

Stuck in the Mud

Exodus | Exodo 14: 19-31, Matthew | Mateo 18: 21-35

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I

There's not much humor in the story of the Exodus. Some Biblical tales are peppered with pithy understatements, sarcastic asides, or other forms of comic relief. Not the Exodus. It's completely serious from the moment God commissions Moses to deliver Pharaoh a stern message, "Let my people go!" to the moment God parts the waters for the Israelites to flee from captivity.

Throughout the narrative God becomes, if anything, more determined to liberate the Israelites and more dreadful. You can imagine God's great clenched fists as escalating signs and portents go unheeded by Egypt's king. With Moses as the Divine herald, God hurls frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts at the oppressive tyrant. A pestilence of boils. A 5,000 year hail storm. None of these cosmic interventions increasing Pharaoh's motivation to release the Hebrews, God's frustration grows. A river of undrinkable water. A protracted eclipse of the sun that casts the world into darkness. Ten plagues now God has heaved against Pharaoh, finally breaking the despotic king's hardened heart with the terrible sacrifice now remembered as Passover. Granted a brief reprieve from their enslavement, the Hebrews stream out of Egypt as fast as they can flee. When Pharaoh's grief over his lost son turns to rage he sends the Egyptian army in pursuit. Our white-knuckled God once again defends the Israelites in flight. A pillar of fire from earth to heaven separates them from the army. The waters part and the Hebrews proceed. But the Egyptian cavalry is now getting a bit stuck in the muck. God clogs up their chariot wheels so that they cannot be turned. And finally, a break in the drama and I can find some humor in it. An Egyptian officer has a eureka moment. As he is up to his knees in mud struggling and straining to get his chariot unstuck he orders his soldiers to retreat. Let us turn back, he exclaims, "God is fighting against us." You think? What was your first clue?

God had been fighting the Egyptians since the moment they enslaved the Hebrews. In the context of this story, God had been fighting the Egyptians literally since Joseph was displaced as Pharaoh's chief of staff and a new king arose. If you read the book of Exodus, the Hebrews are enslaved in Chapter 1. Taskmasters are appointed over them and the king drives them to build the imperial cities of Pithom and Rameses. Chapter 2 is the birth of Moses. From the very moment that the oppressor rises, God has slipped the liberator into their midst. At no point in this story is God not fighting the Egyptians. But Pharaoh's army continues to rebel against the purposes of God, first through polite requests for abolition, then through ten escalating plagues, and finally in this climactic battle by the Red Sea. How did they not recognize that it is hopeless to continue when God is not on your side?

Just imagine the awakening. This soldier has by now seen it all. If he is stuck in the mud at the Red Sea, then you can bet that this is an experienced soldier who has lived through all the plagues and surely many tight spots. Of course it's true the most experienced and long-tenured can be deceived by trusting their expertise. Those who have been at it the longest are the most reluctant to change their ways. He has surely questioned the purpose of this army and his place in it in the past. Maybe he has wondered if it's right to follow these orders. Maybe he's inwardly questioned whether it's worth the moral cost to keep these slaves. But this moment is different, the moment when he has lost all hope because he realizes that the cause he's fighting for has no future in the promises of God. What absolute despair. This reckoning with the intentions of God may explain much about

Pharaoh's resilient determination to defy the liberating impulse of Moses's God. What a terrible fate, don't you think, to reach the conclusion that God is not on your side. What a sad and bitter place to dwell: living in the knowledge that you are not right with God.

Maybe that helps to explain one of the key mysteries of this story. The text says that Pharaoh refuses to emancipate the Hebrews because his heart is hardened. In fact the text makes God the agent of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. At the end of each plague just when you might think that Pharaoh will come to his senses and change his mind and let the Hebrews go, "But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen." The Hebrew word used over and over again for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart has several possible meanings. It could also mean "to stiffen," like an upper lip straining not to quiver; or to stiffen, like a back straightened in a defensive posture. But that word could also mean "to grow heavy." That I can imagine, Pharaoh's heart growing heavier with each plague, weighed down by hopelessness or despair. God hardens the heart of Pharaoh in the sense that God adds weight and burden to Pharaoh's heart each time that Pharaoh chooses not to liberate the Hebrews. With each choice, Pharaoh finds himself farther and farther from the purposes of God, straining harder and harder against God's will, carrying a heavier and heavier heart the longer he resists God's desire. Heavy the heart that cannot see itself in the promises of God. How heavy to feel oneself outside of God's care. How heavy to say "God does not love me." How heavy to conclude that God has forsaken me. I have someday lived myself in that dark and bitter place, when I knew that spiteful God was working against me. What a hard and heavy load sitting on your chest.

II

Of course, what we want as readers is for Pharaoh to reframe his thinking. It's easy enough from our privileged place as spectators in this story to root for Pharaoh to change course. What if Pharaoh could just think about this in a different way. How the story might be different if only the oppressor believed not "God is working against us"...but "We are working against God." Seen in this light, Pharaoh actually becomes a much more relatable and sympathetic character. You don't have to be a tyrant to find yourself blaming God for your predicament. We can all relate to the sort of anger that says God is working against me. Maybe we have also found ourselves, like Pharaoh, latched senselessly to plans or purposes that we know are not in accord with God's will and, perhaps, that we don't even believe in ourselves. In those instances, it's the Spirit that somehow moves in us, the Spirit that somehow softens our heavy hearts, maybe not until we are stuck in mud so deep we can't dislodge ourselves but sometimes we see signs and listen to God's word before we get to that point. That's when our hearts shift from the angry cry, "God is working against me." In that moment we recognize that the resistance is not in God. The resistance is in us. Then we grant God our consent.

Summer will soon turn to fall. Around this time of year I always think about the legend of the Ginkgo tree. Most trees, as you know, will slowly turn to their autumnal colors and most will begin to lose their leaves one by one. In his poem about the Ginkgo tree, Howard Nemerov imagines the trees as being stubborn by hanging on to their leaves until the last possible moment. But the Ginkgo listens to the season. Its leaves will change from green to yellow more or less all at once. And rather than resist the coming winter it will shed its leaves in one gracious release. You can walk past a Ginkgo tree one evening and marvel at its full bright leaves, and come back the next morning to find them all a rustling around the roots of the tree, only bare branches still reaching up.

We can sense, no less, the will of God. We can sense the Spirit stirring in us, or we can hear the Spirit speaking in the silence of our thoughts, or we can feel the growing heaviness when our hearts are hardened by the distance we have created from God. It's even true that we can see the signs externally when we are not working with God. No less than Pharaoh, despite what story we may tell

ourselves, the pain in our communities speaks for itself in the same way that God used Moses to give it a voice.

Let me try to say this one final way before concluding, with just a little reflection that applies in so many places at church. I am the national vice-chair of the board of directors of the United Church of Christ. This is the board that oversees the resources and the work of our denomination. Like so many institutions today, especially in the church, this is a board that has struggled with change, adapting to some new paradigms, and there are a lot of strongly held opinions and differences of perspective and experience that we do our best to honor. Earlier this year, actually in March, I was trying to call a meeting of all these people together for a meeting that everyone said they wanted and seemed important to me. But as much as people said they wanted to come they didn't seem to be making it much of a priority. The dates didn't work, a location couldn't be secured, nobody was happy with travel arrangements, we missed a payment to the consultant, we couldn't agree to an agenda. Still I soldiered on, but it was such a beleaguering strain to make this happen that I was secretly grateful when Covid called the whole thing off.

When the pandemic struck I was so frustrated and angry about all of this. I felt like that poor chariot driver stuck in the mud, awakened to a new revelation! God is working against us.

That really made me wonder...what was the first clue?