

## What is this? A God of Justice AND Grace!

Prayer: Oh Lord, like the Israelite children in the wilderness, we cry out to you in a time of uncertainty and need. And we pray that you would not only meet our physical needs but, as you did with them, help us to see more deeply the kind of God you are. Amen

Friends, we gather around God's word today in a time of deep challenges – the health challenges of Covid-19 and smoke-laden air, the social challenges of injustice and protest, and the ecological challenges evident across the globe. In times like these it is truly right to cry out to God to meet our needs, and one of the needs, as today's readings remind us, is ever deeper insight into the nature of the God who redeems us and claims us in Christ.

In these days of economic tightness, and a growing disparity between the rich and the majority of us, Jesus's parable of the workers in Matthew 20 is important to bear in mind. It is right, and indeed necessary, to challenge injustices in treatment and pay. But Jesus reminds us that the God we serve is not simply a God of justice (the great Santa Claus in the sky – making a list...). God *is* committed to justice, but not restrained to this minimum (paying a fair day's wages)— our gracious God goes beyond justice in loving acts of generosity! And, as Jesus cautions in verse 15, we need to be careful lest our legitimate concern for justice becomes warped into envy of those needy ones on whom God bestows generosity. For in reality, none of us receive from God our “just wages” (of sin), but God's gracious gift.

But as I did in two earlier sermons, I want to focus our attention today on the reading in Exodus, where we see (if we read closely) God's loving parental concern to teach his people that they should not take his graciousness for granted!

To appreciate this theme in Exodus 16, we need to place it in context. This is necessary in part because the assigned lessons over the past weeks (in the need to be selective) jumped from Moses's call to the prelude of the passover, and then the deliverance at the sea. I want to walk us back through the developments after Moses was confronted by God in the burning bush, leading up to the day the Israelites complain that they have been brought out into the desert to starve.

My review will be brief, casting light on parts of the story that are frequently missed. I encourage you again to go back and read the full text yourselves in light of this review. And in particular, I encourage you to bear in mind two points: 1) that God’s purpose throughout is not just to overpower Pharaoh (the false god / religion) but to expose the folly of Pharaoh / false religion; and 2) God’s ultimate purpose is to help us all to “know” who God truly is.

Let me start the review back in Exodus 3, when God calls Moses to lead the Hebrew children out of Egypt. You will remember how reluctant Moses is, and how God makes concession after concession (the help of Aaron, etc.). Finally, in verse 18 God “lowers the bar” of what Moses is to ask of Pharaoh – instead of asking to allow them simply to leave, Moses is to ask Pharaoh only to allow them to make a three-day trip into the wilderness to “offer a sacrifice” to their God (in Hebrew the word “to worship” and “to serve” are the same!)

Now, before we begin to question God’s honesty here, remember that God is trying to make clear who is truly in control of all, and that it is as important to show who is “wisest” as it is who is “strongest.” The scene is being set for a contest!

When Moses gets back to Egypt, and conveys the request to Pharaoh, Pharaoh’s reply (5:2) is “Who is YHWH that I should obey him? I do not know him.” And his response is to further oppress the Hebrews (bricks without straw). When they fail, and are beaten, it is noteworthy that the Hebrew leaders now “cry out” not to God but to Pharaoh (5:15). The gauntlet has been cast down. God now begins the process of leading Pharaoh—and more importantly, the Hebrews—to “know” the Lord. 7:15-17 By this you will know that I am YHWH

God does this through an “object lesson” – what are usually called “the plagues,” though the Hebrew word in Exodus means: Signs, Wonders, Mighty Acts. As you read through these mighty acts it is helpful to notice that the first nine are grouped in three triplets.

The first three “plagues”: 1) water to blood, 2) frogs, 3) gnats serve to make clear that the Lord’s power is greater and different than Egyptian “magic.” By the end of the third (8:19), the magicians are convinced:

“This is the Finger of God.”

The purpose of the second set of three is suggested at the beginning  
8:22 you will know that I YHWH am in the midst of your land  
So 4) the swarm (horse flies?), 5) livestock, and 6) boils  
selectively affect Egyptians but not Hebrews (making clear the issue  
at stake)

The third set of three then turn up the intensity, focus on Pharaoh  
9:14 Hebrew reads “I will send my blows upon your heart” (against  
you yourself ...) 9:29 you will know the earth belongs to YHWH  
So 7) hail and lightning, 8) locusts and 9) darkness (remember  
Pharaoh is representative of Ra, the sun god)

Capped with the killing of the first born (Pharaoh’s heir; he had God’s heirs)  
Houtman (2:199) notes that in 31 and 32 Pharaoh says “as is your  
wish,” emphasizing he is only giving permission for their request to  
hold a festival, not admitting defeat to YHWH over whose servant  
they are.

The story of deliverance does not end here, but we need to pause and highlight the  
“bartering” that goes on during these ten “mighty acts”

remember that all Moses has asked for is permission to make a three-day trip  
into the wilderness to “worship” God. Pharaoh suspicious.  
After the gnats (8:25) Pharaoh says, OK, sacrifice in *this* land (Moses  
refuses – warns sacrifices “abhorrent”)  
After the hail and lightning (10:8) OK, the men can go (Moses refuses)  
After the darkness (10:24) OK, but leave your flocks and herds behind  
(Moses refuses)  
After the killing of first born (12:31-2) OK, go “worship” your God.

One of the reasons it is important to keep this bartering in mind is that it explains  
why Pharaoh later chases the Hebrews. He has only given permission for the 3-day  
journey but now he has heard they have “fled” (14:5)

This leads up to God’s final deliverance at the sea, where it becomes clear that God  
did not *have* to rely on craftiness to deliver; and where the Hebrew children cross a

clear (watery) boundary – so that they are now “out of Egypt.”

But have the Hebrew children gotten “Egypt” out of them yet? At the end of chapter 14, verse 31, we read that they “feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.” But in the chapters that follow, as they make their way to Mount Sinai, among the most common verbs is “grumble” and “complain”, as they make clear that they do not yet truly “know” God and trust in God’s justice / graciousness yet.

In chapter 15, as they set out through the wilderness and cannot find safe water to drink, they complain *against* Moses (and God). A real need, but where is the trust. Then chapter 16, today’s text, which begins:

16:2 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

16:3 The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Jewish readers of this text have helped me to see that the most important thing to see in this text is that this is an exaggerated complaint! Remember how they bartered to bring with them all their flocks, etc. They had something they could eat if necessary. More importantly, they are glorifying the past (ate meat until it “came out our ears”). This is surely not true, Pharaoh not nearly so generous! They are acting much like the teenager, whose response after a parent scrimps to save enough to buy them an old Kia, is only to complain that it is not a BMW! The Hebrew children demand to go “first class,” with fine breads and pheasant under glass! Clearly there is a lot of “Egypt” or captivity to self still in them! And one could well imagine God growing angry or walking away (since we would).

But the shocking thing in the text is that God gives them what they ask! Well, manna and quail – but close. This is not just because they might need some food, but because they are still coming to know God. When they see the bread on the ground they ask “What is it.” (Hebrew manna). The truest answer is that it is another of God’s mighty acts to help us know that God is gracious above all.

But this graciousness does not set aside God’s concern for justice. Thus some

responsibility is connected to gathering the manna (and more will come). God's gift of food to the Hebrews was as an opportunity for them to learn a responsible lifestyle. Grasping and greed go against the nature of true freedom. They are contrary to life founded in gift and trust. As we live through these challenging times, may we learn this lesson more deeply as well, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.