

Children of Israel

a sermon by Don Falkos
for Advent Lutheran Church
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Scripture Readings:
Exodus 12:1-13
Exodus 13:1-8

Good morning.

What fun readings I get to talk about this morning. Blood and death! Whoo hoo!

In order to comprehend what's going on in these passages from Exodus, we have to go backwards before we can move forwards. I'm going to share some historical perspective, discuss some of the issues that arise from these readings, and finish by connecting them to who we are today.

The first issue I need to address is the Bible itself. The Bible did not drop from heaven as a complete book. It was pieced together out of multiple sources, over the course of a thousand years, by scores of people. Often older source materials were cut apart, rearranged, and sewn together to give us the books we have today. This is true for many Old Testament books, and particularly for some of the earliest books – Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. That's why the Bible often seems to be repeating itself, telling the same story multiple times. The stories come from multiple sources. The two readings we just heard were both from the book of Exodus, but they came from different sources – one from the E source and one from the Priestly source.

As best anyone can figure, the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt took place in the early- to mid-1200s BC. The earliest surviving written account of the exodus is from over 300 hundred years later, about 900 BC. By the time this document was written, the nation of Israel had been well established under King Saul, King David, and King Solomon. But after the death of Solomon, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom retained the name Israel. The southern kingdom was known as Judah. This earliest account of the exodus was recorded in a document known as the E source. It's called the E source because in it God is referred to as Elohim, which starts with the letter E.

The E source was represented for us this morning by our second reading, the one from the opening of Exodus 13. In this reading Moses encouraged the people to remember the exodus and there was all that talk about bread made without yeast.

Our first reading, from the opening of Exodus 12, talked about the tenth and final plague, the death of the firstborn son from every family in Egypt. This passage originated in a document known as the Priestly source.

The Priestly source was written hundreds of years after the E source. By that time, the northern kingdom had been conquered and exiled by the Assyrian Empire, and the southern kingdom had been conquered and exiled by the Babylonian Empire. When the Israelites in Babylon were finally released from captivity and allowed to go back to Judah, there was a power struggle to determine the shape of the Israelite religion. The document known as the Priestly source was written to promote and advance the priestly aspects of religious practices, such as animal sacrifice.

Let's look at this later material first, the Priestly passage about the tenth plague. But before we get to it, we need some background. The story here is about the Children of Israel. So who were the Children of Israel?

The land of Canaan was situated in what we know today as Israel and Palestine. It was named after Canaan, the grandson of Noah. There were twin brothers born in Canaan, Esau and Jacob, who were grandsons of Abraham. Esau, the eldest, was an outdoorsman, an expert hunter. But he wasn't very bright. On the other hand, Jacob, the younger of the two, was quite intelligent. He was also deceptive and conniving. He managed to trick his older brother and his father into giving *him* the family inheritance. For some reason I won't pretend to understand, God chose to bless Jacob and then changed his name to Israel. He had two wives and two concubines who collectively gave birth to twelve sons and one daughter.

Jacob's youngest son, Joseph, was his favorite. As a result of this favoritism, Joseph became an arrogant, self-centered teenager – an absolutely unique occurrence in the history of the world. His brothers hated him and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Several years later there was a famine. God lifted Joseph out of slavery and gave him a prominent position in the Egyptian government. Because of Joseph, Egypt was spared from the ravages of the famine. Not so the land of Canaan. Eventually, Jacob's entire family, the offspring of Jacob, the children of Israel, moved to Egypt, where they were quite prosperous.

Many years passed. There came a time when the Children of Israel were almost as numerous as the Egyptians themselves. In fear of these foreigners, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, enslaved them.

Many more years passed. Then God spoke to a man named Moses. "I have chosen you to lead my people, the Children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt and back to the land of Canaan."

Moses went to Pharaoh and tried to convince him to "Let my people go." But Pharaoh wouldn't listen.

God sent a series of plagues, which affected all of Egypt except where the Children of Israel lived.

(1) First, the water everywhere in Egypt turned to blood. The fish died and the water was undrinkable.

(2) Next, frogs infested the land. When Pharaoh agreed to let the people go, Moses prayed to the Lord and the frogs died. But then Pharaoh changed his mind.

THREE All the dust in the land of Egypt became gnats. And the gnats were everywhere, covering people and animals alike.

FOUR Swarms of flies covered the land. Pharaoh agreed to let the people go, but changed his mind after Moses prayed and the flies were gone.

FIVE A plague killed Egyptian livestock, while not a single Israelite animal died.

SIX Painful boils broke out on the Egyptians. Still, Pharaoh refused to listen.

SEVEN There was devastating hail with thunder and continuous lightning. The only place without hail was the region where the Children of Israel lived. Pharaoh agreed to let the people go, but changed his mind after the hail stopped.

EIGHT Locusts swarmed over the whole land of Egypt devouring every plant that had survived the hailstorm. Pharaoh agreed to let the people go, but changed his mind after the locusts were gone.

Do you notice a pattern here?

NINE A thick, palpable darkness fell on the land of Egypt, although there was light as usual where the Children of Israel lived. Pharaoh shouted at Moses, "I will not let the Children of Israel go."

Now we arrive at our first reading, where God is explaining the tenth plague and how the Children of Israel are to avoid its effects by sacrificing a lamb and smearing its blood on their doorposts.

The fact there are ten plagues is significant. In the Bible, ten is a "number of completion" often associated with suffering – suffering through which God is faithful. This story is about the power and sovereignty and faithfulness of God. Having *ten* plagues in the story is supposed to remind us God is faithful no matter what we're experiencing. The Children of Israel experienced slavery, but

God was faithful throughout their suffering and provided *Moses* to lead them back to Canaan.

I've been dancing around the elephant in the room. This reading about the tenth plague is an extremely difficult passage of scripture. God tells Moses, "I am going to pass through Egypt and kill every firstborn son." That doesn't sound like the God I know – the God of love and compassion.

So what is this all about?

Our sensibilities are different from those in the culture out of which this story arose. We need to take that into account when considering this passage. In the Ancient Near East, attributing violence to one's gods was an act of praise. "Our god is wonderful! He defeated our enemies in battle and gave us their lands." That's how they saw their world, even though they were the ones who had gone out onto the field of battle and defeated their enemies.

Did biblical authors write with similar hyperbole?

Yes, they did.

In Exodus 12:12 God says, "I will pass through the land of Egypt." "I will strike down every firstborn son." Sounds pretty straightforward, doesn't it?

But just a few verses later, in Exodus 12:23, not part of our reading this morning, we have another description of the same event. This description comes from the older source material, the E source. In it we're told, "The Lord will pass through the land." "Because of the blood on your doorposts the Lord will pass over your home." "The Lord will not permit the destroyer to enter your house."

Let me say that again. "The Lord will not permit the destroyer to enter your house."

Notice it's not God carrying out the violent action. It's "the destroyer" or in some translations "the death angel." This may not seem like much at first glance. But as is the case with almost everything in the Bible, there's more here than initially meets the eye.

Who was the destroyer?

I think it's safe to say this is the fallen angel we know as the devil or Satan.

We could say... God didn't kill the firstborn sons of the Egyptians but simply allowed it to happen. That doesn't sound a whole lot better, does it? But consider what brought God to the *point* of allowing it to happen.

Let's look at a different story – the story of Noah and the great flood, found in Genesis 6 – 9. In this story God sent a flood to destroy the earth and all the people living on it, except for Noah and his family, who were kept safe in the ark.

But is that what the text *really* says?

Turns out, it's not.

The waters are a hugely destructive force. They want to overflow their banks and submerge the land, devouring everything in their path. But at creation God established boundaries for the waters and ever since has been holding them back. By the time of Noah, God had given humankind opportunity after opportunity to turn from their evil ways and to move toward good. Instead people became more and more wicked, to the point where every thought they had... every inclination... was simply evil. Finally, enough was enough. God was saddened at the need to do so, but chose to withdraw divine protection. And the waters overcame the land.

I said earlier God *sent* a series of plagues on Egypt. We now see it's more accurate to say God *allowed* a series of plagues. God had provided plenty of opportunity, nine plagues so far, for Pharaoh to release the Children of Israel. But they were still being held captive. Only then did God withdraw divine protection and allow the destroyer to wreak havoc by killing the firstborn sons of Egypt.

Now let's look for a moment at our other reading, the Exodus 13 passage from the E source. Here Moses commands the Children of Israel to remember their departure from Egypt – to celebrate it every year. The central element of this celebration is unleavened bread – bread made without yeast. This was a weeklong celebration known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Why unleavened bread? That's easy. If you're on the move, you don't have time to wait for the dough to rise. It really is that simple.

The passage we've already discussed at length talks about the *Passover* celebration in a similar way. It says to eat the Passover meal while wearing your traveling cloak and sandals and holding your staff in one hand as though you're on a journey and are in a hurry. Both of these celebrations, Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, strongly emphasize the haste of departure from an undesirable situation.

Since the time of Noah, people have continued getting themselves into undesirable situations. God has provided opportunity after opportunity for them to turn from their evil ways and to move *with haste* toward good. Some of these people have taken the opportunity. Others have chosen instead to become more and more wicked. In the end, God has turned away, withdraw divine protection, and delivered them over to the consequences of their own evils.

The Children of Israel in Egypt were spared from the destroyer by the blood of the sacrificed lamb, which they smeared on the doorposts of their houses. We are spared from the destroyer by the blood of the sacrificed Jesus, which was shed on the cross at Calvary.

God is love. So when the Bible portrays God as being violent, be aware something else is going on. Most likely, it's a misunderstanding or misrepresentation by the biblical author. God is love, revealed fully through Jesus, especially Jesus on the cross.

One last thing. Jesus spoke of the destroyer in John 10:10 when he said, "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give a rich and satisfying life."

Reading the Bible's ancient stories of death and destruction can be overwhelming, especially if we take them at face value. Instead, we should see them as God holding out as long as possible, offering salvation again and again, until it's no longer possible.

We must trust in God's love, and these difficult stories will become a source of hope and encouragement as we face the difficulties of our world today. Then perhaps we can live the rich and satisfying lives Jesus wants to give us.