

ROAR: Plagued By Fear

Exodus 10:1-2
I John 4:16b-21

When life is scary—God is good!

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
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I am not a fan of fear. I don't like scary stuff. I haven't been in a haunted house since I was working with the youth in Lake Village 30 years ago. Even then, the hay bales where I was hiding to scare the kids gave me a massive asthma attack. Served me right. Roller coasters—I am happy to sit on a bench while my family rides. Horror movies—I'll pass. I'd rather pay my money to laugh or cry than scream.

I'm not a fan of fear. I don't feel the need to manufacture fear through artificial means. There is plenty to be scared of in the real world. A visit to the doctor can change your life with a difficult medical diagnosis. A ride down the highway or a trip to the grocery store can end with an accident. You can live in a town where there are tornadoes one weekend and a catastrophic flood the next weekend. That's some scary stuff!

The Hebrews in Egypt were experiencing some scary times in our Scripture today. Last week we talked about the Israelites becoming slaves in Egypt. This week we see what happened when God initiated the process of liberation. There was some scary stuff going on. Very little of it directly affected the Hebrews; they were spared the brunt of the plagues. But they could see what was going on all around them, and it had to be frightening.

Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* that, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."¹ The same was true in ancient Egypt. Pharaoh and his government were not about to let the Hebrew slaves go; they were too valuable to the economy of the region. So after Moses' first polite request, to take the Hebrews out into the desert to worship Yahweh, was turned down, God got serious and began to send plague after plague upon the Egyptians until they relented and let the Hebrews go.

There are ten of these plagues, and they all follow a similar pattern. God through Moses demands that Pharaoh let God's people go. Pharaoh refuses. God tells Moses to tell Aaron to inflict a plague upon the land. Or sometimes it's just Moses, or even just God. The early plagues seem to affect everyone, but the worse the plagues get, the land of Goshen where the Hebrews live is not affected by the plague. During or after the plague, Pharaoh softens a little and agrees to let the Hebrews go with Moses to worship in the

wilderness. Then inevitably, as soon as the plague stops, he changes his mind and refuses to let the slaves go free. The text says that Pharaoh continually hardens his heart, or sometimes it says God hardens his heart, so it finally takes ten plagues, with the last one being the death of the firstborn, to convince Pharaoh to let God's people go.

So there are ten of these plagues: the Nile turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils on the humans, hail and thunder, locusts, darkness and the death of all the firstborn in the country. These are fun stories to tell, but they raise some serious questions.

How did all this stuff happen? Of course, you can take all of this at face value, that God sent all this bad stuff on Egypt. But some have proposed that there is a naturalistic explanation for all these plagues (or at least the first nine). Think of it. There is a type of red algae that can infest waterways and can make it look like blood. If the water is polluted, the frogs come up on land. When the frogs die there are insects that breed on the dead flesh—gnats and flies. These insects can cause disease to the livestock and bites or boils on human flesh. It all makes sense.

We know from around here how a front can move through and bring thunder and hail; it's not as common in the Middle East, but it happens. What does happen often are swarms of locusts that move across the landscape, devouring everything and so thick they block out the sun. We can see all this happening.

But the naturalistic explanation doesn't get at the theological questions these stories raise. What about God sending all this bad stuff on the Egyptians? Doesn't God love the Egyptians, too? Last week we made a big point about God not being the source of evil in the world. We don't believe God sends bad stuff on us. God made the world in freedom and doesn't micromanage the events of our lives. Remember that? Now there's this!

What about Pharaoh's hard heart? We know what it means to make our own hearts hard against God; we do that all the time. But what about God hardening Pharaoh's heart? Was it just to play out more destruction on the Egyptians? Why didn't God just soften Pharaoh's heart in the first place and avoid all the carnage?

Maybe we just need to ignore all those questions. Maybe like our Scripture lesson says, we just tell these stories to our children and grandchildren so they will see how God made fools out of the Egyptians and did these signs to show that God is an awesome God. Maybe these are stories best saved for Vacation Bible School, and we don't need to pay so much attention to them.

I think there is another way to look at these stories that seems to make better sense. Adam Hamilton, in his study on Moses, shares the idea that these stories of the plagues can be seen as sort of a satire on Egyptian beliefs. The early Hebrews wanted to prove that their beliefs and culture were superior to the Egyptians, and one way they could do that was to make fun of the Egyptian gods. These plagues were sort of a contest between Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the pantheon of Egypt.

In Egypt, the Nile River was a god. Pollute the river, and you pollute the god. Another god looked like a frog. I think it's funny, with the first two plagues, the Egyptian magicians duplicate the actions of Aaron by making more blood in the river and more frogs on the land. That only makes matters worse!

Another god looked like a cow, who were devastated by pestilence. The greatest god of all was the sun god Ra, for whom the Pharaoh Ramesses was named. When God made darkness fall on the land, it was a demonstration that Yahweh was stronger than Ra.

The hardness of Pharaoh's heart can be understood because the Hebrew word for hard is also the word for heavy. Pharaoh's heart was getting harder or heavier with each plague. The Egyptian belief about the afterlife was that when a Pharaoh died, his heart was measured on scales against a feather. Hearts made heavy by evil could not enter the afterlife. So God is giving Pharaoh chance after chance to dig the hole deeper for himself that will prevent his entry into the Egyptian afterlife.²

I think it makes good sense to look at the plagues as a contest between Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, and Pharaoh and the gods of the Egyptians, so "*that you may tell your children and grandchildren how [God has] made fools of the Egyptians.*"³

So what do we do now with the story of the Plagues on Egypt? In the midst of these scary times, what's the purpose of these texts beyond providing cool crafts for our VBS kids?

The first purpose is political. These are stories of liberation. For the Jews even today, the Exodus is the primary story of God delivering God's people from oppression. For Christians, the Exodus is second only to the death and resurrection of Jesus. For all oppressed people anywhere or any time, these stories carry a message of hope and deliverance. It's no accident that the African slaves in America sang, "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land. Tell ol' Pharaoh, to let my people go!"⁴ That was a word of liberation for them, too.

The second purpose is theological. The Lord sends Moses, saying, "*Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren ... what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the Lord.*"⁵ The purpose of these stories is to show our awesome God in all God's glory. God is mighty. God is powerful. God is worthy of praise and worship and service. So don't be afraid. Don't be worried. In these scary times, trust in God. Have hope. God is good—all the time!

When we confront the scary times of life, we can take heart from these ancient stories. We know that when we face difficulties of any kind, we can turn to God. God is God, and there is no other. Eugene Peterson puts it this way in his introduction to Genesis in *The Message*: "First God. God is the subject of life. God is foundational for living. If we don't have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it right, get life right, get our lives right. Not God at the margins; not God as an option; not God on the weekends. God at the center and circumference; God first and last; God, God, God."⁶

This God we worship is fundamentally one thing, and the one thing is love. And what do you know? Love is the antidote to fear. In I John we read: "*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have*

boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”⁷

Do you see this amazing sequence taking shape? First there is love, because God is love. Love is the ground of all our being. We turn to God, and God’s love is in us. This love casts out fear. Without fear, we can live with boldness, in other words, courage. Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is when fear is overcome by spiritual values—faith, hope, and love.

General George Patton, one of the liberators of Europe in World War II, said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers."⁸ Or the unforgettable actor John Wayne said, “Courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway.”⁹

So God is love, and love conquers fear, and conquered fear empowers us to live with courage. And lives lived with courage bring liberation. The person living with courage is free. And the person living with courage can live to set others free. Wherever there is love, there is courage, and wherever love and courage operate, there is liberation—from hatred, oppression, discrimination, and prejudice. Love sets us free.

When I think of slavery and courage and liberation and love, I think of Harriet Tubman. Harriet was born into slavery in 1822 on a plantation in Maryland. She suffered beatings and abuse throughout her young life, and her siblings were sold as slaves to other places. In 1849, about to be sold to another owner, Harriet escaped to Pennsylvania. But she couldn’t rest in freedom. She said, “I have heard their groans and sighs, and seen their tears, and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them.”¹⁰ So Harriet became a guide on the Underground Railroad, and made 19 trips back into Confederate territory to rescue slaves. She said, “I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can’t say — I never ran my train off the track, and I never lost a passenger.”¹¹ Her nickname was “Moses,” because she led her people to freedom. She also earned the nickname “The General,” because she was the first woman to lead a combat unit on a raid into South Carolina that freed 700 slaves.

Harriet Tubman had been taught Christianity by her mother, and her liberation activities were constantly guided by her faith. Thomas Garret, a

fellow abolitionist, said, "I never met with any person of any color who had more confidence in the voice of God, as spoken direct to her soul."¹² Harriet said about her relationship to God, "I said to the Lord, I'm going to hold steady on to you, and I know you will see me through."¹³ Her mission of liberation was founded on and fueled by her relationship with a God of love who cast out her fear.

After the Civil War, Harriet retired to a farm in upstate New York. Late in life she became a Methodist and an activist for women's right to vote. She lived until 1913, and died peacefully and free at the age of 91.

Today on this Memorial Day of 2019, we have some good stuff to take away from worship. Today we remember and celebrate those who have given their lives for our country. They were people of courage who made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives to keep our country free. We celebrate the love they had for our nation. There is no way we can ever repay our debt to them. We honor them.

But today we also celebrate a greater love that goes back far beyond the history of these United States, even far beyond Moses and the slaves in Egypt. Our God is a God of love, and God's love casts out fear. Life in every age has had many things to be afraid of: slavery and oppression, tragedies and disasters, disease and death. Thanks be to God, we can overcome our fear. We can live with courage. We can be agents of liberation. We can be people of hope.

If you find yourself plagued by fear today, paralyzed by anxiety, discouraged by the world you see around you, hopeless for the future, then hear this Good News. The Egyptians are fools. Our fears are weak. Our God is mighty! Our God is awesome! God's love is all you need to live victoriously. When life is scary, our God is good!

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From The Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait*

² Adam Hamilton, *Moses: In The Footsteps Of The Reluctant Prophet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017), 82-90.

³ Exodus 10:2

⁴ "Go Down, Moses," *United Methodist Hymnal*, #448.

⁵ Exodus 10:1-2.

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 2002), 19.

⁷ I John 16b-18.

⁸ As told by Chaplain George Metcalf. *PreachingToday.com*.

⁹ Actor John Wayne (1907–1979), *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁰ Harriet Tubman, from *Harriet, the Moses of her People* by Sarah Hopkins Bradford.

<http://www.harriet-tubman.org/quotes/>.

¹¹ Harriet Tubman at a suffrage convention, NY, 1896. <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/quotes/>.

¹² *PreachingToday.com*.

¹³ Harriet Tubman, from *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* By Sarah Hopkins Bradford.

<http://www.harriet-tubman.org/quotes/>.