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## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, December 6, 2009

### Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

#### *A Plague of Doubt*

Exodus 6:28 – 11:10

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Advent is the arrival, coming and discovery of something extremely important. Advent reminds us that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, lived obediently, suffered and died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. It reminds us that Jesus will return again and consummate the new heaven and new earth. Advent speaks directly to the plague of doubt.

Moses asked God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”<sup>1</sup> God said to Moses, “‘I Am Who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I Am has sent me to you.’”<sup>2</sup>

Who is God? God is our creator, redeemer and sustainer. I Am Who I Am is! In our text, God uses Moses to speak truth into Pharaoh’s existence. He uses the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and the plagues to demonstrate his faithfulness in order to reiterate his plan for the people to be a blessing to all people. Doubt plagues the human condition and experience. God speaks directly to the plague of doubt.

Moses was told by God to tell Pharaoh to let God’s people go. Pharaoh resisted. Moses persisted even in the midst of the plagues causing him doubt. After each plague, Pharaoh resisted. Moses persisted.

In the larger text of Exodus 6:28-11:10, God is the subject of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart ten times. The heart, the seat of the mind and the will, is no longer as responsive or resilient to outside influence, hence stubborn, obstinate. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart leads to God’s honoring. The defeat of the hardened oppressor brings public honor to God. God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is an aspect of the larger judgmental picture.

God does not rid the world of evil with a flick of the wrist in that evil is a means to a greater end for God. There will be genuine conflict in moving a people from bondage to freedom; the pharaohs of this world do not give

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus 3:13

<sup>2</sup>Exodus 3:14

up easily. Doubt is one of those Pharaohs.

Mary and Joseph doubted in the beginning. But they persisted in believing God and they watched their doubt be resolved through faithfulness.

What is your doubt today?

Moses doubted, but persisted. The plagues caused both Israelite and Egyptian alike to suffer. The plagues demonstrated to both Israel and Egypt that there is only one God.<sup>3</sup>

The first grouping of plagues is three. First, there is the plague of blood.<sup>4</sup> Water in the Nile, its estuaries, wooden buckets, stone pitchers and every reservoir turned to blood. Of course, fish did not survive and the smell of their rotting was unbearable. The magicians of Egypt replicated this miracle; however, it just made things worse for the people. It would have been more useful for the magicians to undo what Moses had done, but they could not. Pharaoh's heart was unyielding. Pharaoh's heart became hard; he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said.

Second, there is the plague of frogs.<sup>5</sup> They came out of the Nile in great abundance and took residence in houses, beds and even clothing. Pharaoh's magicians could make more frogs appear, but could not make them go away; hence, Pharaoh asked Moses to do it. When the frogs were dissipated, Pharaoh acknowledged the power of God when earlier he claimed he did not know God; but his heart was still hardened.

Third, there is the plague of gnats.<sup>6</sup> The gnats came out of the dust when Aaron struck the sand. They were numerous. The Egyptian magicians could not replicate this miracle. They acknowledged the gnats as an act of God. Pharaoh, however, was still hardened in his heart.

The second grouping of plagues is also three. In these three, only the Egyptians were afflicted. The Egyptians witnessed the hand of God, but did not necessarily attribute the power to perform the miracle to the God of the Hebrews. In this grouping, Moses simply announced what God would do. No mediation through Moses or Aaron. Why? To prove that the miracles were not a result of the incantations of Moses and Aaron, but rather resulted from the hand of God.

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<sup>3</sup>Exodus 7:17; 8:22; 9:14

<sup>4</sup>Exodus 7:14-25

<sup>5</sup>Exodus 8:1-15

<sup>6</sup>Exodus 8:16-19

First, there is the plague of flies.<sup>7</sup> These flies were thick in the air and did not affect the land of Goshen where Israel lived. Pharaoh was willing for the first time to allow the Israelites to sacrifice to their God, but only if they stayed in Egypt. Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.

Second, there is the plague on livestock.<sup>8</sup> The whole creation is bound together by invisible cords. None can sin or suffer alone. No man lives or dies to himself. Our sins send their vibrations through creation and infect the very beasts. Pharaoh's heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go.

Third, there is the plague of boils.<sup>9</sup> The pain and discomfort was not alleviated by Egyptian gods or Egyptian magicians. The magicians were helpless, because they had boils as well. God continued to harden the heart of Pharaoh, because he did not heed the cry of Moses and the people.

The third grouping of three plagues demonstrates to Pharaoh that God is all-powerful. First, there is the plague of hail.<sup>10</sup> The hail storm was the worst Egypt had ever experienced. It was accompanied by fire darting to the ground. Pharaoh made a show of repentance that was quite shallow. Man and beast suffered death during the plague. This is the first plague that led to death. Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the LORD had said through Moses.

Second, there is the plague of locusts.<sup>11</sup> All crops that were spared during the hail and fire were consumed by the locusts. Pharaoh knew that this plague was a test of his deity. That Pharaoh confessed sin and requested forgiveness was unusual. The Egyptian mind sought better understanding from his 'mistakes' not forgiveness for his sins. But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let the Israelites go.

Third, there is the plague of darkness.<sup>12</sup> This supernaturally imposed darkness struck at the heart of Egyptian worship of Ra, the sun-god. Pharaoh still did not submit to God's rule, for the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart.

The final and tenth plague was the plague on the firstborn. Every firstborn son in Egypt would die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, to the firstborn son of the slave girl and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. But the Israelites would be spared. Pharaoh refused to listen for the LORD hardened his heart.

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<sup>7</sup>Exodus 8:20-32

<sup>8</sup>Exodus 9:1-7

<sup>9</sup>Exodus 9:8-12

<sup>10</sup>Exodus 9:13-35

<sup>11</sup>Exodus 10:1-20

<sup>12</sup>Exodus 10:21-29

Following Passover, Pharaoh would demand that the people leave Egypt.

When we examine the obedience of Moses and the obstinacy of Pharaoh, we have both a positive and negative example before us. We must represent God unashamedly while maintaining a full confidence in his ability to deliver us. But to do this, we must always work at resolving doubt. And we do that by believing when it is hard to believe.

Doubt can crush the human spirit. The people of God are often deaf to good news from God because we doubt. We need to be reminded that doubt keeps us from hearing and following God's voice. But when we work on resolving doubt we are actually hearing and following God's voice. Resist giving in to doubt. Doubt emerges in the hard situations of life, but with God in the equation, there is always hope. Engage your doubt and move in resolution. God will lift the dark cloud of doubt. Pray for God to reveal himself to you in and through his Word.

Mary and Joseph had doubt. Moses had doubt. Thomas had doubt. "Blessed are those who believe who have not seen and yet have believed."<sup>13</sup> Remember that God is faithful to his promises. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind."<sup>14</sup>

The plagues are to be understood as a theology of creation. The deliverance of Israel is ultimately for the sake of the entire creation. The plagues are not an arbitrary chosen response to Pharaoh's sins. The visitation of God among the Egyptians through the plagues is a liturgical event. Moses and Aaron did what God commanded; God hardened Pharaoh's heart; Pharaoh did not let the people go. But things will change: Pharaoh will let Israel go.

Such is the case with doubt. Believe what you do not see because of doubt. Doubt is God's hand hardening your heart. You will have a season of not being set free. But things will change. Your doubt will be resolved. This is the message of Advent. Advent is the arrival, coming and discovery of something extremely important. Let us pray!

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1958 N. Webb Road • Wichita, Kansas 67206-3404 • p 316.634.0337 f 316.634.1496 • [www.eastminster.org](http://www.eastminster.org)

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<sup>13</sup>John 20:29

<sup>14</sup>James 1:5-6