

Sermon Text for August 15, 2021

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Luke 17:11-19, Exodus 7:14-25, 11:4-5

“The story of Moses and the plagues”

Stories to live by, that is where we find ourselves. Our last series was surprised by joy where we found ourselves with the Apostle Paul and the church that he loves as he speaks to them in the midst of the type of persecution we couldn't imagine. We found ourselves aware of Christians who loved Jesus and yet in the midst of a daily grind that involved the potential for death and arrest, they still were able to find joy. We hopefully were able to take from this in the midst of all that we are going through how do we find the joy of Christ, which can seem elusive based upon our environment. The joy of Christ cannot be dictated by our life situations. We must remember that.

We find ourselves in the midst of a sermon series entitled Stories to live by. The stories that we hear give us way forward especially as we see protagonists dealing with life issues and situations that put our daily struggles in a very different context. We are also discovering that some of the details that we thought we knew about these stories were not as accurate as we thought. The fruit isn't an apple, the snake isn't called the devil, the wise men didn't visit Jesus in the manger but in a house.

We find ourselves today looking at the story of Moses and the plagues, right after we find ourselves with the story of the ten lepers who are healed, but only one comes back to give thanks. So today both death and life point to an operating truth upon which we need to base our lives. Each of these stories point to the purpose of knowing that God is the Lord. The plagues point to the Lordship of God. The healing points to the Lordship of Jesus, our God. Let's read.

READ

So the story of the healed lepers is one of the favorites for the preschool kids to act out. I have to make sure that the kids know that 9 of them are going to end up kind of being the bad guy, and one of them is the good guy. You should see the face of the 9 kids as they walk away without saying thank you to Jesus. Once after the story we were heading back to the classroom and one of the kids who was in the 9 said to the one who played Jesus, thanks for healing me. Now, that isn't in the story, but it drives us to want to make sure that we thank Jesus for healing us, even if it wasn't in the story.

It is interesting in the story that Jesus asks the healed Leper a series of questions that are somewhat rhetorical. Look at vs.17, the questions lead to the answers that yes, he was the only

one, and yes, he is a Samaritan, a foreigner, but he was treated the same as all the others who were healed. This Samaritan falls in line with a series of examples that Jesus gives where the Samaritan, the foreigner, the stranger, is lifted up as the protagonist and the hero of the story. Think of the Good Samaritan who helps the Jew who was beat up on the road while all the other Jews disregarded him. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well who was given the task of preaching the Gospel so that a whole Samaritan village comes to faith. Think of the Samaritan woman who pleads for her daughter and eventually gets Jesus to say that she would be remembered for her faith.

So we find the despised, the hated, the other, the different, in this story, and others like it in Scripture, understand that Jesus is Lord, against those who should get it, don't. If the theme of today in our Bible Stories is that these stories today exemplify the message that Jesus is Lord, this one specifically points to the outsiders as the ones who get it, but the insiders, don't.

Outsiders and insiders. The New Testament uses a word for God's chosen people, the insiders, and that is the term elect. We believers in Jesus are the elect. But sometimes Christians behave like little kids: I'm elect and you're not. I'm chosen and you aren't. I'm an insider and you aren't. When we do that we fall in a trap where we forget that we were elected for something. We have been elected, we have been chosen, to a purpose, not to an office or a way of life that comes to us through some privilege. We have been saved so that we might offer salvation to others. We have been called into a relationship with the Messiah, the savior Jesus, so that we might call others into that same relationship.

But we have taken this election, this calling, and created walls to delineate those who are insiders and those who are outsiders. Jesus tore that wall down, but we are continuing to build it up. This tendency to divide into good guys and bad guys, the insiders and the outsiders is part of our make up, especially in this country. Our story is a history of tribalism. Arrogance, elitism, us versus them, often in deadly and wicked ways.

I grew up and lived in settings where I was often the minority. In my high school I was a minority, on the basketball team I was a minority. I felt comfortable in that setting, so when I see someone with a t-shirt that says Black Lives Matter, I think to myself, yes.., they do. When I am asked, "can you understand why a statue of a general who fought to preserve slavery might be painful to descendants of slaves?" I think yes I can, especially after living in northern Florida for 8 years where an elder there once explained to me why blacks are inferior to whites. True story.

When I am asked to consider that my white skin might be an advantage in our culture, I think, yes, it might. Slavery, the division of whites against blacks, is the worst example of tribalism in our nation's history and continues to haunt us to this day, there is no doubt. The same is true politically, isn't it? We have lost the ability to carry on passionate but courteous conversations about political matters. Even religion. When I am with pastors who, like me, consider themselves evangelical, it is so easy to speak contemptuously of the other side. To joke and criticize. These are brothers and sisters in Christ, and yet we still divide ourselves into us and them.

If we are ever going to be used by God to reach out to and love our community, our world, if we are ever going to be for them we must begin by remembering that God is for them. God loves them. God loves those who are progressive and God loves the members of the political party opposite. God loves equally all races. God loves the people of China, and Iran, and Russia. God loves the people of the Taliban, and wishes them to be saved.

That doesn't mean his heart isn't broken by rebellion and wickedness, just as his heart was broken by our rebellion and wickedness. We needed saving. We needed a Savior, and we got one. But Jesus didn't come to save Americans, white Americans, white republican or democratic Americans. Jesus came to save all the families of the earth. He has elected us for a purpose: to proclaim his love and salvation to the whole world. Including, and perhaps especially, those we disdain, or mistrust, or imagine to be beyond his saving.

Which brings us to Pharaoh and the plagues. We find that same theme in vs.17 where we read: Thus says the Lord, by this you shall know that I am the Lord. That is the purpose of what we are reading today, the God is the Lord not just of the Israelites, but also of the Egyptians and God has power not just over the Israelites who are in captivity, but also the Egyptians who are holding the Hebrew people captive.

We begin and end with plagues of blood. The first plague, which we read, is that of turning the river to blood. The last plague, which we also read a snippet of, also dealt with blood, and that was the blood of the first born son for those who did not have the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. The eight plagues in between, which makes ten, are the following: frogs, lice, flies, livestock pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness. As the plagues hit the nation of Egypt the stubbornness of Pharaoh and his inability to see God as Lord not only continues but intensifies.

It is fascinating to me that the people of Egypt were able to see the Lordship of God in relationship to the Jewish people, but only Pharaoh was missing it. We see before the final

plague that the people of Egypt were willing to give gifts to the people of God, because they knew who was Lord. If you look at chapter 12 you see in vs.35 that those citizens of Egypt were more than willing to be rid of the Hebrew people especially in light of the plagues. But Pharaoh's heart was hardened. His stubbornness and his inability to focus on his Lordship got in the way.

At this point, we see that Pharaoh stands alone. We even see in 11:8 that the servants of Pharaoh would bow down to Moses, recognizing, again, the Lordship of God over and against the Lordship of Pharaoh. History has shown us that there can be a marked difference between a leader and his or her people. Look at how things would have been different, how many lives would have been saved if those around Pharaoh were allowed to speak and be listened to. But his stubbornness blocks his ability to save his people from the final plague. His stubbornness doesn't allow him to see the Lordship of God in this story.

God's actions were to shake Pharaoh out of his stubborn stupor so that he could recognize the Lordship of God. God loved Pharaoh as he loved the Israelites. The purpose of both of these Scriptures is to show that God is Lord over disease, over slavery, over stubbornness, over tribalism.

Throughout this time we are able to live by stories that remind us that God is Lord. Hang onto that truth. Jesus is Lord. Sometimes our stubbornness makes us think that we are Lord. Our humility describes a Lordship centered in God. May we be directed always to finding ways to proclaim his Lordship for all people and to all people. Amen.