

“Liberation”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Exodus 12:1-14; Exodus 4-12  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
on September 10, 2017

I once sat through a sermon in which the preacher claimed that Hurricane Katrina and 9-11 were examples of God’s wrath upon America. I don’t recall if he said why those places were being punished, but he clearly didn’t consider himself a part of those places. He also shared a long self-congratulatory story about how God had told him in a vision that all his children and his grandchildren would grow up to be ministers of the gospel and how, despite a few suspenseful hiccups along the way, this promise had come true.

It was a rather odd pairing of stories—God’s indiscriminating wrath poured upon adults and children alike, Christians and non-Christians alike, and God’s very special favor delivered straight and simple just to him.

The sermon was, in my opinion, an example of religion at its worst—God is a genie in a bottle for me, and for you, an angry judge who distributes violence against the masses at will and you better watch out. I am God’s chosen, and my family and I are safe. The masses are degenerate and as such I do not really need to view them as *people*.

God’s wrath can be a comforting sort of theology when big things go terribly wrong, because it provides an explanation for the unexplainable—unless, of course, the terrible things happen to you. But as long as they do not happen to you, you do not have to wrestle with the reality of a good God who allows terrible things to happen. You can simplify the complexity of evil and suffering to it all being a part of God’s plan, AND (bonus) you can use other people’s pain to amplify your own agenda and scare people into believing you. Assigning God’s wrath to random acts of terror or natural disasters is a horrific abuse of religion, and yet preachers have been doing it since the beginning of human suffering.

The ten plagues in the book of Exodus are some of the most dramatic stories we have of God’s intervention in human affairs, not to mention God’s intervention in nature. God does things in the plagues that defy the laws of nature, but the question is not, “Did these plagues really happen?” The question is, why did God’s people choose to keep telling these stories throughout the ages and what might these stories say to us about God?

The Ten Plagues have fascinated doomsday preachers and film-makers alike. There is something incredible and terrifying about God interrupting the normal order so powerfully to make a point. In some ways, we long for a God who would speak so loudly and clearly. In other ways, we are appalled by a God who would behave in such nature-defying, earth-harming extremes.

The lectionary reading for today is from Genesis chapter 12. It is the story of the feast of the Passover. It is a text about the deliverance and liberation of the Hebrews. In many ways it is THE story of the Jewish faith.

It is also a text about God's tenth and final plague on the Egyptians, when the firstborn son in every Egyptian household died overnight. I believe that the way we tell a story is hugely important, so I want to back up and review the many stories we have skipped since Moses first encountered that burning bush until God told the Hebrew people to go ahead and pack their bags.

This all began when Moses asked Pharaoh the first time to let the people go. And Pharaoh replied, "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." And then the Pharaoh told the Egyptian taskmasters to work the Hebrews even harder and to stop giving them straw to make the bricks. Rather they would have to gather the straw themselves, but their quota of bricks would remain the same. Pharaoh said, "Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words." Needless to say, this did not endear Moses to the Hebrews. They blamed him for Pharaoh's increasing cruelty. They said to Moses and his brother Aaron (this is a quote from Exodus), "You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." And then Moses moaned to God, "Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people." (Exodus 5)

It wasn't too long after this that the water of the Nile turned to blood, and the first plague began. Plague after plague Pharaoh had the opportunity to release the people from slavery, and plague after plague he refused.

It is important to know *why* the plagues come. Note that God did not send plagues upon the Egyptians because they were having too much sex or playing cards or because their women were scantily clad. *The plagues came because they oppressed others.* This will be a reoccurring theme of the Bible and especially of the prophets. You will not hear Isaiah or Micah or Amos rail against homosexuality, for example—not even once. But you will hear them again and again and again decry the wickedness of trampling on the heads of the poor.

I've noticed sometimes more progressive Christians shy away from the Old Testament as if it had cooties. We don't want to associate with a text that makes God seem violent. We get squeamish at the slightest mention of God's wrath. Perhaps we've heard spiritually abusive sermons like the one I mentioned earlier, so naturally we want to run the other direction.

But I want to pause here and note a few things about God's wrath as God's wrath actually appears in the Bible.

1. God's wrath is for oppressors. I think that's worth repeating. God's wrath is on the oppressors.
2. God's wrath comes with a clear warning and with a clear purpose. The purpose is to liberate. The plagues do not come as a surprise. There is no confusion about why they are happening. The plagues come because the people are still enslaved, and Pharaoh is given every opportunity to release them.
3. While foreigners are sometimes the targets of God's wrath, the Hebrew people are by no means exempt from judgment. The prophets—including Jesus—often reserve the harshest indictments for God's own people.

4. In addition to all the wrath-talk, there are lots of places in the Hebrew Scriptures where God repeatedly watched out for the foreigner and commanded the people to treat the alien in their midst with honor.
5. A lot of the promises of God's wrath in the Hebrew Scriptures never come true, and instead the people experience great mercy.

I'm not saying these observations turn wrath into an easy subject, but I am saying that wrath isn't biblical if it targets anyone other than an oppressor. Anyone who preaches hellfire and brimstone for any reason other than to confront oppression does not speak for God. Look, I'm about as squeamish about attributing violence to God as a person can get, but I still think it bears repeating that according to the Bible's own telling—God sent the flood because “the earth was corrupt and full of violence” (Genesis 6:11). God destroyed Sodom because her people were “arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).

Perhaps we would do well to learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters. There is good reason not to get rid of the Old Testament and its stories. These stories take seriously the realities of human oppression. They take seriously how difficult and complex it can be to achieve liberation. They take seriously that sometimes enemies are very real.

Also, the Bible does not tell one monolithic story. It tells many stories, some of which challenge the presumptions of its other stories. The Bible is a conversation, not a creed. This is something the Jewish tradition understands far better than we do. They commonly use a form of biblical interpretation called midrash—the rabbis tell other stories about the biblical stories—like the one I shared earlier in today's service, about God interrupting the celebration to say, “My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?” Midrash is a way of reading the Bible that invites creativity, heart, and engagement. It's a way of reading the Bible that asks us to be storytellers in return, to fill in the missing elements, to imagine God's presence in pieces of the story we didn't expect. It's a way of reading the Bible that requires humility, because to answer life's big questions with stories instead of certainties means we are willing to accept there are mysteries we do not fully understand. It's a way of reading the Bible that privileges curiosity over spiritual arrogance.

One of the reasons I chose not to read the Passover text from Genesis 12 today is because that one story isn't the whole story. Every time we read the Bible, one story isn't the whole story, but today especially I wanted to remind us how we got to the place in the narrative where the Hebrew people were escaping Egypt but God was killing firstborns to make it happen. It's important to hear the rest of the story—to know that as Jews observe the Seder meal, when they get to the part about the ten plagues, they spill a drop of wine—the symbol of joy—from their cups with each plague. The death of Egyptians is not a thing to be celebrated, but a piece of the story to be mourned. It's important to realize there are reasons these stories keep being told down through the ages, despite their complexities.

As Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sosso said, “It's not just an ancient story. It's also our story. We too were in Egypt, and we too were freed. The whole story of the Exodus forms the basis of most moral legislation in Judaism. We are told to care for the stranger. Why? Because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We're supposed to be concerned for the oppressed. Why? Because we were slaves in the land of Egypt. Constantly, references to caring for the stranger and the

oppressed are throughout our tradition, and it's all based upon the fact that we once experienced what it meant to be oppressed.”

Imagine reading the daily news and choosing to identify with the oppressed, every time. Identifying with the immigrant, the foreigner, the victim, the poor, the displaced—*every time*. Can you see how knowing that you came from brick-making, came from bondage, came from immigrant is a crucial story to keep retelling?

And is it really so crazy that the Hebrew people believed nature itself was responsive to the deeds of humanity? Is Pharaoh and his hardening of heart a mere ancient story or a present reality? How many times does it have to flood before our leaders will take climate change seriously? Can you see how retelling these stories might be worthwhile?

Friends, may we be liberated from our judgments and sometimes not so subtle disdain of the Old Testament. May we be set free to enter the conversation with heart and with imagination. May we be liberated from the spiritual abuse we have endured at the mouths of false prophets who use God's words to pummel and point fingers rather than to set the captive free. May we be liberated from the embarrassment of claiming we are people of faith. May we be set free to revel in the knowing that God is love and God is invitation and God is good, and may we have no shame in saying we believe in that God. May we be liberated from the constricting view that we are God's chosen. May we be freed to embrace all those whom God has created. May we be liberated from the dogmas that trap and released into the Mystery that empowers. Maybe we liberated from our narrow places and brought into the width and length and height and depth of God's extravagant, immeasurable love. Amen.