

Lenten Devotional March 22, 2018

Scripture

Exodus 7:25-8:19

²⁵Seven days passed after the LORD had struck the Nile. ^{8:1}Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. ²If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. ³The river shall swarm with frogs; they shall come up into your palace, into your bedchamber and your bed, and into the houses of your officials and of your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. ⁴The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your officials.’” ⁵And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, the canals, and the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.’” ⁶So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. ⁷But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and brought frogs up on the land of Egypt. ⁸Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said, “Pray to the LORD to take away the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the LORD.” ⁹Moses said to Pharaoh, “Kindly tell me when I am to pray for you and for your officials and for your people, that the frogs may be removed from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile.” ¹⁰And he said, “Tomorrow.” Moses said, “As you say! So that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God, ¹¹the frogs shall leave you and your houses and your officials and your people; they shall be left only in the Nile.” ¹²Then Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh; and Moses cried out to the LORD concerning the frogs that he had brought upon Pharaoh. ¹³And the LORD did as Moses requested: the frogs died in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. ¹⁴And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank. ¹⁵But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said. ¹⁶Then the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt.’” ¹⁷And they did so; Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt. ¹⁸The magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not. There were gnats on both humans and animals. ¹⁹And the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God!” But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said.

Devotional

Dr. Helen Blier, Director of Continuing Education

“Won’t they ever learn?” I think each year when the lectionary revisits the ten plagues. It’s one of those cinematic or literary devices that just packs on the anxiety—we know the pattern, we anticipate the outcome, and despite all our frets and protests . . . it happens. Again. And again. And again. And I admit to feeling a bit smug when I see how stubborn and clueless Pharaoh and his minions are.

Today’s exercise in frustration brings us strikes two and three in the “Pharaoh-just-won’t-get-the-memo” storyline. And strike three is followed by seven more; I mean seriously. How many of us would like to think we’d have cried “Uncle!” at cleaning up piles of dead frogs? Enough, already! No one should need the gnats, boils, darkness, and the rest!

But it goes on. And because they just won’t see, children die. And I think, “Lord, have mercy.”

This year, I am struck by the ways in which we are more Pharaoh than Hebrew. I bet that, given a pen and a few minutes, anyone reading this devotional could come up with a list of plagues that bring suffering to our fellow human beings—and the creative ways we harden our hearts by resigning

ourselves to the suffering because “it is what it is” or—forgive us—we blame the victims. Whether it’s opiate-related deaths in Allegheny county (over 700 in 2017), children dying from gunshots in the U.S. (1300 a year), people dying from hunger worldwide (an estimated 9 million each year), or the persistence of racism, human trafficking, the elevation of profits over persons in economic systems . . . Lord, have mercy.

Prayer

God of redemption, Lent marches inexorably to the death of another firstborn. As we turn toward Holy Week, may you finally peel away the parts of our hearts that have become like Pharaoh’s and commit ourselves to seeing and responding to the suffering of our neighbors near and far. We make this petition in the name of your own Son, whom you saw suffer and die as well.