

“God’s Promises Will Prevail in the End”

Exodus 8:16-24; Luke 11:14-22

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent 2022; March 20, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In the Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning, we see God at work delivering His people from bondage. In the Old Testament reading, it has to do with delivering the people of Israel from bondage to the kingdom of ancient Egypt. The Gospel reading has to do with Jesus delivering a man from bondage to a demon that would not permit the man to speak. In both cases, there is a tyrant whom God defeats. In both cases, God fulfills His promises by grace.

The Old Testament reading takes place in the middle of the story of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt. We need to back up a little to put things in context. Some 400 hundred years earlier, God had called Abraham out of his father’s house to go to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-3). God promised Abraham that he would have so many descendants that they would be a great nation. He also promised that God’s blessing would come from Abraham’s descendants to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). This promise had to do with the Messiah. God also promised that He would give the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants. God made this same promise to Abraham’s son Isaac, and then to Abraham’s grandson Jacob, who is the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

As the book of Genesis closes, Jacob and his sons and their families end up in Egypt as a result of the story of Joseph. Joseph was Jacob’s eleventh son, at that time the youngest, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. Later, by the grace and plan of God, Joseph became second in command in Egypt under only Pharaoh himself. There was a famine in Canaan but there was food in Egypt. So Jacob and his sons and their families went down to Egypt 70 persons in all (Genesis 46:27; Exodus 1:5). That is how the people of Israel ended up in Egypt. While there, they grew into a nation.

Joseph died. The Pharaoh that was alive then also eventually died. Pharaohs arose after that who were not friendly to the people of Israel. They began to view them as captive, forced labor. Finally, a Pharaoh arose who made Israel’s condition of forced labor hard and severe. Israel was enslaved to Pharaoh and the Egyptian regime. The people of Israel cried out to God.

But in fact God had told Abraham all of this ahead of time. God had told him that his descendants would be strangers in another land and serve them 400 hundred years, but that then God would bring them out of that land with great possessions and would bring them to the land of Canaan, the promised land (Genesis 15:13-14, 18). The land in which Israel would be strangers turned out to be Egypt.

We pick up the story today when it is time for God to fulfill these promises and make His plan come to pass. He sends Moses to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to let God’s people Israel go. He wants to take them to the promised land.

There is a mighty world power standing in the way. It is the kingdom of Egypt. Sitting atop that kingdom was Pharaoh, King of Egypt. They were reaping the economic benefits of having a captive workforce in the people of Israel. Neither Pharaoh nor his court were inclined to let the people of Israel go. They also did not recognize Yahweh, the LORD, the God of Israel, as anything special or anything to worry about. They thought of Yahweh, at first, as they probably thought of all gods, as just a local or tribal deity. They also had their own gods. They also had their own spiritual powers and practices by which the magicians and sorcerers worked their

“secrete arts” (Exodus 7:11, 22), they thought.

God told Moses that He would harden Pharaoh’s heart to give an opportunity to show Pharaoh that Yahweh, the LORD, is in the midst of the earth (Exodus 8:22); so that Pharaoh would know that “the earth is the LORD’s” (Exodus 9:29 ESV); that Yahweh is not just some local or tribal deity, but God almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and that Yahweh fulfills His promises. Pharaoh also hardened his own heart in refusing to listen to Moses and Aaron and yield to God (Exodus 7:3, 9:34). Therefore, God would “get glory” over Pharaoh (Exodus 14:4).

So, the game is on. Pharaoh engages in a huge power struggle with God. Who is going to come out on top in this struggle? In digging in, Pharaoh brought about his own destruction and hardship and misery for the people of Egypt. God knew that Pharaoh would require miraculous signs to test just what kind of God it was who was demanding that Pharaoh let Israel go. God was willing to play that game at that time to show Pharaoh who is really God. God called these miraculous deeds “signs and wonders” (Genesis 7:3). We know them as the plagues.

Our reading today picks it up with the signs and wonders of the gnats and the flies. This contest of signs and wonders, however, started out with Aaron’s shepherd’s staff turning into a snake. The Egyptian magicians and sorcerers were able to do the same with their staffs. But then Aaron’s snake swallowed up their snakes.

Then God told Moses to strike the Nile with his staff and turn the water into blood. He did so. The Egyptian magicians and sorcerers were also able to turn water into blood “by their secret arts.” I think we should understand that God was secretly at work in this. So Pharaoh’s heart was hardened. This also happened with the frogs; frogs everywhere (Exodus 8:3-5).

But now we come to the gnats and the flies. “Tell Aaron to strike the ground with your staff, the LORD says to Moses, “and the dust will become gnats” (Exodus 8:16). Aaron did so. The dust became gnats. Imagine the dust in the hair of humans and beasts becoming gnats. There were gnats on man and beast. And then there were the flies, swarms of flies everywhere (Exodus 8:21).

The gnats frightened the magicians and sorcerers because they could not duplicate this sign. They knew that it was only God working through His word that He spoke through Moses that did this. They went to Pharaoh and told him: “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19 ESV).

That was an interesting thing to say. Why the finger of God and not the power of God or the hand of God or the arm of God, or something like that? It is hard to say exactly. But it is interesting to note that in the Bible fingers make things. An example is Psalm 8:3, which says: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained” (Psalm 8:3 NKJV). We take it for granted, but when we stop and think about it, there is so much we can do with the way God made our hands. There is great power in our fingers. There is precision, definite purpose, ability, and craftsmanship involved with fingers. Thus Moses told the people of Israel that God wrote the commandments on the two tablets of stone with “the finger of God” (Deuteronomy 9:10). Thus, the Egyptian magicians and sorcerers confessed that the gnats were the work of God. This is the point. The gnats were the work of God. Yahweh is God.

Jesus says that He cast out the demon from the man “by the finger of God” (Luke 11:20). Therefore, the kingdom of God was manifest in what He did.

It is interesting how the Egyptian magicians and sorcerers were able to keep up with God for a while. God let them. But not from here on. Now they would not be able to keep up. Thus God brought the flies, and the plague on the Egyptian livestock, and boils on man and beast among the Egyptians, and the super big thunderstorms with bowling-ball sized hail, and locusts that ate

whatever was left from the hail storm, and the darkness that could drive you mad, and then the slaying of the firstborn of man and beast; the people of Israel being saved from the destroyer, sent from God, by the blood of the lamb.

But even then Pharaoh chased the people of Israel into the Red Sea after letting them go. That was a mistake, for the Red Sea crashed down upon Pharaoh's army after the people of Israel had passed through safely.

What should we take from this? It is a wonderful story, and it shows us that God can do anything. But what do we learn about God and in relation to God?

The most important thing is that God fulfills His promises. We talked about the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob regarding the people of Israel, which has the Savior of all nations at the heart of it. There is also the promise given in the garden of Eden: "God said to the serpent that a Son of Eve would crush the serpent's head" (Genesis 3:15). We see today in the Gospel that the Son of Eve, Jesus, drove the demon out of the man, the descendant of Adam. Jesus plunders the strong man's house, the strong man being the devil (Luke 11:22). This is good news for us. Jesus delivers us.

What power whether earthly or spiritual has the ability to thwart God fulfilling His promises? The answer is. No power. The powerful Egyptian kingdom and army could not do it. The devil and demons could not do it. We find on Easter Sunday that the murderous scheming of proud and evil men could not do it, as Jesus came back to life, indestructible life, on the third day.

God's contest with Pharaoh teaches us that God works things out; that He is in control, no matter what the surface madness might look like; that whatever men or the devil think their purposes are, God is accomplishing His purposes, and will do so. How much do we need to hear this in the midst of what is going on among the nations right now? And God's purposes can be on the grand scale of things going on among nations, or on the smallest scale of the life of the man from whom Jesus cast out the demon, or in your life or mine.

This is to encourage and strengthen our faith in God in Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Pharaoh was not able to stop God. The devil is not able to stop God. Those who put Jesus to death were not able to stop God. Sin cannot stop God. Not even death can stop God. God wins in the end; His grace and mercy will prevail. And through faith in His Son Jesus, you also will win in the end in Him by grace through the forgiveness of sins and promise of life everlasting; and there will be life, and peace, and joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.