

Exodus 7:14-24

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the water. Wait on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake. Then say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the desert. But until now you have not listened. This is what the Lord says: By this you will know that I am the Lord: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink its water.’ ”

The Lord said to Moses, “Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over the streams and canals, over the ponds and all the reservoirs’—and they will turn to blood. Blood will be everywhere in Egypt, even in the wooden buckets and stone jars.” Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood. The fish in the Nile died, and the river smelled so bad that the Egyptians could not drink its water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt. But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh’s heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said. Instead, he turned and went into his palace, and did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians dug along the Nile to get drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the river.

There are some Bible stories that are like eating chocolate cake. They are sweet and delicious. You can’t get enough of them. Other Bible stories are like medicine. You know you have to take it for your own good, but it doesn’t taste good. This story from Exodus fits into the second category. It’s good for us and we know it, but it has a bit of an aftertaste.

Stories like this are a good reminder for us. The God of the Bible is not to be sanitized. We may prefer that he be delivered to us like Mary Poppins with “just a spoonful of sugar,” but that’s not always God’s way. The God of the Bible is to be presented precisely as he presents himself. He is not to be sanitized. He is to be encountered.

Pharaoh encountered God. Not the sanitized, made-for-TV version of God. He encountered the true and only God of the Scriptures. It wasn’t pretty, nor was it was cute. But it was an honest attempt by God to shake up Pharaoh’s spiritual world. Pharaoh refused to be healed by God’s encounter. Will you?

It’s not that God didn’t try. God sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh. Aaron tossed his staff on the ground and it started slithering around as a snake. Even when the

Egyptian magicians duplicated the miracle with their dark arts, Aaron's snake devoured theirs. Message received? Not a chance. If God wanted a legitimate shot at getting through to Pharaoh (and he did!), it would take a serious campaign of God encounters. So God launched into arguably the second greatest series of God encounters this world has ever seen.

Have you ever understood the 10 plagues that way? God's not a bully. He doesn't send frogs and gnats, darkness and flies because he's acting on his own inner insecurities. God has no insecurities. There is no inner incompleteness in him that he tries to fix by dominating life forms he considers less than him. God's purpose throughout the 10 plagues was this one: **"And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it." (v. 5)** The Lord wanted to get through to the Egyptians. This was God encountering the Egyptians with a love that would take drastic measures to get their attention.

There's no other way to explain why he chose to prolong the encounter as long as he did. Why wasn't this just a one and done? That's what happened at Jericho when Joshua was in charge. They walked around the walls. They blew on their trumpets. Bam. The walls came down. God so could have liberated his people like that. In fact, come to think of it. If God wanted to, he could have skipped right to the tenth plagues and then called it a day. Bam. The Israelites would have been free. That's not how he did it. Why not? Because this was more than just about setting the Israelites free. It was about reaching the Egyptian people. So God took a nice chunk of time sending them God encounters.

And that also explains why God systematically ripped out the heart of the Egyptian religious system. God was willing to gut everything the Egyptians thought they knew about god so that they would know the true God. He started with Hapy. He had to. Every year the people sang their hymn to Hapy. "Hail to you, Hapy, sprung from earth, come to nourish Egypt! Of secret ways, a darkness by day, to whom his followers sing! Who floods the fields that Re has made, to nourish all who thirst; let us drink the waterless desert, his dew descending from the sky." [1] For the people to know God, they had to dump Hapy, the god of the Nile, first.

It's not hard to understand the Egyptian connection to Hapy. What's Egypt without the Nile? The fisheries were rich. The farming was fantastic. The delta was great cattle country. The waterway made them a commercial juggernaut. The Nile was everything to those people. And that was the problem. The Nile was everything to those people. That's why they worshipped Hapy. So one bright Egyptian morning, God did something about it. He told Moses to meet Pharaoh as he was going out to the water. Moses was in essence to say, "The Lord the God of the Hebrews is going to show Hapy to be a big nothing."

The way to do that? Take everything that Hapy supposedly did and destroy it – turn it to blood. And that's exactly what he did. The fish died. The Nile stunk. The

people couldn't drink the water. Blood was everywhere in Egypt. Everywhere. Any place that held water: ponds, canals, even the water in jugs turned to blood. Can you imagine pouring yourself a cup of coffee only to find out that now it's heated blood? Can you think what it would be like to be showering and suddenly the showerhead is spraying red liquid? Can you imagine how that devastated the economy? Trade ground to a halt on that stinking river and their supply of fresh fish was decimated for months and months. So much for Hapy, right?

You know what's absolutely fascinating in this story? When you read it there's all this talking. In fact, the section is almost all talking. But not a word from Pharaoh. Not a word. Aaron and Moses have lots to say to Pharaoh, but Pharaoh says not a word in return. It's like Moses and Aaron were talking to a wall. I'll bet that Pharaoh even pretended like they weren't there. Maybe he was thinking to himself, "Why should I listen to a couple of raggedy 80-year-old guys? I won't even dignify them with a response." So he doesn't. Except that he did. His non-verbals said everything he intended to say, "**He turned and went into his palace.**" (v. 23) For seven days, Pharaoh went back to his palace and refused to take to take to heart his encounter with God.

There's a preaching magazine that I get every few months or so. It goes out to all the preachers in the synod. A recent one was entitled something like *The Foolishness of Preaching*. It was one of the most down-to-earth, real articles I've read on preaching in a long time. Here's what it basically said: preachers go through a slump where they don't think anything they say from the pulpits matters. I didn't know this, but apparently Martin Luther had a major slump. He usually preached multiple times a week, but for a period that lasted over a year he barely mounted the pulpit. A preaching slump. It's not something I'd really thought about before. You know what preaching slumps have in common? Two things: #1 the pastor doubts the Holy Spirit's work through the Word. #2 the people don't seem to change as a result of preaching.

This is not my personal confession time. I'm not telling you this because I feel like I'm in a slump or the people of this church never change in response to preaching. I'm telling you this because it is the experience of many a preacher that he finds his people looking a bit like Pharaoh. That tells us something about ourselves. We have an inner Pharaoh. You saw what Pharaoh did. He had one of the most powerful encounters with God in human history. Then he went home and chilled in his palace for a week like nothing in the world had happened. Tell me that doesn't make you think about your life. It convicted me. We have the most profound God encounters in the history of the world. Wednesday after Wednesday and Sunday after Sunday we're exposed to the most incredible stuff. We get the Ten Plagues. We get Jesus' baptism. We get Jesus' birth. And that's just the recent ones. We encounter God time and time again. And then what happens? We go to our palaces; get on with our lives for the next seven days; and fail to think about and internalize the God encounter we just had. Tell me it's not true. Tell me that the sermon gets worked over in your head consistently for the next seven days. Tell me

that God's message in the Lord's Supper brings you comfort still on Tuesday. Tell me that Thursday you're still celebrating your baptism like we did last week. Tell me I'm wrong.

That truth just enhances God's grace. God won't quit on us. He won't quit encountering us. He sent prophet after prophet. When we killed them, he upped the ante. He sent his Son who gave us the greatest series of God encounters this world will ever see. They even trump the 10 plagues. But this time, God's encounter comes in a way you'd never guess or imagine. For all of us who went home to chill in our palaces for a week refusing to be impacted, you'd think that when God would up the ante through his encounters he'd be holding lightning bolts in his hands and lasers would be shooting from his eyes. That's what you'd think.

It wasn't for our God. Anything but. When God launched the most important series of God encounters in Jesus Christ (By the way, this was the launch. John marks this as the launch when he says, "**This, the first of his miraculous signs...**" **John 2:11**) God destroyed nothing. Just the opposite. He completed happiness. It was a wedding. They ran out of wine. So Jesus turned water into primo-better-than-French-wine wine. There was no stink. There was no devastated economy left in his wake. There were no thirsty people. There was a happy couple on their happiest of days that ended up having an incredibly happy wedding reception. Jesus completed the happiness. That's exactly what God did when he launched the first of a series of God encounters in Jesus Christ.

Think about that. God strategically picked this miracle as the first sign through which he would encounter the world with his glory. It wasn't like Jesus was standing there thinking, "I think I'll be helpful." This was an event designed by God to show us how he intends to encounter us. God in Jesus Christ intends to encounter us with grace upon grace. He will not cow us into submission by plague. No. Nothing like that. God's final set of glorious encounters wouldn't kick off by turning water into blood. He would start by turning water to wine. And that matters. That really matters. I wonder if the disciples reflected on that. I wonder if they thought, "This is so incredibly different than how Moses launched. Why does God choose to encounter us by turning water into wine at a wedding?" The question hangs for us to ask and then answer. Maybe just maybe it's because he wants to show us that finally he came to bring you to the ultimate wedding feast where he plans to serve the best of wines. Actually it's not a maybe at all. That is what he did through the cross and his resurrection. Do what Pharaoh didn't do. Go home and think about that for the next seven days. Let it show you God's grace in your life all week long. Then come back in seven days and encounter that God of grace all over again next week. Amen.