

Drawn out of the Water

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 1:7-2:10

Today we start our new fall sermon series. This fall we will be walking through the book of Exodus. Exodus, as most of you know, is the story of how Israel moved out of slavery in Egypt and then travelled through the desert toward the Promised Land. There are two movements in this story and those two movements are reflected in the title of this series. There is *Freedom From*: God frees the Israelites from their captivity of Pharaoh and Egypt and all the evil powers they represent. The first four sermons of our series will talk about that liberation. We will see that even though Pharaoh is long gone, these same powers still enslave people today. That's *Freedom From*. The second half of the series will be *Freedom To*. God freed Israel from Egypt, but that freedom did not allow them to do whatever they wanted; they were freed from Egypt so that they could learn to live as children of God. God freed them from Egypt so that they could learn the deep, life-giving disciplines of his family. This fall we will learn this glorious freedom, these life-giving disciplines with Israel.

We will start this morning with one of the strongest enslaving powers that held Israel. I won't name that power yet, but it shows up in the first two chapters of Exodus and it's personified in the person of Pharaoh. This power still enslaves people today. Let's read the passage, and as I start reading, notice that Exodus 1:7 echoes the blessing of Genesis 1. In Genesis 1 the Lord blesses human beings and says to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth!" See if you can hear the echo of that blessing.

Read Exodus 1:7-2:10. Exodus does not start with a picture of Israel in slavery, Exodus starts out with a picture of Israel thriving! Israel is blooming. God created us to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth. Israel an embodiment of that! They are a picture of God's blessing! They are a model of how God intends people to live. How does Pharaoh react to this goodness, this blessing? Not well.

Pharaoh's royal barge sails gently down the Nile. Pharaoh sits on the deck. Two slaves are fanning him. There's a plate of figs at his fingertips. A beautiful young servant girl stands beside him ready to refill his wine glass as soon as it's empty. But Pharaoh can't enjoy any of this because he's passing through the land of the Israelites. He looks in one direction and he sees their green fields bursting with grain. He looks in another direction and he sees the big new Israelite barns. He looks along the river bank and he sees the Hebrew children playing, the music of their laughter echoes across the water. They look so healthy and there are so many of them!! Pharaoh frowns. His hand clenches into a fist. In tone of cold determination he turns to his high chancellor standing behind him on deck, "*Look! Are you seeing this?! These Israelites, these foreigners, are becoming too numerous for us. They are a threat to our Egyptian way of life. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them. Let us take care of them before they outnumber us.*" And so Pharaoh declares war on the blessing and the life he sees springing up around him. Pharaoh sets himself against the covenantal blessings of God. He hatches a plan, a kind of final solution. First he enslaves the Israelites. When that doesn't keep them from growing, he gives orders to the midwives to make sure the male babies are killed at childbirth. When the midwives foil his plan, he gives an even more brutal order. "If you find a Hebrew baby boy, throw him in the Nile." Pharaoh will not be happy until he's sitting in his barge, and instead of hearing

Hebrew children laughing and playing, he sees their bodies floating by him in the Nile's muddy water.

Why does Pharaoh want to snuff out the laughter of Hebrew children? Why does he see the green fields of the Israelites as a threat? Why does the happiness of the Hebrews make his heart grow cold? Because Pharaoh worships death. Pharaoh is enslaved by death. Pharaoh is a servant of the 'gospel' of death. Death. That's the first enslaving power that we encounter in our sermon series. How is Pharaoh a slave to death? He's clearly living by death's code. Death has a set of teachings - a kind of "gospel" of fear and scarcity - and Pharaoh has bought into it. Death says life is not eternal, life is short, so hold onto life whatever it takes. Death says life is not abundant, there is not enough for everyone in this world so make sure you get what you need and don't let anyone else take it from you. Death says other people are threats. People could take your food, they could take your life, so watch out for them. Pharaoh follows this dark gospel of scarcity and fear, and so when he sees life and laughter in another people he moves to snuff it out.

The worship of death isn't just some ancient Egyptian thing. I wonder how many of you saw the summer blockbuster, *Avengers Infinity War*. It's one of those Marvel comic book movies. Lots of people saw it and it got great reviews. The villain in that movie was Thanos. Thanos was a super being from the planet Titan. Thanos has accumulated enormous power and wealth, but as he looks around the galaxy he sees all sorts of other civilizations growing and thriving and, and like Pharaoh on his barge, Thanos frowns. He's sure that there isn't enough for everyone. He's sure that the universe will reach peak population and all the abundance and growth will turn into famine and war. So he hatches a simple plan. He will seek the infinity stones. These stones will give him absolute power in the universe. Then he will use that power to eliminate half the population in the universe, thus making sure that those left over will thrive. With a kind of cold tenderness, he explains his murderous plan to his adopted daughter Gamora: "Little one, it's a simple calculus. This universe is finite. Its resources are finite...if life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correcting."

Does that sound anything like Pharaoh? "The people have become far too numerous. We must do something." Pharaoh and Thanos follow the gospel of death. Death worship is alive and well in our culture. Anywhere where people make their decisions based on fear and scarcity, they are following the path of Pharaoh and Thanos. You saw it with the Nazis in Germany, threatened by the flourishing of the Jews, deciding to wipe them out for the sake of the German people. You saw it in the English reaction to the Irish potato famine in the mid-19th century. The English ruled Ireland but sent only marginal help when the potato crops were devastated by a blight. They worried they wouldn't have enough for themselves. Instead they called the Irish people lazy and suggested that the famine was "the sharp but effectual remedy by which the cure [for their social evils] is likely to be effected." One million people died. People follow the teachings of fear and scarcity and end up making blood offerings to death.

Death worship doesn't just happen in great genocide; it happens in the small, middle class places of our life. Mary is heading into 7th grade. She's anxious about her social standing. Will she find friends? Will she be accepted? She doesn't want to become one of the invisible people. She gets to school and every break one of her old childhood friends, Jean, finds her and hangs with her. She's known Jean since they were 3. They go to the same church, live in the same neighborhood. The problem with Jean is that she's awkward. She's a nice girl, but she says weird stuff in conversation, and she wears frumpy clothes, and she has this loud laugh that startles people. Sometimes when she is with a group of the popular kids, the ones Mary would

really like to be with, Jean laughs and she sees people give her a look. Mary makes a decision. She pushes Jean away. Stops responding to her texts, she avoids her at break, ignores her in group conversations. Mary decides that middle school social capital is a scarce resource. You need every scrap you can get. Mary can't afford to spend any of that capital on people like Jean. You see what happened there? Death was whispering in Mary's ear. Death kept saying, "There's not enough! It can't be both you and her." Without realizing it, Mary is worshiping death, and she's offering her friend as a sacrifice on death's altar. It happens to all of us. Death whispers its dark gospel in our ear. "There's not enough. You aren't going to make it! You need to take drastic measures."

The gospel of our Lord is not a gospel of fear and scarcity! He is a God of amazing grace and abundant life. He is the One who does immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. In our passage the Lord shows his power over death and its gospel. He does that at a couple of levels. On the surface level he does it through people. He does it through those 5 wonderful women who choose life instead of death. There's Pharaoh's daughter who defies her father's orders and keeps the baby alive. That's a slap in death's face. There's the Hebrew midwives, they choose life. They have no power – they are slave women - but they break the law and refuse to execute Pharaoh's orders. That's a finger in death's eye. And then there's Moses' mother and sister who devise a clever scheme to keep Moses alive, so clever that Moses' mom ends up getting paid by Pharaoh to nurse her own baby. That's a punch in death's nose. These women are surrounded by fear and scarcity. But they do not live out of fear and scarcity. All around them death is snarling and raging and menacing; they just keep on loving and choosing life.

But of course these women don't do these things on their own strength. The power that allows them to choose life in the face of death comes from God. The power for any of us to choose life and love in the face of death comes from God. And in the deep reading of this passage, God shows us that he is stronger than death. Where do we see that? Well let's zoom into that little basket floating in the river Nile, a 3 month old baby crying inside. Did you notice a little footnote beside the word 'basket' in your bible? It tells us that the word for basket here can also mean 'ark'. And what was that basket coated with? Pitch. If you really know your Bible, you will remember that Noah also used pitch to coat his ark. Is that little baby bobbing in a basket, or is he in God's ark? Look once and it looks like baby bobbing in a basket, about to be swallowed by the water of death. Look again and you see that he is in the ark of the almighty God who carried Noah and his family through the raging Flood. Death has no power over this child. Death has no power over any of the people who belong to this God.

Look deeper still. Where was Moses floating when he was drawn out of the water? Among the reeds. The reeds. That's a foreshadowing. In chapter 14, Moses and the Israelites will be running from the Pharaoh and his chariots, and they will find themselves pinned against the shore of a great sea. Do you remember the name of that sea? You probably think of it as the Red sea, but in Hebrew its name is the Sea of Reeds. There too just as it looks like death will be closing its jaws around his people, the Lord will draw them out of the water. Death has no power to the people who belong to this God.

Look deeper still. That baby should remind you of another man who was born to set his people free. Death tried to drown him too. He was getting too much attention, taking the light away from the ruling powers so they decided he should die. And so, driven by fear of losing what they had, they seized Jesus and nailed him on a cross and then they tossed him into the grave. Look once at that man hanging on the cross, he looks like a defeated Galilean carpenter.

Look again and he is the Lord of life, driving a stake into the heart of death. The Father drew Jesus out of the water of death, out of the tomb, and unleashed a river of eternal life. Death has no power over the people who belong to this God.

Look on more time at Moses in that basket and you might even see yourself. Because someday death will try to take hold of you. He will come snarling into your life. He will bring weakness, he will bring scarcity, and he will bring fear. You will find yourself sinking down, sinking down into death's cold waters. But in that place too, the Lord, the giver of life will reach down and in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, he will draw you out of those waters. And you will find yourself in his glorious presence lost in wonder, love and praise. Because death has no power over the people who belong to this God. Congregation, when Death whispers its gospel of fear and scarcity into your ear this week, don't be afraid. Christ is risen! Evil is defeated! And I declare to you that you are free from the power of death.

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