

5th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

Exodus 5:1-2;7:8-23

Afterwards Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.”’ But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.’

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘When Pharaoh says to you, “Perform a wonder”, then you shall say to Aaron, “Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.”’ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as the Lord had commanded; Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron’s staff swallowed up theirs. Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.’ But until now you have not listened. Thus says the Lord, ‘By this you shall know that I am the Lord.’ See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.”’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron, “Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.”’

Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart.

I invite you to spend a moment with me to dwell with the painting you find on the front of your bulletin. It was created by a colleague and friend of mine, Lauren Wright Pittman, who was recently ordained as a Presbyterian pastor in her artistic ministry with A Sanctified Art. Of the twelve images that were created to pair with the passages of this “Unraveled” series, the one on the front of our bulletin is probably my favorite. The first time I saw this painting when we purchased this worship bundle, I literally gasped. It is such an evocative expression of the drama of today’s passage.

So, take a minute and simply gaze at the picture, if you're able. There is pharaoh, dressed in an opulent robe, a robe that probably costs more than most families in his empire make in a year. In his fury, he stands between the waves of water that will drown him and his army. Atop his head is the figure of a snake. Perhaps it's the snake that his magicians conjure to compete with the one that Moses and Aaron conjure by God's command. Or perhaps it's the snake that tempted Adam and Eve in the garden. Behind his head, in concentric circles are the byproducts of his greed, the plagues that haunt the nation as the tyrant's heart hardens. Frogs, flies, and locusts. Boils and blood and hurling hail. All the destruction that rains down on the innocents as a tyrant digs in his heels and demands that things be done his way, consequences be damned. As the horror goes on all around him, pharaoh clutches his hardened heart, and stares resolutely ahead. His brow is bent with belligerence. This is a ruler hell-bent on dominating all, manipulating it all, controlling all, and owning it all.

You see, people like pharaoh don't like to be told that they aren't the final word on everything. When political figures like him don't get their way, they tend to throw temper tantrums. They dig in their heels, they cross their arms across their chest, they get grumpy, and they lash out and everybody and everything. Nothing is ever their fault and everyone else is to blame. If they don't get their way, they're willing to burn the whole place to the ground on their way out.

And this is what our pharaoh does. He refuses to listen to the God that tells him that it's time to stop the violence. He refuses to listen to the religious leaders who go to his palace to give the divine decree that the time of oppression has come to an end. For the message is crystal clear: let my people go. There's not a whole lot of room for interpretation. God gives pharaoh a simple demand and pharaoh gives a simple answer: no.

And so, the violence continues. In fact, it escalates with every minute of the tyrant's conniption. While he sits in his comfortable palace, the people suffer. He has convinced them that he is the answer, that he alone can fix it. But while he clings to power, everyone suffers, Egyptian and Hebrew alike.

One of the things I love about the painting on the front of your bulletin is its title. Lauren Wright Pittman cleverly named it "Anti-Creation Narrative." You see, the biblical narrative begins with a beautiful creation narrative, when God weaves together the earth in perfection. First, God takes three days to create the world and then three days to populate it. The first three days, God creates light, sky and water, land and seas and vegetation. Then God creates the sun, moon, and stars, the fish and the birds, and then, finally, human beings. It's a beautiful utopia. But then humans have to go screw the whole thing up. The second book of the Bible, Exodus, portrays pharaoh as the very antithesis of God's creation. Pharaoh's greed literally begins to unravel the creation that God so lovingly made. The plagues are the de-construction of God's intended order for the earth and its creatures and its people.

And all this de-creation, all of this destruction, all of this violence starts with one thing: a hardened heart. Pharaoh had a choice. He could have heeded God's command and avoid all of this suffering. But he chose the option of war. He chose the option of oppression. He chose the option of chaos. His heart becomes hardened.

Pharaoh didn't worship God; he worshiped himself. He worshiped production. He worshiped his own ability to hoard every resource and his ability to do so on the backs of the vulnerable among him. His heart was hardened because, for him, a soft heart was a sign of weakness.

But you and I know better. We know that a soft heart is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength, a strength that is found in God's willingness to leave the protection of heaven and come down to this messy earth

and suffer with us and heal the broken and spend time with the poor, the destitute, the grieving, the hungry, the thirsty.

If Pharaoh had softened his heart, he could have avoided the suffering of the people he was supposed to protect. If Pharaoh had softened his heart, the Israelites would never have been enslaved in the first place. If Pharaoh had softened his heart, the plagues would never have rained down in their fury.

Also, if pharaoh had softened his heart, the Book of Exodus would be terribly short and painfully boring. But, as it turns out, it is neither. We are gifted with a story in the past that tells us a bit about our present, if we are willing to hear its truth.

There are pharaohs all around us, my friends. If I asked you to close your eyes and then I went back and described this pharaoh again, you could probably very easily visualize some characters in our current world. And those pharaohs *do* need to be called out. Those pharaohs must be challenged and reminded of God's mandate for justice and righteousness. Those pharaohs' palaces must be approached, as did Moses and Aaron, to deliver truth to power.

However, we can't afford to merely focus on the pharaohs that live "out there." We must simultaneously attend to the pharaohs within us. How might *we* be called to soften our hearts to the needs of those around us? How might we soften our hearts so that we might be attentive to and honest about the ways the smallest of decisions that we make affect others?

Because the pharaohs around us, the ones that sit in the seats of power, did not arrive there by mere happenstance; we put them there. We elected them. We emboldened them either by what we have done or what we have chosen *not* to do, but what we have said and what we have chosen *not* to say, when others around us are suffering. We, the Church universal, are not free of blame. So, as Christians in this tumultuous time, as Christians who have sometimes chosen convenience over justice, we have a choice to make. We can make the choice to soften our hearts to the cries of those around us, the cries of the Rizophahs around us, the cries of the immigrants who are scared to answer their door when ICE comes knocking today, the cries of coal miners here in our state who don't know where their next paycheck is going to be, the cries of parents right here in Lexington who can't afford medicine for their children because prescription drug prices are so absurdly high.

We can soften our hearts or we can dig in our heels like pharaoh refuse to accept responsibility for our greed. And today's story reminds us this gruesome truth: when hearts are hardened, the plagues *will* come.

So, we must soften our hearts. We must name and claim and challenge both the pharaohs around us and the pharaohs within us. A hard heart cannot be molded into the heart of God. But a *soft* one can be shaped into a heart that inspires us to be truth-telling in the lair of lies, courageous in the face of pharaoh, and resilient in a sea of suffering.

Let us not lose heart when creation unravels around us because of the brokenness of this world. Let us learn from today's story so that it may never happen again. Let us practice our Christian faith together as a lifelong exercise in softening the hardened heart.

In the name of the God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all God's children say: Amen.