

Activities that deal death blows to the creation get God's attention and God will push back. God will push back. The plagues symbolize creation run amok, creation disrupted, creation destabilized and weakened. These ecological signs of blood and frogs and locusts and death are signs of a deeper disaster. These Muslim bans and destruction of healthcare and tax breaks for the rich that rob the poor and racist denial of protection for human beings from Haiti and other countries not appealing, are signs of a deeper disaster – a creation at odds with what God intended. The deliverance of Israel is primary, but the ultimate divine activity is the deliverance of the entire creation. Right now. At some point, there is no longer any point in waiting.

And "The LORD said unto Moses: 'Pharaoh's heart is stubborn, he refuseth to let the people go.'" That poor choice followed by other poor choices to deal death rather than life, starts Pharaoh down a path that becomes increasingly more difficult to reverse. Again and again, God sends Moses and Aaron and Martin. God sends you and God sends me... With all this sending, all this possibility, God suggests change is possible. But change is a limited time offer in this story of creation. At some point Pharaoh and Bull Connor and Hoover and Trump can't turn it around. God's created order, that exists for the sake of love and justice, at some

point, it can't be turned around by forces that are human, and the God of the universe must set out to save the creation.

I have discovered over the years that I dislike preaching on King weekend. I have discovered my unease focusing on one person when God calls all people to support the flourishing of life. My preaching professor, J. Alfred Smith spoke of the lazy rocking chair of religion that allowed Christians to sit and gaze at the cross rather than getting up and out in the world to change it. I worry that King weekends make us lazy, make us comfortable that we've done our good work for the year.

What is true about Martin is true about Moses and Aaron and you and me and yes, even Pharaoh. We are all imperfect beings made in the image of God. If any of us can be tyrants, all of us can be tyrants. And if any of us can be saints, all of us can be saints. I don't want to spend another 50 years lauding Martin or Rosa or Fannie Lou but lauding you and lauding us and lauding the God who created us to get up and get to it. Like Moses and Martin we are flawed but usable, broken but part of God's plan for good. I say all this to say that we are all on the hook for a piece of Martin's dream which, by the way, was always God's dream.

This struggle the Hebrew people experienced, this struggle Martin and countless others died fighting, this struggle that we are even now resisting, is a struggle for life. And we are each of us responsible for life, responsible to be mouthpieces for God's dream, responsible to make better choices that bring us closer to our made in the image of God-ness. The biggest struggle is always the one with ourselves. Do we believe that we too are touched by the holy...able to do the unimaginable?

In this new year, with Martin's legacy at your back, may you struggle less with yourself as a being called to flourishing life for the sake of serving God. May you stop struggling and live in acceptance and awe of the God who created you for himself, for herself. And may you, like Moses, like Martin, like you, speak life and love to God's good creation. To the glory of God.