

Life vs. Death

Exodus 12:1-14

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This is the sort of passage that when describing it, I feel compelled to sound like a 19th century preacher:

Pharaoh has defied the blessings of God, threatened life, and, thereby, wrought havoc on creation. And now let Egypt reap what she has sown. Let ruin rain down. Let order be o'erturned, as even day becomes the darkest night.

Pharaoh ordered that the sons of Israel be cast into the Nile River. So, in the first plague, the Nile turns to blood. The blood of the Israelites rises up as a sign to expose the guilt of the Egyptians and to foreshadow their own impending doom.

And then plague follows upon plague. Frogs, lice, flies, pestilence, boils, hail, locust, and a darkness one can feel.

That heavy, Gothic language is fitting for this story. As scholar Terence Fretheim has written, "Pharaoh's antilife measures have unleashed chaotic powers that threaten the very creation that God intended." The plagues, which the Bible calls "signs," are the consequences of Pharaoh's policies. If you pursue a policy of death, then you will unleash chaos.

I'm reminded of the final lines of Alexander Pope's great poem *The Dunciad*, in which he imagines the return of primordial chaos as humanity goes mad:

In vain, in vain – the all-composing hour
Resistless falls: the Muse obeys the power.
She comes! she comes! the sable throne behold
Of *Night* primeval, and of *Chaos* old!
Before her, *Fancy's* gilded clouds decay,
And all its varying rainbows die away.
Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,
The meteor drops, and in a flash expires.
As one by one, at dread *Medea's* strain,
The sickening stars fade off the ethereal plain;
As *Argus' eyes* by *Hermes' wand* opprest,
Closed one by one to everlasting rest;
Thus at her felt approach, and secret might,
Art after *Art* goes out, and all is night.
See skulking *Truth* to her old cavern fled,
Mountains of casuistry heaped o'er her head!

Philosophy, that leaned on Heaven before,
Shrinks to her second cause, and is no more.
Physic of Metaphysic begs defence,
And *Metaphysic* calls for aid on *Sense*!
See *Mystery* to *Mathematics* fly!
In vain! they gaze, turn giddy, rave, and die.
Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,
And unawares *Morality* expires.
Nor public flame, nor private, dares to shine;
Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word;
Thy hand, great anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal darkness buries all.

Or there is chaos as envisioned in Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Road*. Some unidentified catastrophe has wrought havoc upon the world. All plant life has been burned and the ashes blanket everything. No animal life remains and only a few humans struggle to eke out a meager existence in what McCarthy describes as "Nights dark beyond darkness and . . . days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world." I imagine Egypt, in the Exodus, story, looking very much like this post-apocalyptic landscape. These are images from our nightmares, made real.

In the ninth and penultimate plague, darkness overwhelms light, and we are returned to the very first day of creation, when all was welter and waste, the formless void, and God's creating word had yet to breathe upon the Earth. This is what Pharaoh and his policies of death hath wrought.

And now in one final plague, death will visit every house, as the sons of Egypt die so that the sons of Israel might go free.

Those who look for natural explanations to these plagues miss the point. The text itself presents them as natural events, not supernatural. They are, as Fretheim writes, "hypernatural." This is creation breaking its bounds and running amuck. This is creation turned upside down, creation become chaos, catching all in its snare.

I have a children's book entitled *The Passover Journey* which states, "In the Exodus story, God says, 'You are to remember what happens this night and celebrate it throughout the ages.'" It is this story, of the tenth plague leading to the freedom of the slaves, which is retold every year in the Jewish Passover feast and which Jesus and his disciples were commemorating that night in the Upper Room as the Lord's Supper was instituted, and which we then commemorate every time we gather around the communion table.

Why do we tell this story?

It is not because we have confirmation that it is an historical event. In fact, we have no such evidence. There is nothing in the historical or archaeological record that confirms that this particular exodus story contained in the Hebrew Bible is an historical event. Acknowledging this frees us to see the story as a narrative about the contest between the forces of life and creation and the forces of death and chaos and how our liberation is achieved.

This children's book says that after telling the story, "We feel different, free, at times uncertain, but we are ready to leave our old ways behind and search for new ways to live our lives."

In the on-going contest between life and death, life will be found in telling the story.

Really? Are stories that powerful? And telling this nightmare brings life?

I want you to notice something about the passage I read earlier. What I read was God's instruction to the people on how they were supposed to remember the tenth plague, and this is before the tenth plague has even occurred. God is commanding the telling of the story as part of the people's worship and liturgy, even before the event itself has happened. It is the telling of the story, the enacting of it in worship, which creates the moment of liberation.

In her stunning commentary on Exodus, Avivah Zornberg writes,

For the characteristic of stories is that that they have endless facets of meaning; they gain admission to our inner world because they are polymorphous, plastic, familiar and strange at the same time. Once within, they begin their work, turning around and around, inviting us to play with their meanings. They are the scrolls of redemption, light, subversive, generating life.

So, what happens when we tell this story? At first we might cheer that the bad guys get their comeuppance. We are thrilled by the demonstration of God's power on the part of the oppressed.

But the more we read it, the more we tell it, the more we begin to think about it and the questions come. "Is this the cost of liberation?" "Is the God who can do this worthy of our worship?" "If God saved the people so dramatically then, why has God not saved us now?"

We are commanded to tell this story, yet when we tell it, and tell it, and tell it, it makes us think and thinking generates questions. In the yearly observance of the Passover meal, Jewish families ask questions. The asking of questions is essential to the telling of the story and the act of worship.

The questions bring us to that place of anxiety, that murky line between faith and doubt, the edge where belief and unbelief come into contact. God commanded us to tell this story and yet if we tell it we might end up concluding that God does not exist, or if God exists, that God does not care, or if God cares, the way God demonstrates that care is too terrifying to deserve our worship.

And herein lies the irony of this story.

God has commanded us into this space of questioning, doubting, and anxiety. But why? Why should God want his people to question these core ideas of faith?

Let me quote Avivah Zornberg again:

God's message presses for hearing and response, for an acknowledged vulnerability, insecurity, anxiety. "Neurosis . . . is . . . the obstinate refusal to face anxiety openly and explore its quality and source." Therapeutic openness, on the other hand, is expressed in a willingness to face the unknown.

Pharaoh is neurotic because he will not face his anxiety and fears; he will not be moved by them. He is untouched by the experience around him. He cannot hear the cries of the oppressed people. He cannot know their pain. He cannot act for justice and liberation. And so his heart is hardened. It is hardened to the point that he becomes incapable of hearing and seeing. He cannot be compassionate; his soul is corrupted.

Do you remember last October, when the children presented a drama based upon this story on Children's Sabbath? They were all decked out in biblical costumes and re-enacted the crossing of the Red Sea and before that Moses demanding that Pharaoh "Let my people go." Sophia Rudd was Pharaoh. And every time Moses, played by Clair Bouma, said, "Let my people go." Sophia would pause for a moment and then go "No!" Her emphatic "no-s," one right after the other, became the hit of the presentation.

And though humorous, a good representation of what Pharaoh is in the story—the person who lacks compassion and does not see nor hear the needs of his people. Pharaoh cannot be moved.

But the healthy person can be moved. That person faces her anxieties, fears, and doubts. She is open to questions, and by being open to questions, she is capable of seeing and hearing when others are hurting. The healthy person explores her doubts, learns from her fears, grows from her anxieties. This is the purpose of therapy.

God commands us to tell this story over and over again, because the telling of it is our therapy. It shakes us out of our comfort zones. It gets us thinking and questioning and feeling. And that is our liberation.

God wants to liberate the divine spark within each one of us. God wants us to become fully human. And in order to do that, God risks rejection, because our liberation from emotional, mental, and spiritual slavery is in telling this story over and over and over again. We become agents in our own liberation.

That children's book on Passover states this idea simply, "Perhaps talking about our slavery and what it means to be free will help us appreciate our freedom and encourage us to work toward freedom for all peoples."

We are engaged in a battle between life and death, between chaos and creation. The way of Pharaoh—of not seeing, not hearing, not responding to the cries of the people—that is the policy of death, that will undo the creation and unleash the powers of chaos.

The alternative is to see and to hear and to respond and that begins by telling the story and asking the questions, facing our fears, our anxieties, and our doubts. That is the path to liberation. That is the way of life.

So, let's choose life.