

“PHARAOH FINALLY GETS IT...(SORT OF)”

Rev. Don Rollins

April 20, 2008

Introduction

Okay, I know you know this old joke, but a sermon on Passover may be my last opportunity to work in a little Ten Commandments humor for the 2007-2008 church year, so here goes. Moses, contrary to the account in Exodus, actually made several trips up Mt. Sinai before the final version of the Commandments were, shall we say, cast in stone. (But wait, hold the riotous laughter. There's more.) After numerous long, sometimes all-night sessions, Moses descends the mountain for the final time. He's exhausted, disheveled and a bit downcast.

After gathering the Hebrew Children around him, he begins. “Well, I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that I got it down to ten. The bad news is that cussin's still in.” (Feel free to expel that riotous laughter now.)

But the Commandments come after the Hebrews exit Egypt, and that, of course, is the story of Pesach (Passover, pronounced “pay sock”). So, let's review the story of Passover.

Passover – the Quick Version

Somewhere around 3,000 years ago, Israel was a wandering tribe, not a nation. Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, was the patriarch who led the tribe into Egypt, where they were at first treated as guests.

Now, you think this country has immigration problems? Immigration, Schmmigration! Egypt, under Pharaoh Ramses IV, had *serious* immigration problems – the Hebrews were coming to Egypt faster than the infrastructure could accommodate them. Not only did they take up precious resources, they displaced native-born citizens who wanted nothing to do with these foreigners and their foreign ways. (Ring any bells?)

The Pharaoh's immigration problems were on the fast track to becoming political problems; the Hebrews were gaining influence in local decision-making – how long before they would have friends in high places? And so he countered the threat with a prototypical response worthy of Stalin, Chairman Mao and Pol Pot: turn unwanted dissenters into slaves for the good of the state.

The biblical account takes all kinds of interesting twists, chief among them the story of how Joheved and Amram, a young Hebrew couple in the Pharaoh's slave state, put their baby in a basket and sent him down the Nile rather than have him grow up in forced servitude. Those of you who know the plot thickener recall that the baby would be rescued by none other than the Pharaoh's

daughter, and raised in the palace as royalty. He was given the name, Moses. A fascinating digression, but a digression nonetheless, for the part of the Exodus that I want to talk about thus first full day of Passover has to do with the Pharaoh's thick skull and fortified heart. So, let's finish this whirlwind telling of the story.

Moses grew up, learned of his Hebrew heritage, fled from the royal palace and, via a burning bush, became God's unlikely candidate for the Hebrews' next patriarch. Moses received his marching orders: Go tell the Pharaoh, "Let my people go." But the Pharaoh wouldn't play ball. He did his best to eradicate every male Hebrew newborn. So some pretty creepy things began going down in Egypt, things we'll talk more about in just a moment.

Now, when an earthly Old Testament ruler decided to throw down with the Ruler of Heaven, the rumble was bound to be one-sided. After nine harrowing shots across the Pharaoh's bow, God's was madder than Dick Cheney at an ACLU meeting. The tenth "plague" involved killing the firstborn sons of every Egyptian household. (I say, not for the first time, what an insecure, capricious deity, the orthodox God of the Judeo-Christian tradition.)

The Pharaoh caved and told the Hebrews to get out of Dodge. They packed only what they could carry – didn't even take the time to let their bread finish baking. Moses, the former shepherd, still carrying his herding staff, managed to get the main body of his refugee people to the Red Sea, the western boundary of the Egyptian province. And there he stood on the eastern bank, Charlton Heston...I mean, Moses, considering how best to cross over, as word came that the Egyptian army was in pursuit. Uh oh. Pharaoh had changed his mind.

According to Exodus 14, some of the tribe began to blame Moses for their predicament, saying that a slave's life in Egypt was better than dying on the banks of the Red Sea. But Moses replies, "Fear not, stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you will never see again." Ominous stuff if you happened to be wearing the colors of the Egyptian army.

You know the rest of the tale. Moses stretched out his hand, causing a mighty east wind to part the sea with a path of dry land. Once all the Pharaoh's troops, horses and chariots had stepped off in pursuit, Moses turned and again stretched forth his hand; the walls of waves swallowed them all. Not surprisingly, the Hebrew Children were more than a little freaked out by all this; both God and Moses got a heartfelt vote of confidence.

The Ten Plagues

Let's back up to that plague thing. Moses, on some robust advice from Yahweh,

told the Pharaoh that it was time the Hebrews were set loose. The Pharaoh, likely as not, had a strong economic incentive to resist that plan – the ready supply of immigrant slaves had for decades made it easy to quarry and hew stone, build roads and even construct whole cities. Why surrender a good revenue stream? Depending on your point of view, I suppose the case could be made that God exhibited great patience with Pharaoh Ramses IV, giving him a total of ten chances to “get it.” Known as the Ten Plagues of Egypt, and thought by scholars to have occurred over the course of about a year, here is the list of consequences God imposed on the Pharaoh and his people:

1. Blood – The Nile, for seven days, was turned to blood. No fishing, no bathing and no fresh water.
2. Frogs – A massive throng of frogs rose up out of the Nile, covering every road, city and house.
3. Lice – Thick as dust, they swarmed the air, torturing the hair and skin of both the Egyptians and their animals.
4. Dog Flies – Also sent in never-ending clouds, these flies attached themselves to human and animal eyelids.
5. Murrain – Cattle were central to the Egyptian food chain and economy. This virus attacked and killed their most important livestock.
6. Boils – First animals, then people, were covered in sensitive sores, making it hard to walk, stand or sleep.
7. Hail – Secular historians described the hailstorms as the worst ever seen in Palestine. More people and animals perished.
8. Locusts – Whatever was left of Egypt’s agriculture was destroyed amidst gigantic infestations of these large insects.
9. Darkness – For three days the sun did not rise. Egyptian citizens, rulers and armies remained indoors.

And the tenth plague – the one that finally sprung the Hebrews from under the Pharaoh’s thumb? In an eye-for-an-eye mood, God killed every firstborn son of every Egyptian family. The Hebrew Children were instructed to place a few drops of lamb’s blood above their doorframes, signaling that their firstborn males should be *passed over*.

Because I have, in previous sermons, talked about the moral and intellectual crimes against humanity wrought by the kind of God image as described in Exodus, I’ll spare you yet another rant. Let’s just leave it at this: What kind of God is it that tortures, maims and murders so easily and so randomly? The Ten Plagues of Egypt may or may not have taken place, but the theology that is exposed therein still plagues us all. But once again, I digress...

The Pharaoh in You and Me: In Defense of Stupid

The almost certainly apocryphal story of the Pharaoh is a study in the condition known as stupid. Let me illustrate with more riotous humor. Had Ramses IV been born in my home, it would have taken no more than three plagues, tops, before the jokes kicked in:

- That ol' boy's stupid as rake
- If stupid was snow, that ol' boy'd be walking around in a permanent blizzard
- That ol' boy is just stuck on stupid
- That ol' boy couldn't be more stupid if you cut off his head

By my lights, stupid has nothing to do with IQ scores, academic degrees, annual income, regional accents or fancy words. The hillbilly philosophers of my hometown may not be academics, but this much they know: *Stupid is never having learned how to learn.*

Over the years, mostly from firsthand experience, I've even developed a formula for stupid:

same opportunities + same poor decisions = stupid

By that measure, the Pharaoh was stupid. But before we start busting his chops, by that measure, *everybody's* stupid. Everybody knows that the smart money is on eating less and exercising more. Everybody knows that we change or we die. Everybody knows that loving someone who doesn't love us in return is emotional suicide. Everybody knows that alcohol and other drugs won't solve anything long-term. Everybody knows we can't control other people. Everybody knows we're going to die someday. Bottom line: nobody can stay in learning-to-learn mode all the time. Nobody. And so we see ourselves mirrored in the Pharaohs and other stumbling figures of literature, trying to "get it" in one way or another.

At the risk of offending both our regulars and our Mankato sisters and brothers, if stupid means dodging the lifelong task of learning how learn, then everybody's stupid on at least a temporary basis. (It might sound better to phrase it like the Buddhists – the quest to remain a novice – but even the Eastern traditions have a term for stupid: fool.)

The comedian, Ron White, says that you can't fix stupid. I think that's going a bit too far, even in the case of the Pharaoh, but White's hook line does remind us that *stupid means the perpetual state of not knowing that we don't know*. Let me be clear, there's truth in that old saying about how all life's big decisions are based on insufficient data. But that's not stupidity, that's living. Stupidity, as made stunningly obvious in the figure of the Pharaoh of the Passover story, is continuing to make poor decisions based on *sufficient* data. What does that kind of stupid look like? It looks like unnecessary heartache. It looks like unfounded fear. It looks like needless suffering. It looks like blaming others for our situation.

Spend enough precious time this way, and we'll forget how to connect to anything approaching mystery or transcendence or God, for touching the holy means we *will* be transformed. Resisting change is stupid, but we all do it. It's not sin, it's not abnormal and it's not uncommon, but neither is it the way to the sacred.

Learning How to Learn: Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

Distasteful as you may find my use of the word stupid, I resist the temptation to sanitize the spiritual devastation we wreak on ourselves, one another and this groaning planet. The fully human, understandable – at times *endearing* – resistance we marshal against learning to learn, is an expensive way to go through these all-too-short lives of ours. If stupid carries too much baggage for you, choose any term you prefer, but the fact remains that taking responsibility for ourselves begins with knowing that we don't know and learning how to learn. This is grownup stuff. Had the Pharaoh recognized that, perhaps there would be no Passover. But he didn't. And there is.

The Passover season will be forever associated with freedom's triumph over oppression. The Seder meal will be celebrated so long as the holy season, itself, is kept alive. And, if I had my way, the cautionary tale of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh will echo across time the message that life is for learning.

“Autobiography In Five Short Chapters”
(author, unknown)

I.

*I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost.....I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*

II.

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in, again.
I can't believe I am in this same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*

III.

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.*

*I see it is there.
I still fall in.....it's a habit.....but,
my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.*

IV.

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*

V.

I walk down another street.