

Live your life! I'm taking my cue for today's sermon from our reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Paul is telling the people of Philippi, a place where he planted a church and now hears that they are struggling, that they cannot give into death as a solution to their difficulties. He admits that at times he himself would like to give up on life and be at peace with God rather than having to suffer in prison, undergo beatings and face angry mobs in various towns. But instead he is living his life in Christ here in our world to bring Christ to the people, and even now, to us.

If you spent your whole life as a slave in Egypt you too might want to throw in the towel and give up and take a path **out** of life. Today's reading from Exodus gives us an idea of why suffering slaves were given hope by God through Moses and Aaron. Through them they will know God's saving grace. The Israelites endured savage and unfair treatment at the hands of their taskmasters. Why not just give up? They cannot. They are God's people. God's plan for them is joy and freedom. It just takes some difficulties to get there!

Those brothers who must have had to show much courage, go before Pharaoh once again as God told them to do. Why does God say that Moses will be God to Pharaoh? Because Pharaoh doesn't recognize the God of the Israelites and so what Moses and Aaron do and say will have to be exactly the team effort that God needs from them: Moses and Aaron had to do and say to Pharaoh what God would do and say.

No longer are Moses and Aaron asking Pharaoh for a few days to go and have a rest and time off to worship God. God's demand is this: Pharaoh must let the people go altogether. And there will be consequences for not giving the people their freedom. Pharaoh may have a hard heart as a matter of his own free will. And yet, God has a role in letting this man who has no feelings for other human beings continue in his hardness. God will let Pharaoh continue down his path of destruction for his people and his country. A contest of snakes seems to set the tone for the plagues to come.

All of creation will be summoned to show the power of God to create and to destroy, the power to allow slavery and the power to release captives to freedom. The staff of Aaron becoming a snake and swallowing the snakes of the magicians foreshadows the army of the Egyptians which will be swallowed by the Red Sea as the Israelites make good their escape.

It isn't our modern style to think of God in a contest with magicians who can turn a staff into a snake. But this is the way that our spiritual forebears told a story about the power of God. That's one reason why we don't hear this story on Sunday mornings, usually. It seems like a primitive God indeed who is willing to engage in this sort of spiritual warfare against the wisest men that Pharaoh can summon in his Kingdom. God's competition is just a sign of God's power, for us it's a metaphor. Any tool can be used by God to show what must and will happen. Anything can be of use for the Israelites to escape their awful captivity.

The Hebrew people have no weapons, they are not trained in warfare. How possibly could they expect to win a battle against Pharaoh and all his well-armed soldiers? How could they possibly imagine that

they might escape their captors? The plagues will show that God, harnessing all creation, will show the mighty superiority of the God of justice and freedom. The snake is just the beginning.

Later on, in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses will tell his people who now are struggling on to reach the promised land to “choose life.” We always need God’s encouragement in the face of great difficulties.

God’s power to bring generosity and kindness in the face of a life of suffering is also the point of the parable we heard this morning. God’s ways are not our ways. Although suffering is part of a day in the life of a worker trying his or her best to make a little money to feed self and family, generosity is part of a day in the life of God.

The landowner of the parable needs some day laborers and so goes to town to find some guys standing in a parking lot looking for any sort of work they can get. But this God pays fellows who worked all day in the hot sun the same as he pays ones who only worked the last hour. This doesn’t sound fair to us. But if we think of generosity and love instead of a human idea of fairness, we will start to understand who God is and how God can lift us out of difficulties when we do not expect it. We are the people who are hired in the last hour. We have suffered and don’t expect that our suffering will be relieved. And then, we are freed as the Israelites are, or we are given a gift in an unexpected way. We experience God’s overwhelming generosity.

Again this week I’m going to close with Paul’s words. His eloquence in the face of all that he suffered is a gift from God and for us, a gift to understand God better as our life giver, and sustainer in adversity. Paul is another Moses standing up to the Pharaoh in his day, the Emperor of Rome.

“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. ... And this is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well-- since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” Philippians 1:27-30