

Delivered from False Narratives About Ourselves

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[0 : 00] Oh, wow. Look at that. Off to a great start. Good morning, everyone.

Good morning. Oh, wonderful. My name is Erin Byrne. I am the director of family ministry here at the table, as you may know. And I grew up just outside of Seattle.

It's been a while since I was home, and I miss it a lot. So I was excited when, just over a year ago, one of my favorite writers announced that he was moving there. This is a writer whose work I love, but my excitement about him moving to Seattle turned to frustration one day when he complained that people from Seattle are really judgmental towards anyone using an umbrella.

Since the Pacific Northwest, you know, gets mostly one kind of rain nine months out of the year, there's a bit of a culture that if you're a real Seattleite, you'll tough it out. You'll learn to love 55 and drizzling.

Reading his post as a real Seattleite, I found myself thinking, maybe we're not judgmental. Maybe you could learn to handle some rain. Maybe that wouldn't kill you.

[1 : 12] Friends, if your inner voice ever sounds like that, maybe pause. Take a deep breath. We don't have to prove that we are more powerful than the weather, much as we may want to.

And today we're going to talk a little more about when to hold on to our strength and when it is okay to be humble enough, weak enough even, to use an umbrella. This week we're continuing our series on the story of the Exodus, reading about some of the plagues of Egypt and digging into what it means to think of God as a deliverer.

We're going to read through the first three plagues, and then we're going to talk about the false stories that Pharaoh and the Egyptians believed about themselves and learn about how God can deliver us from those stories we tell ourselves and how we can participate in that deliverance.

Last week, Pastor Tanetta gave us the context that at the time of today's story, the Israelites are living as slaves in Egypt. Many of them are brickmakers, building homes and temples for the Egyptians, their oppressors.

For a few chapters now, our Israelite heroes Moses and his brother Aaron have been going back and forth to Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, asking him very famously to let my people go.

[2 : 21] To which Pharaoh responds, Who is this God that I should heed them and let Israel go? I do not know your God. I will not let Israel go. We've talked a lot recently about Pharaoh's question, who is this God?

But who is Pharaoh? Pharaoh was the ruler of all of Egypt. In the book of Exodus, we don't see a governmental system with a lot of checks and balances, a ruler with a healthy sense of humility about his place in the world.

In fact, the ancient Egyptians also understood their rulers to be intermediaries with the gods, so people with divine power. On Pharaoh's side, what does it look like to spend your whole life being told not only that you are the most powerful person around, but also that you have power from the gods?

What does it mean to grow up knowing that Pharaohs before you had pyramids built in their honor? In Pastor Trinetta's sermon last week, we saw what that looks like for Pharaoh. Every time there is a chance that someone else might start to gain some power, Pharaoh gets defensive.

The Israelites have been slaves for a while now, and they start to outnumber the Egyptians, so Pharaoh makes them do even more manual labor. Moses asks Pharaoh to give the Israelites a break, a short retreat in the wilderness to worship their God.

[3 : 39] Pharaoh turns around and tells them to collect their own straw for the bricks they're making, making their work even harder without time for retreat. Moses says that God commands that Pharaoh let the people go.

Pharaoh says, Who is this God that I should obey them? I do not know your God. When I started preparing this sermon, I was honestly expecting to say that Pharaoh was high on his own power, that he was overconfident in himself, but I don't really get that from reading today's passages. What I see in today's story is someone who gets really defensive, someone who's working really hard to convince himself that he is who he says he is. This is not the story of a ruler who's confident in his power.

This is the story of a man who doesn't know how to handle anyone else having power. So he avoids reality and hardens his heart to the world around him, even as the evidence that he might be mistaken about himself becomes more and more overwhelming.

We're going to start with Exodus chapter 7, verse 8. Here God is talking to Moses and his brother Aaron. 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 serpent. [4 : 57] 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 serpent. 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 serpents. 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.

So this is the first time we concretely see God proving God's power over Pharaoh. It turns out that Pharaoh, or at least his magicians, do have some sort of mystic power in this story.

There's obviously a lot to unpack there. The biblical authors are pretty clear that this is not power from God, but they do also take for granted that somehow this story happens. If we get too caught up in trying to explain how it happens, we miss what they're trying to tell us.

The biblical storytellers emphasize the fact that God shows God's power over the court magicians. This passage sort of serves as a prelude to the ten plagues, a gentle trick to remind us of who God is, in case there was any doubt about who we should be rooting for as rulers, as readers.

[6 : 10] Now we turn to the real plagues, which will be a little less gentle. In preparation for the first plague, God tells Moses to go out to the Nile River, where Pharaoh is probably about to go bathe, and to warn Pharaoh that if he does not let the Israelites go, God will turn all the water in Egypt into blood.

Essentially, Moses says to Pharaoh, see this water that provides life for your country, prepare for it to become a source of death. The water you're about to bathe in, imagine it full of dead fish. Imagine it creating a horrible smell so that the people can't stand to be near it. This is what my God will do to you, Pharaoh, because you are refusing to let my people go.

Verse 19, 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 irrigation channels, and over its ponds, and over all the gatherings of its waters, and they shall become blood, and there shall be blood in all the land of Egypt, even in the trees and in the stones.

Moses and Aaron did as the Lord had commanded. Before the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his officials, he, Aaron, lifted up his staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood.

[7 : 28] 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. So here God calls into question Pharaoh's divine power.

How powerful are you really if I can turn your beautiful river into blood? But this plague also creates some doubt about Pharaoh's political power. What kind of a leader are you if someone else's God can ruin your country's elaborate irrigation system?

What kind of a political leader ends up with the land covered in blood? A political leader who just lost a battle. God doesn't kill any Egyptians, but there is blood everywhere. Blood flowing through the trees.

So how does Pharaoh respond to his land looking like there was a massacre? Verse 22, So again, Pharaoh's political and divine power are in question here, but now we're also questioning Pharaoh's social power.

When he sees that his magicians can also turn some water into blood, Pharaoh turns around and leaves. He doesn't have time for criticism. He simply avoids dealing with the fact that his constituents are digging for groundwater because there is nothing to drink.

[8 : 57] And this part isn't really God's doing. Pharaoh could work to support his subjects in the midst of this crisis, but he can't admit to himself that there is a crisis. So instead, he refuses to acknowledge what's happening.

It's time for plague number two. The Lord said to Moses, Come to Pharaoh and you shall say to him, Thus says the Lord, Send off my people that they may worship me. And if you refuse to send them off, Look, I am about to scourge your region with frogs.

And the Nile will swarm with frogs, and they will come up and come into your bedroom and onto your couch and into your official's house and onto your people and into your ovens and into your kneading pans.

And upon you and upon your people and upon all your officials, the frogs will come up. And the Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, the channels, and the pools, and bring up frogs over the land of Egypt.

So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts and brought frogs up on the land of Egypt.

[10 : 09] It's sort of funny here that the magicians work to prove they're able to repeat this plague. Ah, just what we were hoping for. More frogs. Their magic doesn't really seem to make things better for the average Egyptian.

That said, the frogs in Pharaoh's bedchamber do seem to get to him eventually. This time, Pharaoh does say that he will let the Israelites go, not forever, but for a trip, for their religious sacrifice.

And he asks Moses to pray to God to take the frogs away. I want to note two things here. The first is that even though Pharaoh's magicians are able to recreate this plague, they don't seem to be able to get rid of it.

Sort of a rough kind of power to have. I also want to point out that Pharaoh doesn't think he has the power to talk to God, so he asks Moses to intercede on his behalf. Even though Pharaoh insists out loud that he is more powerful than the Israelite God, he doesn't have the courage even to speak to God directly.

So Moses asks God to reverse the plague. God sort of listens. Verse 13, And the Lord did as Moses requested. The frogs die.

[11 : 17] In the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. And they gathered them together heap upon heap, and the land stank. So we don't fully see God fix things here.

God wants the Egyptian oppressors to remember as they pile up their dead frogs, who is really in power? Verse 15, But when Pharaoh saw that there is relief, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

So again, we see that Pharaoh isn't really concerned about the average Egyptian or the piles of rotting frogs, which his slaves would have hurried to clean out of his own palace. He's only concerned about proving that he, a god king with his own team of court magicians, is the most powerful one around.

We're not going to go through all the plagues today, but I do want to read the third one, the plague of tiny little bugs. Some translations say lice or fleas. This one says gnats. Some say mosquitoes. I think you've already gotten the point. The bugs are small, and they are everywhere. Exodus chapter 8, verse 16, Then 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.

[12 : 28] And 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. This is worse if you translate it as fleas. All the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt.

The magicians of Egypt tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not. There were gnats on both humans and animals, and 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. So this one's interesting. The biblical authors tell us that the magicians tried to do what God did, but they could not.

I know I've already mentioned this, but it bears repeating, Replicating a plague isn't exactly the win for Egypt that Pharaoh seems to think it is. After this third one, you imagine the magicians going to Pharaoh saying, Oh, Pharaoh, we are so sorry.

We weren't able to repeat the lice infestation. I guess everyone's going to have to settle for the one they got. That seems to be the finger of the Israelite God. All jokes aside, it is a pretty big deal that the magicians who work for Pharaoh turn a corner here and acknowledge that the Israelite God is more powerful.

[13 : 41] After this point, we stop hearing that the magicians tried to repeat God's work. They only made it through two plagues and a small snake incident before they figured that out. Pharaoh's royal officials hold on a little longer, but during the eighth plague, the plague of locusts, which, because I like you, I will not describe, these officials also urge Pharaoh to accept defeat, saying, How long shall this fellow, Moses, be a snare to us?

Let the people go so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet understand, Pharaoh, that Egypt is ruined? But Pharaoh holds on to his misunderstanding of himself for the full ten plagues.

As the plagues progress, God also becomes more explicit about what's happening. The plagues we read about impacted everyone in Egypt, but starting with the fourth plague, the plagues actually don't impact the Israelites.

Later on, the biblical storytellers emphasize that some Egyptians also start to fear God and they are spared. So as this story progresses, we see more and more Egyptians start to let go of the false stories they've been told about who their Pharaoh is and where he stands in the world.

Not Pharaoh himself, though. A few more times, he promises to free the Israelites and then goes back on his word. Other times, his heart remains hard the whole time. After the plague of locusts, Pharaoh tries to negotiate with God.

[15 : 01] The Israelite men can go, but not the children. Even eight plagues in. After his officials and many of his subjects have acknowledged that the Israelite God is more powerful, Pharaoh still acts as though he is negotiating with an equal.

After the ninth plague, Pharaoh again tries to negotiate. The people can go, but not the livestock. Finally, after the tenth plague, Pharaoh lets the Israelites go. But even then, even as Moses is on his way out the door, Pharaoh has the nerve to make one more request.

Bring a blessing on me, too. Throughout the full development of this story, Pharaoh never learns to see himself and his power honestly. Pharaoh is one of the most powerful people in the world at this time, and still, he can't allow himself to believe that his power extends only over his enormous empire, and not also to the water, the sun, and life itself.

Most of us in this room, as far as I know, do not rule over any empires. We probably have more in common with people lower down the chain of command. People who face real risks if they change too much about how they act or what they believe.

But these characters also have power, and their actions still impact other people's lives. So what are the spaces where we have power? This will look different for everyone. Maybe we have power over people we supervise at work, people we teach.

[16 : 26] Sometimes we have power in our relationships that we may not always notice. We may have power based on race, gender, income, sexuality, or physical or mental abilities. Sometimes our organizations have power based on connections or name recognition that smaller, newer organizations may not have.

In D.C. as a city, we often talk about how we don't have a vote in Congress, and that's true, and we have a large population of people here who work for the federal government or are influencing policy.

So there is power here, even when it doesn't feel like it. So if we are more like those supervisors and officials navigating our limited power, why even talk about Pharaoh?

Biblical figures like Pharaoh provide dramatic examples of our own behaviors so that we can look to them and say, what part of this shows us truth about our lives today? Pharaoh spends this story defending his power because he cannot handle being wrong, and the people who bear the brunt of his actions are those whose lives he barely even considers.

I wish I could say that that kind of thinking was fully unrecognizable to me. I wish I could say that in my life I always treat everyone with respect and with love, and we could just end the sermon here, but the truth is that the times in my life when people have let me know I've hurt them, it's often been in situations where I didn't even consider that other people might be affected by my actions.

[17 : 49] Times when I spoke harshly without hearing myself at all, times when I got frustrated with someone else because of how their actions affected me without realizing that they were dealing

with something much bigger. Like Pharaoh, I often get wrapped up in my own story.

I know what I am trying to get done, and I don't always recognize when my single-minded focus on myself leaves other people trying to deal with the consequences. Sometimes, like Pharaoh, I even have people around me who start to let me know that things aren't working, but I can't listen because I'm hardening my heart and am defensive of my own power, convinced that it is better to refuse help than to admit to myself that I might need it.

Okay, so I was a little harsh. So what? Pharaoh gives us a caricature of this mentality, showing us what that failure to be honest with ourselves looks like when taken to its extreme. Okay, so he turned the Nile into blood.

So what? It was one time. We do this in all sorts of ways throughout our lives. Sometimes, we are so involved in our own lives and our own struggles that we don't even realize we're making things harder for other people.

Sometimes, the places where we are refusing to hear honesty are things we think of as personal or private. My relationship to alcohol or other substances, my relationship to work, my unwillingness to recognize things that I have experienced as trauma, and we don't always realize the toll that those personal issues or personal decisions take on people around us.

[19 : 16] Sometimes, like Pharaoh, we're unable to face discomfort and so we allow systemic harm and oppression to continue when we could be challenging it, preventing it, or at the very least, helping out the people being harmed, digging for water alongside those on the side of the Nile.

We can start to change, but we have to be willing to be honest with ourselves first. And that's hard. Genuine honesty with ourselves takes a lot of work and a lot of courage.

It requires us to allow ourselves to be humble, to be willing to let go of power if that's what needs to happen. Honesty means following the model set by Jesus who humbled himself enough to come to earth, live as a part of an oppressed society in fellowship with other people there, and really empathize with their lives, rejoicing when they rejoiced, mourning when those around him mourn. Honesty requires us to spend our lives empathizing with other people and even being vulnerable enough to risk change so that we can rebuild ourselves into more thoughtful and loving people so that instead of building pyramids and empires, we can build communities rooted in love and justice. In another world, I imagine Pharaoh starting to face the hard truth that the God of his slaves is more powerful than he is. I think it would hit him hard, but I don't think that it would destroy him.

[20 : 41] I hope that it would knock over his leaning tower of false beliefs and clear the ground for Pharaoh to rebuild. Once Pharaoh has learned to be honest about the power he doesn't have, power over life itself, he can start to evaluate how to use the tremendous power he does have.

After he's faced the hard truths about his life, Pharaoh can sit down with his advisors, his officials, and figure out how to build a healthier, safer, fairer Egypt. He can figure out how to restructure the economy now that it is no longer depending on slave labor.

He can set up the systems in his own life that help him to hear honest truths from those around him, to empathize with people in his kingdom. That would be huge and how much better for all of Egypt if their ruler were able to let go of the power he wants to have and instead figure out how to use the power he does have.

As you may know, this does not happen in the story of the Exodus. God doesn't force us to change and God doesn't deliver us from the lies we tell ourselves unless we choose to allow ourselves to be delivered.

Pharaoh chooses over and over again to harden his heart and to choose stubbornness over deliverance. But we don't have to do that. God can and does deliver us from our misunderstandings of ourselves and our misuse of power.

[22 : 01] God just doesn't do it alone. God delivers us through connection. In today's story, we saw how disconnected Pharaoh was both from God and from other people. He was unwilling to admit to himself that there was a problem, unwilling even to speak to God, and unwilling to listen to those around him telling him that he was off base.

Jesus gives us a model of the opposite, taking on human vulnerability through human life and death in order to see people where they are and to truly listen to those around us.

A few weeks ago, Heidi taught us about the Egyptian midwives who worked together and with God in order to deliver the Israelite infants. Today, we learned about Moses and Aaron working together and with God to deliver all of the Israelite people.

God's deliverance requires us to have the courage to connect with God and with other people in order to empathize with others and humble ourselves.

One of the ways we can partner with God in the work of deliverance is through connection with God, through prayer, if we can build habits of mistreating, ignoring, or marginalizing other people, then surely we can build habits of connecting with God in order to see more honestly how we are treating others.

[23 : 17] If you, like me, struggle with finding ways to pray that work for you, I want to let you know that the table has a monthly event called Prayer School where different people in our community teach us ways to pray that work for them.

God also delivers us through our connection to one another in community. part of this involves building relationships with one another so that we have people around us who know us well enough to let us know when things aren't working.

Another part of this is listening to other people, people outside of our immediate circles and who we may not be used to hearing. In the Bible, we read about prophets like Moses, Aaron, and their sister, the prophet Miriam, who speak the truth about what needs to change in order to create a more righteous society.

If we look around in almost every era, we see communities, often communities of faith, naming the truth of their situations and identifying what needs to change. In Washington, D.C., the Washington Interfaith Network, WIN has been doing that kind of truth-telling for years, following in the footsteps of people like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to help those in power see themselves honestly, letting them know what the community needs and how to meet those needs.

As Taneta mentioned earlier, this afternoon, WIN is having an event to ask city council candidates to commit to increase affordable housing, improve public safety, and support climate action all in local ways so that we can make our community better here in Washington, D.C.

[24 : 43] Regardless of how you're able to participate, I encourage all of us this week to pay attention to the truth-tellers in our lives and our communities and to really hear what those people are saying.

Whose are the voices we aren't used to listening to in our workplaces, our schools, and our neighborhoods? Whose are the voices that we as a church or as a city have learned to ignore? And how can we elevate those voices in our lives and empathize with them in order to see ourselves more honestly? It takes practice, it takes courage, it takes vulnerability, and it takes truly honest connection, but we can participate in God's deliverance from the false stories we tell ourselves and into lives of truth where we use our power well as followers of a human Jesus.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, I pray that you would give us the courage to see ourselves honestly. I pray that this congregation would know that you are with us as we take the risks we need to take in order to build more honest and loving community.

I pray that we would be there for one another as we grow and that you would help us to be patient with those we love as we realize what needs to change so that we can work with you, Lord, to build a community oriented towards love and truth.

[26 : 00] In your name I pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.