

Exodus 5-7

Unraveled: When Human Beings Unravel God's Plans for Justice

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This is the third sermon in the series, *Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart*. Truthfully, I don't think any of us are living our best life right now or living the life we had planned, so perhaps this series has come along at just the right time. The Bible is full of stories of lives that have come unraveled, lives that didn't play out as the people had hoped, and how the people understood God in the midst of the unraveling. So far in this series, we have talked about how the disciples' lives, especially Thomas', were unraveled when the unimaginable happened and Jesus was killed. Last week, we were reminded that none of us will escape the unraveling that occurs when we suffer and through the story of Job, we learned that even in our suffering, we can encounter the Holy. Today the story of the Exodus will give us an opportunity to talk about some of the ways in which human beings unravel God's plans for justice. I hope as we talk, unlike Pharaoh in the story, our hearts will soften, and we will begin to imagine new ways we can engage in the work of justice, even as we social distance, even as we wear masks and refrain from gathering in large groups, even when it seems like there is so much wrong we don't know where to start and we don't know if we even have the will to continue.

It brings me comfort to believe that the world as it is now is not what God had in mind. The biblical narrative begins in Genesis 1 with a creation story, which is essentially a story of God's generosity. God created and then declared everything that had been created, GOOD. By the time God's work was finished, the earth was overflowing with plants, fish, birds, animals, and even humans, and all would "be fruitful and multiply." Throughout the stories in Genesis, God's people experienced the abundance of creation. The natural world continued to give and it provided for the people and there was enough. Human beings still messed things up at times, but creation continued to create and people had enough.

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Then in chapter 47 when Pharaoh (Egypt's king) had a dream that there would be famine in the land, for the first time in the Bible someone said, "Oh my gosh,

there isn't going to be enough. We need to grab all the things...all the toilet paper, all the medicine, all the food, all the everything."

Pharaoh was afraid. Because he was afraid, he became ruthless. If you have seen Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat (or read Genesis), you know that Pharaoh assigned Joseph the job of managing the famine. It was a brilliant plan. In the years preceding the famine, Joseph, acting on behalf of Pharaoh, storing up grain because there was abundance. When the famine hit and crops failed, the peasants ran out of food, so they put their land up as collateral and they were given food. The next year, there was still no food, so they gave their cattle as collateral and they were given food. By the third year, they had nothing left to give up, so they put their own bodies up as collateral and that's how the Israelites became slaves. The Israelites became slaves because the people in power did not use their power for the common good, they used it to benefit themselves. Who would do such a thing?

https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/?fbclid=IwAR1fxG2e4kITWshJDp4EfW5jd0pTZ88Dw6bSAbTzDCwXp7df_v1sDSq7oRo#content

This brings us to the book of Exodus where the tug of war between God's abundance and the world's scarcity is on full display, much like it is today. Even as slaves, the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied, which scared the new Pharaoh and just like the last one, he was afraid, so he became ruthless. That's when he ordered the midwives to kill all the Israelite baby boys, which they didn't do. The Israelites suffered and the story tells us they cried out to God and God heard them. God sent Moses and his brother Aaron to free the Israelites. And in Exodus 5:1-2 it is written:

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"...Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.'" ² But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go." (Exodus 5:1-2) Later on, it says that Pharaoh's stubbornness was as a result of being hard-hearted. Someone who is hard-hearted is incapable of empathizing with another person and therefore is not moved to alleviate the suffering of others. Pharaoh was hard-hearted.

God, Moses, and Aaron spent the better part of the next 7 chapters of Exodus trying to convince Pharaoh that he did not want to be the one standing in the way of the liberation of God's people. You know...there was blood in the Nile, frogs, locusts, probably murder hornets, and lots of other unpleasantness. Yet, Pharaoh remained staunchly hardhearted, completely responsible for unraveling God's plan for justice. But God did not create human beings to be slaves. God is a god of freedom. And even the most hard-hearted among us, even when we work together to oppress other people, even then, we are not strong enough to thwart God's plan for justice.

We know how the exodus story ends, so I am going to leave the story there because I want us to use this opportunity to consider that the way we have traditionally read the story of Pharaoh, Moses, and the liberation of the Israelites is rooted in our own privilege. And that interpretation has, in fact, contributed to the unraveling of God's plan for justice throughout the history of this country and in this time and place, it has, in a sense, excused our hard-heartedness toward people of color. When we are first introduced to this story as children in our white church Sunday School classes or Vacation Bible Schools, we are encouraged to identify with the Israelites. The lesson is often, just as God heard the Israelites' cry for help, God hears us when we cry out for help. Right? We can count on God to protect us and to free us from that which holds us captive, which theologically is sin.

This interpretation arrived in this country with the Puritans and Pilgrims and their exodus across the Atlantic to the new world. These English Reformers imagined themselves held captive by what they saw as England and the Church of England's (which were basically the same) inability to protect society from the people they believed were out to destroy the Anglo-Saxon culture of England. The Anglo-Saxons were a cultural group who inhabited England from the 5th century. The group was comprised of Germanic tribes who migrated to the island. This is important because part of what these English reformers brought to America was the belief that Descendants of the Anglo-Saxons were superior to all other people. They brought racism to this land.

In the book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Kelly Brown Douglas writes, "The Pilgrims and Puritans fled from the Church of England to

build a religious institution more befitting Anglo-Saxon virtue and freedom. They considered themselves the Anglo-Saxon remnant that was continuing a divine mission” (Brown Douglas, p.8). So, like the Israelites liberated from slavery, these reformers were freed to fulfill what they believed was a mission from God to be lived out in this new land. And that is the premise on which this nation was started, that “the American story is God’s story” (Brown Douglas, p.25).

Since then, white American Christians have, at many points in history, interpreted the biblical text in ways that support racism. Certainly, one example of that is how scripture was used to support the enslavement of Africans. One example is in the very weird story of Noah and his sons Shem, Japheth, and Ham. Ham (who is known as the father of Canaan) saw his drunk father naked. When Noah woke up and realized his youngest son had seen him naked, he cursed Canaan. The text says the people of Canaan would be the “servants of all servants,” so according to white tradition, not the Bible, Ham must have had black skin and he was therefore the descendent of all Africans. In a nutshell, the curse of Ham is that God made Africans to be slaves.

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Take a look at this artist’s depiction of Noah’s family. Note the sons have vastly different skin colors, while Noah and his wife are white.

You better believe this story, like the Exodus story, is interpreted very differently in the Black church. There are not Black children learning in Sunday School that they descend from a curse and that the white people of America are the victims of oppression. They say Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America. I used to think that was because we have such different worship styles. It’s really because we see the stories of our faith so differently. Perhaps it is time to consider our consistent role as unravelers of God’s plan for justice, perhaps it is time to consider that we, white Americans, are more like Pharaoh than we are the Israelites in the Exodus story.

As I mentioned, had we been raised in the Black church, we would find ourselves, white people, cast in a very different role in the story of the liberation of Israelites. You see, the God of the African people was a god of freedom, a god very different from the one their enslavers worshiped. The Great High God of their West African culture was truly free, free from being limited or boxed in by one group of people and free from the fear that causes human beings to become

ruthless. Douglas writes, “It was an awareness of transcendent freedom that enabled enslaved men and women to know that the God their enslavers spoke of was not truly God...The enslaver’s God was for all intents and purposes a white slave master sitting on a throne in heaven keeping black people in their place...The black enslaved knew that this was not the God who encountered them in their free African lives.” It is the freedom of the Great High God that Africans encountered in the story of the Exodus. It was not the Anglo-Saxon god that brought white people to this land and whose story was used to unravel the lives of indigenous people and enslaved Africans.

We need to examine the ways in which the white church’s interpretation of the Exodus story and other stories in the biblical narrative have damaged, and continue to damage people in Black and brown communities. Perhaps we need to look in the mirror and see that, in many cases, we are like Pharaoh. We are afraid and our fear has made us ruthless and hard-hearted. In some respects, our fear has caused us to undo the abundance that was present at creation. Our fear has allowed us to unravel God’s plans for justice for people of color, which has yielded environmental racism, huge wealth disparities, disproportionate prison populations, and so much brokenness.

But here is the good news in this story for the white church, for all of us really...we don’t have to continue to play the role of Pharaoh. We can pick up the role of Moses any time, in fact, many of you have already done just that.

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You see, Moses and Aaron didn’t quit after Pharaoh told them, “no” the first time. They persisted, they continued to insist that Pharaoh let God’s people go. Pharaoh refused over and over again. And things in Egypt got uglier and messier and scarier, but Moses and Aaron did not quit. I believe they didn’t quit because they were called to their role by God. And friends, we have been called to our role too, we have been called to create and not destroy. We have been called to defend and not oppress. We have been called to weave justice into a world that is unraveled. We have been called to the work of making God’s vision of abundance come to fruition, even though the world keeps telling us there is not enough, even when the world seems to get uglier, scarier and messier.

So, even though it seems that voices of compassion are being drowned out by hateful rhetoric, speak words of love anyway. Even though stories of violence abound, be peacemakers anyway. Even though racism has been woven into the fabric of this nation since the very beginning, weave something new, something colorful and warm, something that allows us to imagine that true freedom is really possible and there is a role for each one of us as we proclaim together, "Let God's people go." Amen.