

“The Battle of the gods”
 Sermon for 11 September 2016
 Texts: Exodus 7:1-13

(Pray before preaching.) Our God is the God of History. Therefore we should make our appeal to Him and not to mere men (or women) as the case may be. Man plans but God disposes. Man has his ideas, but God has His way. And, it is always a battle of the gods globally—a war between belief and unbelief on the ground.

It is wonderful when God discloses new information to us in His Word—for in my study of the inception of Exodus, I was reminded, that Aaron was Moses’ elder brother, by three years. They were, respectively, 83 and 80 years of age when they appeared before Pharaoh to make God’s Name, to engage with and overthrow the Egyptian pantheon. The Egyptians had a whole concoction of “gods” which came from their deception by demons. That is, the gods they embraced were actually demons, or fallen angels mistaken for deities. Their religion was polytheistic and pagan—and it was buoyed up by magicians who practiced occult rites and rituals, called “secret arts.” If we stop and think, we see that this false religion was idolatrous and satanic. Therefore God’s decision to “reveal Himself” through a power encounter staffed by Moses and Aaron, so to speak, was part of His deliverance plan for **His firstborn**, namely Israel.

“When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Prove yourselves by working a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before that it may become a serpent.’ (Exodus 7:9) Where have we heard this before?! In the New Testament when Jesus’ identity was a live question—people wondered just Who He was.

28 Then they said to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” 29 Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.” 30 Therefore they said to Him, “What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? 31 Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

32 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 Then they said to Him, “Lord, give us this bread always.”
 (John 6:28-34, NKJV)

It was the post-miraculous feeding crowd that asked these questions! The ones that actively sought Jesus out in Capernaum after that event across the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus’ teaching on being ***the bread of life***, caused a huge division among the Jews and even among His own followers, the disciples. **Truly, truly I say to you unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.** (vv.53-54) This was more than some of them could stomach, and certainly more than most could wrap their brains around. Do remember that the Lord’s Supper had not yet been instituted (whereby this feeding and drinking might occur) so that a literal misunderstanding was completely reasonable. These things Jesus taught while **in the synagogue, as He**

taught at Capernaum. (v.59) What is the meaning of this? I see that there is a similarity here between the unbelievers in Moses' day and those abroad in Jesus's day—we note the same ignorance of God, the same need to be introduced to God!

Now, back in Exodus 4:1-5, Moses is personally introduced to the “serpent trick.” **“What is that in your hand?” And Moses said, “A staff.” And He (God) said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it.** Evidently, the serpent that appeared was totally convincing. Then God tells Moses to **Put out your hand and catch it by the tail.** Now, anyone who knows anything about handling snakes knows that that is the wrong thing to do. For if the snake is a viper, it was lash back and bite you. **So he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—“that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”** So when Aaron throws down his staff and it becomes a serpent. It seems that this trick was common as dirt. Cheap magic in Egypt. **Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts.** (Exodus 7:11) However, it is what follows that was astonishing. Aaron's rod, the same one that was placed in the Ark, the rod that blossomed, **Aaron's staff swallowed up their staves!** (v. 12) Aaron's staff vanquished their staves, **a solid, indisputable victory** in that power encounter in “the battle of the gods” that was transpiring. *This the magicians of Egypt could not duplicate—it was an irreversible fact of scared history and irrefutable truth!* These wise men and sorcerers were probably cultic leaders—something more than illusionists who performed to entertain! Here is validation of my opening assertion that **our God is the God of History.** After 430 years of *history*—a good portion of it spent enslaved in a foreign land—God declares Himself historically **as the personal God of their ancestors, the patriarchs!** He is saying, know Me as the God of your forefathers, as the intervening and interacting God of your ancestry, lineage and history. So must we, this is the One. Behind Jesus' usage of “Father” as a form of personal address to God lies our sacred history! Although many, many more names intervene between us as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Moses was given other powerful signs and the implication of chapter 4 is that these were meant to be persuasive to God's own people. They would establish the authenticity of Moses call and proof that God **has appeared to you.** (4:5) After the snake came leprosy and after leprosy, came the transformation of water from the Nile into blood. When Moses gets around to Pharaoh the extent of this last sign is greatly expanded. The river, and not just water from the river, will be turned to blood—the fish will die and the waters will stink. The Nile was their life—agriculturally, economically and personally. It was their water supply, their mode of transportation, their source of irrigation, laundromat and commerce.

Okay. All this is good. However, the greater purpose of Exodus is God establishing a Name for Himself. Equally fascinating is the fact that the people whom God finds useful in one generation can become useless to Him later on. So it is with Zipporah, a Midianite (a daughter of Jethro) who saves Moses' life by circumcising their son and **touched his feet with it** (the severed foreskin) **saying, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me.”** Moses' life was imperiled by his negligence, or by his failure to perform what God had commanded (circumcision) on his son. In Numbers 31 we read, however, that the Midianites had become so reprobate that God decreed their destruction as a nation—twelve thousand warriors slaughtered all the men, boys and non-virgin women. For two explicit reasons: the hindrance of passage (to the Hebrews) and for the seduction of the He-

brew men by Midianite women who enticed them into immorality and idolatry! Condemning, not saving—disobeying, not serving.

Then we read (v. 27) **The Lord said to Aaron, “Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.” So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him.** It has been forty years since they had seen each other. They had not kept in touch by text or email. They had no GPS either—this was all pre-technology, pre-radio, satellites, pre-land-lines and yet they were able to keep a divine appointment. It is all grace. ***Divine appointments are always kept, always on time—never missed!***

The Lord our God is the God of History. He has the entire world situation under control. That is why we first cry out *to Him*, and that is why we don’t have to be terribly apprehensive about anyone in power, anywhere, ever. And you, Moses, shall say to Pharaoh, **“Israel is my firstborn son,” and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may serve Me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold I will kill your firstborn son.**” (4:22-23) God can easily remove whatever matters to those who oppose him—He can even remove His opponents! So do not fear, only pray and serve God.

What does God mean **let him go that he may serve Me.** Well, the answer is near at hand. But first I should note that **Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the people of Israel. Aaron spoke all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses** (that was part of the package!) **and did the signs in the sight of the people. And the people believed**(What a glory, what a Praise!); **and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshipped.** (4:29-31) And here I am constrained to say, if the Lord God saw the afflictions of His people in Egypt, you may be certain He sees your affliction in Maine, in America—in your homes and in your world. And His word of compassion has come to you; it is a word of deliverance *that you may exalt in the Lord, that you may respond freely in praise, gratitude, obedience which is the purest form of worship!* You have been loosed, not to live for yourself, but to make His Name Great. You have been freed to be good, great and godly.

There is more. **Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold feast to Me in the wilderness.’” But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and, moreover, I will not let Israel go.”** The two emissaries from God (Moses and Aaron, whose roles are our own roles!) reply with pleading, **The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go three days journey into the wilderness that we may make sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword.** (5:1-3) Or, a sharp piece of flint! Moses knew first hand the deadly seriousness of the Lord. Remember, the intervention of Zipporah? She must have found the Lord astonishingly terrible on the way to Egypt. Only her radical obedience spared the life of God’s chosen messenger!

Anyway, if things were rotten before, the escalation of affliction that follows is breathtaking. Those familiar with the narrative know that Pharaoh’s defiance leads to a worsening of conditions for the Hebrews. Now they have to gather their own straw to meet their quota of bricks. This means that government assistance is the first thing to be removed. They are accused of being lazy, idle, shirking. **You shall no longer give the people straw to make**

bricks as in the past; let them go and gather for themselves. But the number of bricks that they made in the past you shall impose on them, you shall by no means reduce it, for they are idle. (Make more with less! Or else.) Therefore they cry, “Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God. Let heavier work be laid on the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words.” (vv. 7-9) Here, some observations are in order:

- Pharaoh is accusing Moses, Israel’s deliverer, of being a liar, a deceiver. He accuses Moses of misleading the people with big talk and false promises—creating unrest and disturbing public peace. The same charges were leveled against Jesus by the religious elite and governing establishment in Jesus’ day!
- This is, whether he knows it or not, the beginning of the end for Pharaoh. He has made it extremely oppressive . . . extremity marks the nearness of his overthrow.
- This is an extreme provocation for Moses, who, as we recall, fled into exile for protesting the cruelty of the slave drivers by murdering one of them. He was on the run for forty plus years. Would Moses succumb to the same temptation: to taking the law into his own hands again? *He doesn’t—another praise! Moses entrusted the people to God!*
- The Lord may, in His wisdom, be giving the Hebrews a bitter last taste of what it means to be slaves, to be enslaved. Perhaps He hoped it would steel their resolve to be free (as well as to refuse to enslave others) and not to yearn for the easy days of societal dependency. When you are slaves, someone else is responsible for you—you do not have the burden of freedom and you can always blame them when things go badly.
- I may be wrong, but this travail may have the beneficial effect of toughening up the people for the trials ahead. I have in mind more than the wilderness trip to Canaan. By that I mean, God, knowing that the people will balk at taking the Promised Land (they refuse to go up and occupy what God has promised to deliver to them), is merciful to prepare them to endure the hardships that they will bring upon themselves! There is a horrifying parallel between the tyranny of Pharaoh and that of his modern counterparts as worked out in the concentration camps, re-education centers, the gulags of the former Soviet Union—where dissidents are sentenced to “forced labor,” or “hard labor” in hopes that they will either die, or alter their social views! It may not be called slavery, but what else is it? Those who think socialism is good, a wonderful option, a desirable future need to know ***the history of modern socialist regimes*** (totalitarian leftist states) where not only have millions been put to death, but political incarceration is their modus operandi. Both the Communists and the Nazis were oppressors and enslavers—big time.
- And, finally, lying words. Pharaoh unknowingly serves God by urging his taskmasters to **pay no regard to lying words.** We especially need to hear that warning today. In the Word, we have the standard of truth, true words—trustworthy words, unlike the political rhetoric we are subjected to daily in the media (first and foremost) and on the platform where lying words are publicly broadcast in the forms of campaign speeches and debates. **Pay no attention to lying words.** Pharaoh’s words have implications like those of Caiaphas who justified Jesus’ judicial murder with **it is expedient for one man to die for the nation.** (John 18:14) Caiaphas meant that Jesus’ death would keep him in power—but God meant for Jesus’ death to atone for the sins of the nation! *Those in power often are deceived into thinking others should die to keep them in power.*

All of which suggests that God is indeed the God of History. He is in charge. He gives the marching orders. Those who oppose Him will be indicted and swept away. The posture of Pharaoh is horrifying and the people blame Moses and Aaron: “**The Lord look on you and judge, because you made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his serv-**

ants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.” No one could accuse these folks of understatement, or of dispassionate speech. *Hard times provoke intemperate speech.* However, God is undeterred: **Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh.** We harken back to 3:19: where God declares **I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go . . . so you shall plunder the Egyptians.** (Exodus 3:19-20, 22) Yes, Pharaoh will rail against the people, **You are idle, you are idle, that is why you say, “Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.”** Perhaps our Pharaoh will attack us with different words. Words like “You are racist, you are racist . . . you who have wealth are thieves . . . you who are rich steal, cheat and stack the deck . . . you are bigots . . . you are haters . . . you are stupid . . . you deserve to die . . . why should I fight terrorists for you, you are only getting what you deserve . . . you are why the world is messed up . . . you pollute the earth . . . you are the reason everyone hates you . . . there is nothing noble, good, true, worthwhile or free about you . . . you short-sighted, ignorant and regressive swine. And did I mention “stupid?” It would appear that being an American is a reproach in the mouths of our current, liberal and leftist leadership—especially of our president.

That may not be that same as saying we are idle, but it will do. Lord, we implore you, **stretch out your hand and let our enemies be scattered.** You see the violence, the rebellion and the lawlessness . . . deliver us for the sake of your great name! Because He has delivered us from slavery, from bondage to sin, surely He will move again and remove our reproach as a nation! Pray. Isaiah 59:1 **His arm is not too short, nor is He dull of hearing** . . . after all He is the active, engaged, intervening God of history.

Detective Joe Friday is alleged to have said, repeatedly, “Just the facts, ma’am.” (He never did.) Nor, did Humphrey Bogart as Rick in Casablanca actually say, “Play it again, Sam.”) But God did say: **You will be My people and I will be Your God.** He so declares in 43-51 verses, including cross references, in Scripture. (See Exodus 6:7, first instance; Jer. 30:22 and Lev. 26:12.)

Amen.