

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
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"A Dystopian Story"
3rd in the Series *Between Egypt and Babylon*
Exodus 5-13
September 22, 2019

The 10 plagues of Egypt are as exciting as they are disturbing.

Wilderness prophets calling down fire and brimstone on tyrants...
Mystical curses that affect the powerful but don't touch the marginalized.
Holy hell breaking loose on all the bad guys.

Like I've been saying, this is epic stuff!
But it's also disturbing.

I mean, just imagine the Mississippi turning to blood... all that blood flowing and churning,
and then frogs so thick you can't keep them out of your house,
flies swarming,
and open wounds and boils beginning to grow on your neighbor, and then on you, and then your children.

All while the leader of your nation is enslaving the minorities and working class in your communities...and refuses to relent.

This part of the Bible kind of feels like getting sucked into a dystopian novel or movie.

You know what those are like, right?

Raise your hand if in high school you read "1984," or "Fahrenheit 451," or "Animal Farm."

Ok, hands down. Now, raise your hand if you've read or watched:

"The Hunger Games,"
or "The Man in the High Castle,"
or "The Handmaid's Tale,"
or "Divergent."

We get so drawn into these stories, don't we?

There is always something really dark about the world these stories describe, something that shocks your senses a bit.... But part of what makes them so fascinating is there is also something probable about the story... something that connects to power dynamics in our world.

And if you studied one in high school, then you know that there's always something deeper going on in these stories... something the author is trying to say or reveal about the disturbing nature of our world that is so often overlooked.

This is what makes the dystopian story-telling such a subversive and powerful tool. They are trying to wake us up and help us to see some disturbing tendencies in our own world and our own time.

Well, you might say that the first 15 chapters of Exodus, and the 10 plagues in particular, are like reading a dystopian novel.

In fact, I'd say it was *the* great dystopian story that the Israelites told and retold to each generation.

To get a sense of this, I want to invite you to imagine we're living in the time of King Solomon's reign. Solomon is the third king in Israel's history.... well after the time of Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho... and the Israelites entering the Promised Land.

And it's after the time of Samson, and Gideon, and Deborah. It's after the time when Samuel anointed Saul, the first king... Saul who has gone down in history as a somewhat failed first king.

But, then there was King David, the great king who brought Israel its long-needed military victories. In fact, the battles of David's day are sort of what WWII did for the United States. David's time is what turned Israel into a great military power.

And now, you're living in the time of Solomon, David's son.

And Solomon has been on the throne for a few decades... and there are all the signs that your country has become one of the most wealthy and powerful nations. It's what everyone always wanted to be. Your national pride is the highest it's ever been.

In fact, the leaders of other countries now come to your king and to your capital in Jerusalem because you all have a reputation, and you are a strong people, with a strong king.

And when the leaders of the world come, they are wowed by the wealth of Solomon, the gold, the silver, and the 1,000 concubines.

And they are wowed by all the economic activity, the building projects of Solomon: The government buildings. The monuments. The Palace. And the crowning jewel of it all: The Temple of Yahweh still being built...

This temple, in fact, had been the dream of King David, and now Solomon is building it. It's like the crowning jewel of the Israelite Empire.

You see, this temple is to your people's ancient God, the God of your ancestors, of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob... from long, long ago.

And this temple is the greatest piece of architecture you have ever seen. And there's more gold than you knew was possible. And all of it makes you so proud. This is what it was like in Solomon's time.

Then, one night you were sitting near the outer gates of Jerusalem and there was an old woman telling one of your people's ancient stories...

It was the one about Yahweh delivering your ancestors out of Egypt.

That old story of the standoff between Pharaoh and Yahweh.

And your imagination just came alive in a new way as she told about Moses walking up to the throne of Pharaoh and facing him down. She told about Pharaoh's dismissive nature. How he said he

didn't know this Yahweh god, but there was no way he was going to let the Israelites go off on some holiday to worship their ancestral god in the wilderness.

"But," Pharaoh said, "since you think your people have time to go off and worship, then they must not be working that hard. You Hebrews are so lazy. Tell your people, Moses, that they can collect their own straw for the bricks they are making." And Pharaoh pushed the people more, the old woman said.

And the more they cried out, the more Pharaoh said, "You are lazy. That's your real problem. You all are lazy, lazy!"¹

[On a side note, this is exactly what Pharaoh says, three times in Exodus 5. So, I guess it shouldn't surprise us when minority groups are described as being lazy today, should it?

It's what Pharaoh's voice is always prone to say to those who are trying to find some relief from life on the bottom of society. "Stop being lazy. Stop looking for handouts. Work harder!" It's one of Pharaoh's favorite themes. But back to our story.]

So, you are sitting there listening to the old woman on the outskirts of Jerusalem tell this ancient story... And she tells about the taskmasters pushing the Israelites **to do** more and more, **to build** more and more... **to make** more and more...

and the more she describes the story, the more you start to get really uncomfortable.

Because you can't help but think about all the foreigners in your own country working so hard... foreigners that King Solomon has been using as cheap and free labor... to work on his national projects... **to build** more and more, **to make** more and more...

the monuments, the palaces, and especially the temple... all that grandeur that so inspires you... You don't like to think about it, but you know. You've heard. Solomon is building with forced labor.²

And you used to think he was only going to use the foreigners in your land... but rumor has it that Solomon's going to start forcing some of the Tribes of Israel to do the work, too.

But you're hoping those are just rumors...

The woman goes on to tell about what happened as Pharaoh stands off with Yahweh. There is a plague... The Nile is turned to blood.

Pharaoh's not impressed. "My magicians can do that too." It's the ancient way of saying, "I've got that technology, too. Big deal."

Then there are the frogs. "Yep," Pharaoh says, "we have that power, too. Your Yahweh is going to have to do a little better."

It's like this great standoff between
the power of Yahweh and the power of Pharaoh.

¹ Exodus 5:8, 17

² For more on Solomon's forced labor policies see, <https://claudemariottini.com/2014/02/18/forced-labor-under-solomon/>

And even when Pharaoh can't do all the same signs as Yahweh, he isn't ready to give up his belief, his trust in his own power. He is not going to let Yahweh win and take away his cheap labor.

So, back and forth they go. Pharaoh pushing the people. Yahweh sending a plague on Egypt.
the gnats, the boils, the locusts... plague after plague...

And the way this old woman tells the story... it's all so vivid. You can't help but be mesmerized by her. And you almost start to think that Pharaoh was a fool.

But the old woman is such a good story teller, she won't let you be naïve:

Pharaoh couldn't let them go, you see.

He needed them. Oh, sure, he started by telling the people there were too many of those foreigners... but by now they are his forced labor.

They are the foundation of his economy. It doesn't matter what God thinks, he's not going to let them go.

She goes on to tell you about how Pharaoh digs in his heels and tries to outlast Moses,
but there is another plague, hail and fire come down... like stones from the sky,
crushing the bodies of all the animals,
destroying the food in their fields,
and the Egyptians cower in shelters...

"Oh, how marvelous and how terrifying it was!" she said.

Truth be told, you're kind of disturbed by it all. Scene after scene of plagues and destruction play out until the dark night, when the angel of death passes through Egypt... and all the Egyptian first born are killed.

It's as disturbing as any dystopian movie you and I have ever seen.

And it's so complex, because the suffering is on both sides now.

The suffering of the Israelites... under the yoke of Pharaoh
has now become the suffering of the Egyptian people...
because Pharaoh refuses to change.

And so, it takes 10 terrifying plagues... for Pharaoh's system of domination to finally collapse, and for the Israelites to break free...

But the suffering of it all... brought on by the power of Yahweh... well, it leaves you uneasy and disturbed. What is this story saying about Yahweh?

**And that question, and the 10 plagues... they all linger in your mind and your imagination... as you walk back home that night,
past the market,
past the monuments,
the work sites where the foreigners, the Canaanites and Hittites, are carrying stone, and making brick, and building day and night to build your great temple.**

And part of you can't help but wonder:

What will happen if Yahweh's temple is built on the backs of human suffering?

What will happen if Solomon's wealth and Israel's strength comes at the cost... of the foreigners among us?

It's a question you just can't shake as you go home that night.

So, you try to sleep it off.

The next day, you get up and go on like you have every day, and you try not to think too much about it. It's just an ancient story.

Only ...it's still lodged in your sub-conscious imagination...

**And on occasion, when you walk past the temple project on your way to work,
it pops to the surface...**

But what can you do, right? This is the modern world.

And ...this is what... peace and prosperity look like.

And so, you move on... and enjoy all the national pride and power that Solomon has been building for you and your people.

And that pattern of living... well, it works OK for you.

Only, it doesn't quite work out for your grandchildren.

You see, when Solomon dies, the whole kingdom and its systems of power... will start to crack... under the weight of the suffering of the marginalized people.

The people working on the temple under the Israelite taskmasters begin to demand relief,
just as the Hebrews did who worked under the Egyptian taskmasters.

But the new king of Israel has visions as grand as Solomon and is as stubborn as a king will be. He won't give in... any more than Pharaoh would.

And so, there is an uprising.

The kingdom of Israel will split in two ... just as Egypt was split apart.

And so, it doesn't quite work out for your grandchildren... any more than it did for Pharaoh's grandchildren.

And they wonder, ...they ask themselves, "How could my fore parents not see... they had become the very Empire they were delivered from? They had become Egypt."

This is what happens in the biblical story. But the questions asked by the grandchildren of Solomon's time aren't the only ones to ask.

It's a question that grandchildren have asked throughout history, you know.

They've looked back on their fore parents and wondered:

How could they not see, they had become Egypt?

In fact, if you study the history of Christianity, you will find yourself asking it again and again.

When you read about the church's role in something like the Salem Witch Trials: How could they not see they were acting like Egypt?

Or when you learn about what the church had become before the Reformation... when we manipulated the poor by using the fear of hell to raise money for the Church's power and prestige:
How could they not see?

**Or when the church engaged in holy wars... between Christians and Muslims, or holy wars between Catholics and Protestants, slaughtering thousands in the Name of Christ:
How could they not see that it was really about power and wealth?
How could they not see they had become Egypt?**

Or go all the way back to the third century, when the church went from a marginalized, persecuted group in the Holy Roman Empire, to (in one generation) becoming the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire,
and the church shifted from being the victims of violence,
to the perpetrators of violence and abuse:
How could they not see
they had become another Egypt?

In fact, it's happened so much throughout our history... that I just can't help but wonder: ***What will future generations say about us?***

Will they look at the living conditions of those who build our buildings or our cars?
Or will they look at the living conditions of those that pick our food in the fields across our country... and compare that to the living conditions of those of us who drive these cars, and live in these buildings, and eat that food... and wonder, **"How could they not see?"**

Or will they look at the percentage of our own population that we incarcerate at an unprecedented level in human history and unprecedented compared to any other country in the world, to create a false sense of safety and ask themselves, **"How could they not see?"**

Or will our grandchildren look at the way we enslave the body of the earth... treating it like a taskmaster would, demanding it produce more and more to satisfy our ever-growing levels of consumption

Will they look at that and wonder: **How could they not see?**

I don't know. But I'm haunted by the question.

**And I'm haunted by the uncomfortable truth that we humans are much more likely to trust in Egypt's power or Solomon's power
than the mysterious nature of God's power in our world that is always lifting up the lowest and least.
And I'm haunted by the dystopian story of the 10 plagues that goes with it.**

Because apparently, Yahweh won't let the "Egypt's" of our world go unchecked indefinitely. Eventually, the powers of Egypt will be humbled before the power of Yahweh.

It's one of the great themes of the Bible:

The Prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

*"Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low...
And the glory of the Lord will be revealed."*

This theme

does play out in the rise and fall of Israel as a nation,
and it plays out in the voice of other prophets like Amos and Micah.

And it plays itself out again in the gospels... in which Jesus' life and ministry is like a constant reminder that ***Yahweh's power is one that is liberating the poor, the lame, the marginalized... lifting up every valley***

and confronting the political, and economic, and religious powers... making low the mountains and hills. Which can be a really uncomfortable part of the gospel.

And so today, I'm sorry to say that today I don't have any simple answers to make us feel better.
I wish I did. I really do.

But today, we are in this dystopian story – a story that is supposed to disturb us.

The 10 plagues of Egypt are as disturbing as they are exciting.

**So, let yourself be a little disturbed.
Maybe that's what we're supposed to do.**

**Maybe it's the only way...
we'll learn how to stop trusting and living
for the power of Pharaoh,
and start trusting and living
for the power of Yahweh.**

Amen.