

*Summons to Faith*

Exodus | Exodo 16: 2-15

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I may have mentioned before that I just love these little books that were published in the strictest lockdown days of the pandemic. Writers stuck at home apparently with no major project to occupy their time turned their energy to the present moment and asked - What is happening? What do we see? Zadie Smith wrote a slim little 100-pager of personal essays called *Intimations*. Another one that I've read came from the prolific Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. In *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, he wrote about the plagues of Egypt and other times when the people of God were struck with deep grief and uncertainty. Any "serious crisis," he says, is an opportunity to "read the Bible afresh." Back in February, March, and April, he was writing this book with no more knowledge about the virus than we had. But he concluded that whatever toll the virus would take on us, it must be an invitation for us to trust in God. This time would be, he said, a summons for us to have more faith.

I told you last week about the eventual awakening of an Egyptian officer stuck in the mud by the Red Sea. Turn back, he told his soldiers, God is fighting against us. Readers of this narrative are relieved that the message finally got through. God had previously employed many creative and terrifying means of demanding that Egypt release their Hebrew captives. The ten plagues that God had invoked against Egypt were all intended to show Pharaoh that God is God. Brueggemann says that those plagues were aimed at another audience too. These tremendous displays of divine power go to show the Egyptian oppressors that God is God. They also go to show the Hebrew captives that God is God. The actions of God have multiple audiences.

To the Egyptians the message is "Let my people go!" and get yourselves right with the Lord. The way you have oppressed God's people and disrupted the divine order has brought upon you the Creator's judgment. The message to Pharaoh is clear. But if you are a Hebrew slave, don't you think that the dramatic actions God is taking against Pharaoh would say something to you, too? What is God's message to the captive in this story? Surely God's power struggle with Pharaoh goes to show the lowest Hebrew captives that God has seen them and heard their cry. It is the first in a long series of actions that shows God's faithfulness to them.

The trouble is that plagues are not exactly precision instruments. One has to imagine that the plagues of Egypt--the frogs, the gnats, the locusts, the river of undrinkable water, the hailstorms--afflicted the Hebrews as well as the Egyptians. When God's righteous anger pummels the place where you live everyone suffers, just ask anyone on the Gulf Coast this week.. Zadie Smith writes about how equalizing the first months of our own pandemic were. The rich can afford more creature comforts than others and the privileged can mitigate their exposure better than most but everyone is vulnerable. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. God's power is displayed to everyone, but God's message speaks to us differently depending on who we are and where we sit. The Lord is God; Pharaoh is not. But if you're not Pharaoh, God is speaking to you, too. The Lord is God; you are not.

To the Hebrews emancipated by God's "fascinating and threatening" actions in Egypt, these plagues will be followed by additional assurances that when our lives are ordered in justice and righteousness God's faithfulness will always provide for us. Later examples are gentler and milder, more beneficent and less tragic, than the plagues they witnessed back in Egypt. But even as they wander in the wilderness they are accompanied by relentless distress and uncertainty. Like every

captive set free, the next step is to ask what do we do with this freedom. Where do we belong? Where is our home? How will we provide for ourselves? They learn to trust that God will provide for them when they provide for one another. God acted on their behalf in Egypt; God showed them away across the water; God sticks with them in the wilderness; God provides their daily bread.

But don't misunderstand this providence. It is not to be taken for granted. The judgment God has hurled against Pharaoh God has also hurled against Israel. God's provision for us is like "manna from heaven" when our lives are ruled by peace, equity, and righteousness. Manna from heaven may be misunderstood as some kind of magical thinking, but there is nothing magical about God's determination to create us and sustain us in God's own image. Manna from heaven is no cheap grace. The Hebrews worked for that bread, not by growing the wheat and kneading the dough, but by remaining true to God's word and listening to God's will. We have nothing to dread in God's judgment when we love God and when we love our neighbors.

So, says Walter Brueggemann, this virus that we are living through is a "summons to faith." God is speaking to us in the same way that God spoke to Pharaoh and to the Hebrews. If you listen closely, you can decipher what God is really saying. It is a word of judgment: that our world is not rightly ordered, that those oppressed are to be let go, and it is a solemn promise that the plagues and the pestilence and the storms will escalate until the powers that rule our world align themselves with God's will. In every word of judgement there is also the assurance of grace: that God will provide. Our faithfulness will always be matched and outdone by the faithfulness of God. God has been faithful to us in the past, so this virus is a summons for us to grow in the faith we hold in God.

Amen.