

Journey Through Exodus: The Church, Exile, and Covid-19
Session 2 January 10, 2021

Last week we looked at three stories of powerful women in the Book of Exodus: (1) the story of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah; (2) the story of Moses' birth and deliverance in the Nile featuring Pharaoh's daughter, Moses' mother Jochebed, and his sister Miriam; and (3) Moses' wife Zipporah.

In session one I suggested some possible connections between ancient text and contemporary situation. Who are the hidden figures in your life? What does the text say to us about how God is present during times of crisis? I asked the group to begin studying Exodus and to think about what God might be up to during these days of pandemic. I hope to hear from some of you about your thinking.

In this second session, we'll explore two stories: (1) the story of Moses' encounter with God and the burning bush; and (2) the story of the plagues.

If you have time this week, I encourage you to read Exodus chapters 3-12. However, in our brief second session we will focus on these three passages: Exodus 3:1-15, 10:1-7, and 12: 21-27.

As you read these three selections, here are some questions to ponder:

1. What are the objections Moses makes to God in chapters 3 and 4?
2. What does this story reveal about God? What might it reveal about us?
3. Have you found yourself making any of these objections?
4. Reflect back on 2020...what are some things you want to forget, and what are some things you want to remember?
5. What are you learning about God during this pandemic?
6. What are you learning about church?

One of the themes we might explore is our society's inability to lament. I wrote an article about that very theme a while back in an exploration of *Lamentations* if you are interested. <https://christiancitizen.us/lamentations-for-our-time/>

More detailed notes follow for those who are interested.

- Exodus 3

- In a rapid series of first person verbs, God declares that he has *observed, heard, knows, come down, bring them up, seen*, and now he will *send*.
- He addresses the Israelites as “my people” in verses 7 and 10. Thus, even if the Israelites have forgotten, God is reclaiming it.
- In response to Moses’ question *who am I?* God answers literally “I am with you.” It doesn’t matter so much who Moses is; it matters that God is with him.
- Moses asks for God’s name, which in ancient times was thought to be the essence of a person. God’s answer is difficult to translate. The NRSV says in v. 14 *I Am Who I Am*. It could also be translated as *I will be who I will be*.
- The divine name, or Tetragrammaton (four consonants) was thought to be so powerful that it could not be pronounced out loud by the time of the Second Temple, save for once a year on the Day of Atonement by the Chief Priest. Many Jews to this day replace the pronunciation with *Adonai*, which means *Lord*. In many English translations of the Old Testament, a capitalized LORD is an indication that the underlying word is YHWH, sometimes rendered as Yahweh.

- Exodus 5-6

- Interestingly in verse 2, Pharaoh asks the same question as Moses “Who is the Lord...?”
- In verse 22 Moses continues his rather bold practice of addressing God by demanding to know why God has “mistreated this people?” “Why did you ever send me?” He seems to be plagued by self-doubt about his calling from the beginning.
- He complains again in 6:12 about his poor rhetorical skills. So, God adapts by directing his speech to Moses *and* his brother Aaron. Undeterred, Moses gives the same complaint again in 6:30.
- Why all the complaining? Perhaps it was to emphasize that it was God who was doing the work; it was God who was delivering; it was God who was behind all the miracles. Not Moses.

•Exodus 7-12 “The Signs of God”

- The turning of the River Nile into blood is not called a plague. It is a *sign*. And what is the purpose of the sign? Verse 17 tells us that “By this you shall know that I am the Lord.” The sign is a proof of God’s presence.
- We are used to calling the events described in these chapters as the “Ten Plagues” but the text does not use that term. The word plague or a related term is used only three times. The other times the word is “sign.” Remember the way the Gospel of John uses the word “sign” to talk about the ministry of Jesus? Both are markers of God’s presence in the world.
- In Exodus 8, Pharaoh asks Moses to pray to God to remove the frogs. (8:8). This is more than Moses seems able to do in the narrative in terms of his relationship to God.
- Notice the repeated theme of the *hardening* of Pharaoh’s heart. When disaster strikes again and again, do we have a similar reaction?
- In 9:27-28 after the hail disaster, Pharaoh makes a remarkable *confession* of sin and again asks Moses to pray for him.
- He repeats this after the the swarm of locusts in 10:16-18.
- “The motif of the stiffening, or hardening, of Pharaoh’s heart runs through the entire Exodus story; it appears exactly twenty times. Half of the references are to an essential attribute of the man’s character, half are attributed to divine causality.”¹

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 23.