

Softened Heart
Exodus 10: 1 – 20

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“I had spent my whole life being nice. I was nice to my husband even when he left me. I was nice to my kids even when they got out of control. I kept getting sicker and sicker. The palsy moved faster and faster. One day I exploded. It took me awhile to understand...being nice was killing me. I stopped being nice and I was given the chance to live.”

This is how I remember part of the monologue from one of the characters in psychologist Scott Peck’s fictional book called “A Bed by the Window.” Peck is best known for his bestselling non-fiction book *The Road Less Traveled*—a work that led many towards God. *A Bed by the Window* is set in a convalescent hospital and shares many of the same insights from Peck’s earlier book.

The words in the monologue were spoken by a woman with palsy so severe she can only move her head. She is a favorite of the best nurse in the care facility whose name is Heather because this woman, who cannot move, knows a freedom for which Heather longs. You see, Heather, a compassionate and strong woman, the one who patients call when they are on their way into the next life, is stuck. She will not allow someone to enter her life that has the capacity to love her in the ways she has loved so many. She enters into one abusive relationship after another.

He would have had to use my name!

As I read the story over a month ago, I was reminded of that part of me which still struggles in Egypt. While Heather’s story is not exactly mine, there is a general parallel. When I’m most honest with myself, I realize that, like Heather, part of me chooses to cling to my ‘inner Pharaoh,’ to act as if I have to remain in control. I choose to be the strong one to the extent that I turn away from God, attempting to rely solely on my own power. When I am more focused on all those things I’m supposed to do, be in charge of, or control—rather than on God’s love for me and those around me—I am plagued. When I act as if God is not acting in those around me, I am indeed eaten up by frustration that quickly turns to anger: family becomes an irritant, ministry loses its joy, and life feels so very heavy.

The life of Pharaoh is a hard and hardened life...a life God does not intend you or me to live.

If we start at the beginning of the book of Exodus, by the time we reach the portion of the scripture read today, we know the litany. We know that Moses will go to Pharaoh and say “let my people go.” Pharaoh will refuse. Moses, with God’s help, will bring down plagues (river of blood, frogs, gnats, flies, pestilence, boils, and hail). Pharaoh will then shout out his need for forgiveness and his recognition of YHWH’s might. He will ask Moses to intercede for him. Moses will pray and the plague will go away.

It is all quite repetitive.

In fact, by the time we get to chapter 10, and the 8th plague of locusts, we have to wonder why there are so many repetitions of the same theme. If this text were written as a scientific document rather than a litany of Israel, one could have listed the various plagues without use of 77 verses before we reached the 8th one. Any good storyteller could have woven a captivating

tale with fewer plagues, and they probably did. Professor Robert Wilson of Yale Divinity School suggest that this is a “maximal list,” bringing together all of the most famous tales of Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh. Indeed, it is a litany. The community would read these repetitive verses again and again, in order to carve it into their being that Pharaoh refuses to let them go free. They’d speak these words again and again that they might deeply ingrain what happens to those whose hearts harden against the Lord. The people of God knew perfectly well that Pharaoh was not simply an individual drowned in the Red Sea, but one who is symbolic of all who keep Israel from their true worship of God

Listen further to how this 8th plague is introduced...

God says, “I have hardened his [Pharaoh’s] heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the LORD.

Heaving these words alone, you probably caught the difficulty of the text, especially for us who believe firmly God has given us free will. We are disturbed that Pharaoh seems to have become a type of puppet in a show we are meant to watch. This is not the only view that comes out of scripture, however. It is not just God who hardens Pharaoh’s heart. In 8:30: “But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and did not let the people go.”

In writing their history, Israel chose to continue both sides of the story. People have the power to harden their own hearts against God. They have free will. NO one is a mere puppet. The other voice that sounds, let me suggest, is not as much of a theological exposition about God as it is a way to tell the story that we would pay attention.

Remember that commercial when we were young. This is your brain (showing an egg)...this is your brain on drugs (showing the egg frying on the cement). Well Israel understands that, in some way, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart suggests that they see God in the role of a teacher, using the plagues of Egypt as a similar type of object lesson. In the litany, God steps into the role similar to that of a Physics teacher, seeking to demonstrate for all to see what happens when a heart hardens. This is your heart; this is the hardened heart, showing fools jumping up and down on the dust of the earth as bugs descend. “Tell your children and grandchildren...so that you may know that I am the LORD.”

After Pharaoh’s officials looked around and saw a devastated land and people, they pulled him aside and asked “how long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God; do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?” Pharaoh makes a weak attempt to let go. But God knows it doesn’t take much to harden Pharaoh’s heart. Moses simply reminds Pharaoh again that the people of Israel, once free, do not intend on returning to life under his power.

Moses said, “We will go with our young and our old; we will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, because we have the Lord’s festival to celebrate.”

Moses is clear that they will leave nothing behind. This is not a day’s outing; this is a new life with God.

Hearing this, Pharaoh sizzles with anger: “The LORD indeed will be with you, if I ever let your little ones go with you! Plainly, you have some evil purpose in mind. NO, never! Your men may go and worship the LORD, for that is what you are asking.”

Here lies the illusion that blinds. Pharaoh misconstrues Moses' request, making sense of it in a way where he might continue his illusion of power. Your request isn't the true request, Pharaoh angrily asserts. What you want is a moment of worship for yourselves, you men who work so hard. Go and worship. Rest, then you can come back to me.

Pharaoh is happy to allow your soul a day with God as long as you return to live under his power.

It would be easier for me to talk about the Pharaoh outside of your soul, those societal forces that seek our buy-in or to talk about the world's troubles as being caused by fools seeking power.

But, if we are honest, we know *we* are those fools.

What are the Pharaoh illusions that blind us?

If I am nice then my husband won't leave me and my children will love me.

If I pray enough then my husband will change.

If I come to church then my beloved who has just been diagnosed with a bad heart will live beyond the diagnoses.

If I put in enough time, I will succeed.

In every case there is a dream and the dream is based on what we'll do, what we control. They all are based on an assumption other than God's unceasing love.

"They drugged him with his own dream," says Meg in the movie, *A Wrinkle in Time*. It is a theme picked up again and again in story. We saw it in the *Matrix* where one chose to live in the dream world where steak tasted like steak over the harsh reality of there being no such thing anymore. In both stories, they have to break out of the dream, the desire to have their dream fulfilled, and instead meet God where they are...standing in the midst of a ruined land.

It is difficult to see for yourself which illusion is blinding you. The clues are there. Those days when you explode for no reason, those words you wish you hadn't said, those days when you fell distant from God. In prayer, ask...why...why am I like that person in the car in front of me, who seeing the car in front of them stop at a yellow light honks angrily although his bumper sticker says *Let There Be Peace on Earth and Let It Begin with Me*? What has got into me? What am I trying to control instead of allowing God to be with me? What has hardened my heart?

It is not only for our own health that we need to stand up to this. Notice how Pharaoh insists the children will stay with him. It is evil, he argues, to want to teach children another way.

The fight for our future and for the future of the next generation is very real. The choices we make, each one of us, in this community of faith have consequences. If we spend too much time in Pharaoh's shoes we teach our children and youth of our church and all those who whom we are aunt and uncle, grandpa and grandma, mom and dad, teacher and neighbor about a power other than God that has hold of us...we erase God's image in ourselves and our world.

The story of Pharaoh is the story of one who succeeds in this world apart from God's law, growing steadily in power and influence, becoming the absolute ruler of his domain...just so that God may harden his heart.

To the extent that we ignore God's will for our lives, we become the Pharaoh of our domain.

But God has given us a path denied to Pharaoh.

We are not only called to follow God of fire and smoke through the Red Sea into the wilderness, through Jesus, we are favored children who God is delighted to welcome into His embrace.

In downtown Santa Ana, Carol Griset has created a place like our room 1, a place for homeless children to come and be loved. Mary, who said 'yes' when Carol invited her to help, noticed one child in particular. I don't remember all the details Mary shared of this child's misbehavior, the many ways fear and sadness were expressed in her body. What I do remember is how Mary described the miracle she saw after this little girl had been part of the program for awhile. One day, Mary said, she saw this little girl doing something she hadn't ever seen her do before. The little girl was lying on the floor, facing up, arms stretched out wide.

It is a picture of a softened heart.

At the end of the story, Heather is asked on a date by a man who we've learned to like by the end of the tale. He is a good man with the right intentions. Yet she runs the other way and literally runs out of the psychologist's office when confronted with her choice. The psychologist who has been with her for many years waits, the minutes go by. As more time goes by, as it sinks further in that the battle to soften her heart to another's love might have been lost this time, he cries.

Until, the miracle...a knock, and the door opens.