

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
2-6-22  
Exodus 7:1-5, 14-17; 11:1, 4-10  
Living Stories: Let My People Go

We are in the midst of a worship series that feature scriptures, sermons, and music to prepare us for Jazz Sunday on February 27. The sermon series is entitled Living Stories and I am sharing scriptures that have been influential in spirituals and gospel music that come from the African-American tradition. Many of these living stories come from the Old Testament – especially from the book of Exodus as we hear about the enslavement of the Israelites, their deliverance into freedom and their quest for the promised land.

Our friend Moses has come a long way since he was sent down the river in a basket a few weeks ago. He has claimed his identity as Israelite, had a personal encounter with the Lord God and has accepted the mission, albeit it a little grudgingly, to tell Pharaoh that he needs to release the Israelites from slavery. This morning we hear the beginning of the story as Moses tells Pharaoh what will happen if he doesn't let the people go and then we skip ahead to the climax of the story. Hear now these words of the Lord from Exodus chapters 7 and 11.

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**7** The Lord said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. <sup>2</sup>You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land. <sup>3</sup>But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. <sup>4</sup>When Pharaoh does not listen to you, I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring my people the Israelites, company by company, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. <sup>5</sup>The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them.”...

<sup>14</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. <sup>15</sup>Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. <sup>16</sup>Say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.” But until now you have not listened. <sup>17</sup>Thus says the LORD, “By this you shall know that I am the LORD.” See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood.

*Pharaoh fails to listen to Moses and the Lord through Moses reigns terror upon the Egyptians with additional plagues of frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils, thunder and hail, locusts and darkness. We pick up the story with the last plague...*

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**11** The LORD said to Moses, “I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away. <sup>4</sup>Moses said, “Thus says the LORD: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. <sup>5</sup>Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. <sup>6</sup>Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. <sup>7</sup>But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites—not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between

Egypt and Israel. <sup>8</sup> Then all these officials of yours shall come down to me, and bow low to me, saying, 'Leave us, you and all the people who follow you.' After that I will leave." And in hot anger he left Pharaoh.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." <sup>10</sup> Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; but the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

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For those who have been steeped in the scripture, the narrative between Moses and Pharaoh is a well-known story, acted out in vacation bible schools and highlighted when we share our connection to the Passover Seder where the story is told in the reading of the Haggadah. Maybe you are familiar with it through the screen version of the *Ten Commandments* or through the spiritual, which we will sing this morning, "When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go; oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go! Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land; tell old Pharaoh: let my people go!" <sup>1</sup>

This song, "Go Down Moses" is truly a living story. In her book, *Reclaiming the Spirituals*, Rev. Yolanda Smith shares how many spirituals lived on multiple levels, with dual or hidden meanings. Those enslaved in this country had "a strong identification with the oppression of the children of Israel [and the song] communicated their belief in a God who identified with their suffering and one day liberate them."<sup>2</sup>

Smith also relates how spirituals often had hidden meanings that allowed those enslaved to communicate secret messages with one another without being detected by their masters. And importantly these songs "expressed a covert form of resistance to their bondage." By singing about the bondage of the Israelites, the Africans enslaved in America were recognizing and claiming their own condition of bondage. They were also making claims about God. Those enslaved understood that God "identified with their suffering and would one day liberate them from bondage." <sup>3</sup>

Woven through the plagues that beset Egypt are two themes that became part of the living story for the Africans enslaved in America – knowledge of the power of God and the hardened heart of Pharaoh. Why does God bring a message of freedom to the Israelites and a message of fear to the Egyptians? The common refrain reminds us, "so that (Israel) will know I am the LORD your God" and "so that the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

The plagues represent creation gone amok, a reversion to the chaos that existed before creation, a great unraveling of the creative and social order. The penultimate plague plunges the world into darkness, harkening back to the darkness before light in Genesis 1. Who is this God of the Israelites? This God who created order out of chaos is also capable of rendering chaos to the very ordered and hierarchical world of the Pharaoh. This disordering is not just on a global scale, but on a very personal scale as well, as we see the hardening of Pharaoh's

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<sup>1</sup> *Go Down Moses. Glory to God Hymnal #52.*

<sup>2</sup> Yolanda Y. Smith. *Reclaiming the Spirituals*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004. p.60

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p130-131

<sup>4</sup> e.g., Exodus 6:7 and 7:5, 8:10, 22, 9:14-16, 14:17-18

heart. At first Pharaoh hardens his own heart, then the narrator notes that Pharaoh's heart "remained hard" and finally God hardens Pharaoh's heart.<sup>5</sup> The repetition becomes a rhythm, lub-dub-lub-dub, with God telling Pharaoh to let the people go and Pharaoh's heart hardening and refusing to do so. Each cycle of request – refusal leads to a further hardening until the blood of life can no longer be pumped through, simply sitting into the chambers until..until there is a tipping point and the pooled-out blood finds freedom. We will hear that story of freedom next week – the release from bondage as the arc bends toward justice and away from oppression.

For the enslaved Africans working on the plantations and farms and households, the story of God's promise that freedom would be granted despite hardened hearts must have been a source of great hope. As they sang, "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land; tell old Pharaoh: let my people go!", they were singing about their hope of freedom. They were singing, sure in their knowledge that there would be a tipping point where the traditions and order and hierarchy that kept them bound would likewise fall.

As Malcolm Gladwell noted in *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, "Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push—in just the right place—it can be tipped... The tipping point is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point."<sup>6</sup>

From tiny viruses to global weather patterns; we recognize just how radically life can be altered with a slight push. Twenty years before the words COVID-19 were ever uttered, Gladwell talks about the characteristics of epidemics – contagiousness, little things that have big effects and that change happens in a dramatic moment. And the world is transformed. The challenge is how we live in the moments when the world seems immovable and implacable. Moses put his trust in the promise of deliverance, despite the overwhelming odds against it, because the Lord God told him it would happen. The enslaved Africans on the plantations in America sang of the promise of deliverance because if God understood the suffering of the Israelites and gave them freedom, then surely God will hear their plight and free them.

This freedom from that which binds us happens on a personal level as well. Big things and small can weigh us down, separating us from God and each other. We feel our hands are tied, that there are no good choices, that we are stuck, that our situation or our whole life is an immovable, implacable place. And then we have a tipping point – our eyes open and we realize we can't do it ourselves and need to let God be in the driver's seat. Transformation is possible – it may look and feel chaotic at times as the order we have constructed becomes disordered. And yet God is present in the disorder, helping to reorder our lives; letting that which binds us go and opening the gates to freedom. God gave us the ultimate gift of freedom in Jesus Christ, releasing us from sin and death. In a few minutes, we will celebrate that gift as we partake of the Lord's Supper. Let us come to table as people whose hardened hearts have been liberated from bondage, as a people who know the joy that God's promises will always be fulfilled. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 8:15,32, 9:7; 9:12

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Gladwell. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Little, Brown and Company, 2002. p12