

March 6, 2016

Exodus 7.14-24

Exodus 10.21-29

We have finally made it to the plagues, I wasn't sure if we were ever going to make it. I am sure the liturgist is very glad that I did not make them read the first eight, while I took the ninth, so you're welcome! For many these plagues are the most exciting part of the Exodus story, they are the climactic transition from the enslavement of the people to their liberation and subsequent wandering. So without cheating, how many of the plagues can you all list off?

For many these plagues seem strange, I mean what kind of plague is frogs anyways? You would think that after hundreds of years, God could really come up with something more terrible than gnats. It isn't exactly menacing. There have been attempts to rationalize these plagues, there are those commentators who find a natural progression of the plagues. They see a progression from the blood onward as a progression of plagues that all flow from one another. Like dominoes that knock the next over after the initial push from God.

But I am not sure that is what the author is attempting to tell us, I am not sure if the author is trying to tell us about how God knocked one domino over, causing the environment to spiral out of control. That would make for a good environmental disaster movie, maybe in the next remake of Exodus, but that would not demonstrate the power of God to lead His people out of slavery. So while that explanation may be compelling to our modern minds, it does not conform to the purpose of the author. It does not fit with the God who has been named and revealed. The God who silently imposed His will on the initial chapters when God seemed absent.

Throughout these nine plagues we experience an anti or UnCreation. The created order is thrown into the chaos of the uncreated world. The natural order is slowly removed one element at a time. Beginning with the water being turned into blood, the animals which become diseased and covered in boils, the plants which are devoured by the locust, to the land itself which becomes gnats, it all begins to unravel. Even the land itself takes part in its own unraveling. It all throws Creation into primordial chaos, before finally even the light is taken away. Creation is literally tearing itself apart with each plague making Egypt descend further and further into an anti-Creation. Until the land finds itself in deep darkness. For three days, Creation is still and dark, the people are unable to move. Creation reaches a point of being suspended for the Egyptians, returning the silent darkness before God spoke, creating something out of the empty void. We experience within this text, God plaguing Egypt by throwing the land into an UnCreation, where brick by brick the created order of the world is torn down before our eyes in the text.

Last week we concluded with God promising Moses that He was going to create from nothing the Hebrew people, that without straw he would build a nation out of these dehumanized slaves, and He would be their God. Last we concluded by marveling at the new creation that springs forth from the lifeless body of Christ, as it hangs from the cross. Last week, we looked ahead to other side the new Creation. This week, we experience the darkness that stands between the old and the new. This week, we experience the UnCreation, the tearing down of the old Creation, the darkness that shadows over the land as the Hebrew people are about to be set free, the same darkness which hangs over land as Christ is crucified. The darkness that stills Creation, sent back to the beginning. This week we experience the nothingness, from which God will create the Hebrew people.

Whether the author is using hyperbole or is describing the all encompassing nature of God's UnCreation, by repeatedly referring to all, all of the water, all of the livestock of Egypt, all of the Egyptians inflicted with boils, all of the plants devoured by locusts, the message the author is sending is clear. The land of Egypt is descending into nothingness, and even the first act of Creation will be removed, and from this God is creating anew. God will tear down the old Creation, which lets people live in suffering and pain, God is unraveling the old Creation which allows there to be oppressed and oppressors. It all has to go if these slaves are going to be released from their captivity to be a people created into a nation around their God, it all has to go if we are going to live as the Kingdom of God, around the resurrected body of our God.

This is why we experience this strange collection of plagues, not as divine retribution for the enslavement of the Hebrews but as the means by which God is going to send Creation back into the pre Creation nothingness. God of the plagues, is not the God who the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards described, as the God who is holding Creation over the flames as we would a spider. With this image of God, Edwards sparked a revival, around a graceless God, a God we cower before, a God who we fear. If this is how we imagine God, even in the darkness of the plagues then we have missed the point. The plagues are not God throwing Creation into judgment, even within the darkness we find something about to be sent out of the nothingness, we find Good News emerging. Just as we find something beautiful emerge out of the torture and death that Christ experiences on Good Friday. From the darkness, from the emptiness, from the nothingness, God is still the God of grace, the God of abundant mercy and love. This is Good News.

But about now you're probably thinking, I can see how this may be good news for the Hebrews who we know will be set free, who will emerge from the nothingness, no longer to be

slaves, but people, with their humanity restored to them, but what about the Egyptians? What Good News is there for them? Well, I am glad you asked! Within this text, one of the most challenging aspects to readers is that God repeatedly hardens Pharaoh's heart, so that the Israelites remain in captivity. God repeatedly hardens Pharaoh's heart and the Egyptians continue to suffer as Creation is dismantled around them. While Pharaoh may bend, he always springs back to where the section began, defiantly opposing freedom for the Israelite people. Each time ushering in the next round of God's UnCreation. We can wonder how the narrator could know that God is the origin of Pharaoh's hardened heart, especially when the earlier plagues end with Pharaoh hardening his own heart. But in the end that does not really matter. In the end, the origin of Pharaoh's hardened heart is inconsequential next to the lives of the Egyptians who are not Pharaoh. In the end, the larger issue is the people of Egypt who suffer under Pharaoh's hard heart. In the end, we know what difficult plague awaits them next, and it seems hard to find God's goodness or grace.

The answer that God gives to Moses, before sending the hail upon Egypt, is that by now God could have struck down Pharaoh and all the Egyptians, but He has let them live so that they may know God's power and God's name may resound through all the land. It would have been more effective if God had simply struck down Pharaoh and all of the Egyptians. And the Israelites could have simply walked away. But they are still part of God's Creation, and they are still able to emerge from the darkness of God's UnCreation. They emerge knowing that there is no one like God in all the earth, God who cares for His people, freeing them from their oppression and freeing His people from being oppressors. They emerge, knowing the name of God, same as the Israelites, having God revealed to them. The text implies that all of the Egyptians experience the plagues, none of them are shielded from God's power, but that also

means they collectively emerge from the plagues. They continue to survive through these plagues, as part of God's Creation, as part of God's Creation which needs to be healed from what they have become, exalting in themselves to give and take life. They need to know that there is no other like God, and they will experience His power, and His grace. As dark as where the plagues are headed seems, they are not held over the flame, being taught to fear God's power. God is not divine tormentor, ready to cast off parts of His Creation. As hard as it is to find, and maybe you do not find my answers compelling, but somewhere in the passage there is grace for the Egyptians. God is somehow reaching out towards them. They are shown God's grace and mercy, which God extends to all of His Creation, so that even though all are imprisoned in disobedience, God will show mercy to all.

As we move closer to Holy Week, keeping our eyes upon the cross as we read through the story of Exodus. We do so remembering that in the life and death of Christ, Christ pours out grace not only on those who are obviously suffering but also the hidden suffering. Knowing that Christ did not only come to the Jews who were suffering under Roman oppression, but also to the Romans, to free them from being oppressors. So that they may also know that there is no other like God, so that they may know the power of His grace, which reaches to both the oppressor and the oppressed, the wrong and the wronged, and comforts both. That out of the UnCreation of the cross, all are able to walk out of the darkness, having experienced God's abundant grace. And that is Good News not only for the slave but also the taskmaster.