

Thus Says the Lord; Thus Says Pharaoh

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Date: 13 March 2022

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[0 : 00] Amen. Amen. So good morning. Good morning. Good morning. And welcome to Pajama Sunday. I will confess that this is absolutely my first Pajama Sunday.

And yeah, I want to say thank you all so much for just being here. I feel like it was a hard morning to get out. I woke up, there was ice on my car. I was like, what is happening? What is going on?

I also am struck by a feeling this morning that, you know, we're coming in this place and we're kind of channeling our inner Beyonce's. We're like, yeah, I woke up like this. You know, I did wake up like this.

And what better place than church to proclaim that we are flawless, that we are God's creatures before anything happens. So yes, maybe we could, you know, going forward call this Beyonce Sunday. That might be heresy, but you know, you know, a little heresy, you know.

It also made sense to make this Pajama Sunday because it is, of course, daylight savings time. Many of us rolled in here out of the bed. We've lost an hour of sleep and unless we've lost an hour of day of our 24 hours.

[1 : 20] And unless you were really super well prepared, you probably lost some sleep as well. But beyond the inconvenience of daylight saving time, beyond the remembering whether we're falling back or springing forward, there is this very real debate that rages about whether or not we should be doing this at all.

And the debate is in pretty full force at, you know, the federal level and at the state level. If you are watching the news, you're seeing this play out again.

And it's really this larger question, I think, for our contemplation about, you know, the debate on the surface is about whether we should have, like essentially when we should have more darkness and when we should have more light.

One side says that, you know, more sunlight in the evening is better for our communal productivity or for our communal life. And the other side says that more sunlight in the morning is better for our productivity.

And, you know, while we might have opinions about all that, it's an interesting debate. I remember the first time I did a prompt with my AP students on this question. They were like, what in the world? People spend their time on this?

[2 : 39] Like what's going on? But I do think these conversations draw us into a deeper kind of contemplation about the nature of day and night.

These two realms of time. And if we spend any time contemplating these two realms, we come up against this fundamental question of how do we react?

How do we interact with light? And how do we interact with darkness? How do we interact with light? And how do we interact with darkness? What does each realm of the 24 hours we are given, what does it draw out of us?

How does each of those daytime, nighttime, sunlight, darkness challenge us? How do they challenge us? How do they nourish us?

And these are questions that I hadn't thought a lot about until I encountered a book by one of my favorite authors, Barbara Brown Taylor, called Learning to Walk in the Dark. If you like good writing that feels like somebody is like wrapping you in a warm blanket, she's the author for you.

[3 : 55] And in that book, she challenges Christians to let go of these conceptions, particularly around darkness. That we should be afraid of darkness.

That we should be afraid of the unknown. That we need to stay as far as possible away from that realm of things. She makes note with wisdom the number of stories in the Bible that take place at night.

Maybe you've noticed some of those stories. Maybe you've noticed some of those stories. Jacob wrestles with God at night. Right? And that's when Jacob gets the blessing.

The Red Sea Crossing in Exodus, the book we're in right now, it happens at night. The manna is given in that same book.

This provision so that people can live, it comes from God at night. And maybe in one of the most profound moments in Exodus, God's revelation of God's self on Mount Sinai comes to Moses in a cloud of thick darkness.

[5 : 09] God is found in the dark, is found at night. And all these earth-shattering, identity-forming moments.

And they make us ask ourselves in a world that prefers light, how we might find God in the darkness, even when the night is so hard and so long that we can barely stand it.

We can't escape night even more, any more than we can escape daylight, even though we want to try. And here's a quote from that same book that I think today is appropriate for our reflection.

Sometimes the light is coming, and sometimes it is going. Sometimes the moon is full, and sometimes it is nowhere to be found.

There is nothing capricious about this variety since it happens on a regular basis. But humans do not easily relinquish control over how dark or bright it is, either in our houses or in our own souls.

[6 : 26] When I was in seminary, I had to take a class, very first semester, called Foundations of Worship. And we were given this assignment, this kind of assignment you would only receive in a seminary classroom, where you had to creatively represent a liturgical season.

And the season that I was given was Ash Wednesday, was Lent. I kind of wished I'd gotten like Christmas, or, you know, like Easter, even Pentecost.

Give me Pentecost. But I got Ash Wednesday. And because I'm not particularly good at creatively representing things, I like words, a lot of words. Give me words.

But I had to, like, display this thing. I chose to bring in to the class that day a shovel. And a shovel because in lots, or not lots, but in some parts of the Christian church all over the world, there's this tradition during Lent of what they call burying the Alleluia's.

So essentially, for the 40 days of Lent, church leaders, musicians, refrain from saying the word Alleluia in worship.

[7 : 39] Alleluia is this expression of joy. And the point of Lent is to move away from what is bright and easily seen and to move into the riches that can only be discovered into darkness through deeper examination.

It's a season that says, let's put on hold all the distractions of light. And then these past few weeks, we've been talking about the multifaceted nature of salvation.

We've been talking about salvation from systems of concrete injustice and oppression and salvation from bondages that are more spiritual, things that are harder to identify.

We've been camping out in Exodus for that reason during this Lenten season. And I started out talking about rest and then being delivered into rest.

Heidi later preached about being delivered from the culture of death. And Anthony has preached about being delivered from false narratives, false images of God.

[8 : 47] And today, I'm going to be honest, I like a neat pattern. I was planning to preach like delivered from ceaseless commodity. We're going to look at Exodus 5. But, you know, y'all stay light savings time.

So this week, that is not what the text brought up. And so we're going to talk a little bit about that. We're actually going to talk about something else that is a little less tidy. than the simple delivered into, delivered from theme.

So when we look at Exodus 5, which we're going to read in a second, we'll note that there is, there's darkness in this text. It's a hard text. In what we'll read today, God does not ever speak.

And that's, these are the kinds of texts that we have to also deal with in our spiritual lives. It's an interim story. It's between the promise of deliverance, you will be led out of bondage, but before there's any real sense of deliverance.

Like nothing concrete happens in this text. And that's a really important place sometimes for us to camp out and sit and contemplate. It reminds us that while we do experience these Sundays of resurrection joy and hope and peace, that lots of us and lots of our neighbors, far too many of us and far too many of our neighbors, live in a place of crucifying realities.

[10 : 16] The crucifying realities of Friday and the unknown mystery of Saturday that just never seems to end. We gotta talk about that. But there are treasures in the in-between place.

I believe that and I wanna talk some about that today. So what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna ask us to bring up Exodus 5. I say bring up because my assumption now is you probably have a digital way of getting the Bible.

So Exodus 5 is what I'm gonna read. And because it is a longer text and because it is a day where we may need to move a little more, I'm gonna invite us to, after I read this text, to take three or four minutes in smaller groups in order to just talk about it.

Okay. So let's do that. So this is Exodus 5. Afterward, 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.

[11 : 41] Then they said, the God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us. Let us go a three days journey into the wilderness to sacrifice the Lord our God or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.

But the king of Egypt said to them, Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors. Pharaoh continued, now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working.

Stop working. Root is Shabbat, Sabbath. That same day, Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people as well as their supervisors, you shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks as before.

Let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously. Do not diminish it, for they are lazy.

That is why they cry, let us go and offer sacrifice to our God. Let heavier work be laid on them. Then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.

[12 : 52] So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said, thus says Pharaoh, I will not give you straw. Go and get it yourselves wherever you can find it, but your work will not be lessened in the least.

So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, complete your work. The same daily assignment as when you were given straw.

And the supervisors of the Israelites whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them were beaten and were asked, why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today as you did before?

Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet you say to us, make bricks.

Look how your servants are beaten. You are unjust to your own people. He said, you are lazy, lazy. That is why you say, let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.

[13 : 58] Go now and work for no straw shall be given you, but you shall deliver the same number of bricks. The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, you shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.

And they left Pharaoh. They came upon Moses and Aaron who were waiting to meet them. They said to them, the Lord, look upon you and judge. You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.

Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said, oh Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people and they have done nothing at all to deliver your people.

All right. That was a lot. So I want you to take a couple of minutes to just kind of process it, talk to a couple of people about it. There's going to be some questions on the screen. Feel free to stand up.

You don't have to, but if you want to do that, feel free, stand up, move around about five minutes to process this text. All right.

[15 : 09] Okay. So hopefully you noticed some things about the passage.

Got a chance to look at it a little bit and you may have noticed, again, as I said earlier, it's not the brightest passage. It's not really maybe a pajama Sunday passage, which couldn't be helped, but I want you to have some time to process it.

All right. So here's just a little bit of a refresher before I say a couple of things about this story and then sit on down. So first of all, the book of Exodus starts, if you remember, if you've been a part of the sermon series, if you've not, that's fine too.

But it starts with the Hebrew people. They're growing in population, so Pharaoh is threatened and thus Pharaoh feels as if he has to undertake a policy of systematic oppression.

So he enslaves the people. And then the Hebrews, they keep increasing in number anyway. So he has to up the policy of systematic oppression, turns into a policy of genocide where he begins to say, we have to kill the Hebrew boys when they are born.

[16 : 19] We've got midwives, we've got these women who are unsurprisingly resisting this policy and who are saying, no, we won't do this.

Moses, his mother, is also a part of this resistance. And so Moses is saved. We see him a little bit later as he grows up encountering God in the burning bush and being told to let this people go, to be a part of God's desire that they be let go.

And we learn that this is a God who sees and hears and is concerned and comes down for the sake of those who are oppressed or held in bondage.

He says to Moses, go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. That's the basic summary. I skipped a bunch of stuff.

Takes some time. Sermons are online. All of that, read up. But it's a story about promise. It's a story about the promise of deliverance. And then in this text, right away, we get into this situation that makes clear that there are these two worlds that these people are living in.

[17 : 34] Moses and Aaron, they come in Exodus 5 at the very beginning and they say, thus says the Lord. And then though, in verse 10, you also get this, thus says Pharaoh.

You get a glimpse of two worlds with two sets of organizing principles. One is the world of the God of the Hebrews who comes down and one is a world of ceaseless productivity.

One is a world that allows rest because it is run by a God of rest. The other world is a world of scarcity, a world of lack, a world where there can be no rest.

There's only anxiety and the need for accumulation. and these two worlds are as much theological expressions as they are socioeconomic realities.

And they're two worlds that we come up against, that we interact in and move in every single day of our lives. And then right at the outset of the story, we also hear for the first time the words proclaim, let my people go.

[18 : 51] It's the famous phrase from the book and this is the first time that you get it proclaimed in Egypt. And then Pharaoh responds, it's classic, I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.

The statement makes explicit this connection that the entire book of Exodus is about, this question, what does it mean to know the Lord, to really, really know the Lord?

and here that connection, it's clear, cannot be separated from the second part of this, letting Israel go, coming out, being released and being a part of release.

And then there's another question here that's really important in this text and it's this demand that Pharaoh, it's the response of Pharaoh to this demand that Pharaoh won't pay attention to.

He says to, essentially to the people, they, I will not let them rest. They are just paying attention to false and deceitful words. So the second question in this text is, are the words of Moses and Aaron true?

[20 : 11] and this, about this world of liberation and essentially, are they true for us by extension? Do we believe them? Can we believe them?

Are they worth what they cost us? So in the story, you get two worlds, one God's and one Pharaoh's and you get two questions.

One that is about what it means to know God and the other that is about whether we can trust God. God, that's the frame of the story and inside of it, you get a whole lot about Pharaoh's world.

That's where all the details of this story go. It's a world where productivity is of the highest value. They can't even leave these people to go for three days outside of the system into the wilderness where they might be energized in ways that are subversive.

This is a world in which wholeness is seen to come through work. Freedom is framed as coming through work.

[21 : 18] Control is guaranteed by this goal of productivity. It's the way to maintain the status quo. What does it mean though that that world is not the world that God intends?

There's a bunch I could say about this. Y'all know I love the scriptures. I just will go. But I will just say this. One other point to notice is that the world of productivity in this passage is like in great detail shown to be a world that is a pyramid.

You've got Pharaoh's officials. Then you've got the taskmasters. Then you've got the supervisors. And then you've got the Hebrew slaves who don't even have a voice in the text. And I want to submit that probably most of us would be in that supervisor place.

We're in that place where we can easily keep our boot on somebody else's neck. The neck of the most vulnerable. But also we can also identify with the most vulnerable.

That's often where we find ourselves. We can use the little power we have to identify above or to identify with whoever happens to be more vulnerable than we are.

[22 : 38] We can exploit. That's often where we are. But in this story the supervisors are the ones who take a chance. They're the ones who go to Pharaoh.

They're the ones who proclaim that the policy is unjust. They're the ones who expose themselves. And if you notice toward the end of that text they say that they have made themselves odious.

I think the word that I read was bad odor. They've exposed themselves. And there's too this morning a question for us about in what ways is the promise of salvation that we are living out, the promise of deliverance making us odious?

And for me that's a hard question to think too long about. It really is. But that is what's happening to these people because they speak out. And then the text ends essentially.

It's like two or three verses. Basically those supervisors they're angry at Moses and Aaron and then Moses and Aaron is angry at God. It's like God you have caused us trouble.

[23 : 49] And it's really because of the ending of this text that I can't wrap it up really neatly. I wanted it to be pretty for Pajama Sunday. Y'all I really really did. I promise you I was like how do I get the prettiness out of this text?

There's not a hopeful note at the end of this. And we need stories like this. There's nothing that comforts us that assures us that God's promise will be fulfilled.

There's nothing that lets us know that the world of God of abundance will triumph in this text. There's nothing to assure us here that the people will definitely be let go.

There's only more and more oppression. Whew.

Y'all I don't know why. Okay. So this is an in-between text. It's an in-between text in which God is silent and that is about the crucifying realities of the world.

[24 : 57] Ta-Nehisi Coates who some of you might have heard of. He wrote the best selling book *Between the World and Me*. Here's what he says and I promise I'm about to wrap it up. Y'all I am. I am going to wrap it up.

He says he said when asked about like his hopefulness about the end of racism. Here is what he said and I think that this resonates in so many areas of our lives.

Slavery in this country was 250 years. What that means is that there were African Americans who were born in this country in 1750, 1760 and if they looked backwards their parents were slaves.

Their grandparents were slaves. Their great-great-grandparents were slaves. And if they look forward their children would be slaves. Their grandchildren would be slaves. There was no real hope within their individual lifespan of ending enslavement.

The most brutal form of degradation in this country's history. There was nothing in their life that said this will end in my lifetime. I will see the end of this. And they struggled and they resisted.

[26 : 04] Every time I read that quote it reminds me of my need to sit and grapple with the in-between place between promise and deliverance.

The place that so many black and brown folks know, that so many queer folks know, that so many persons with disabilities know and as we're lifting up this month that so many women, folks who identify as women know.

As so many people who deal with, so many of us who deal with addictions, who struggle to recover from trauma, often caused in churches.

We know about this in-between place, this space where God seems absent and we know how long it is. So this is not a pretty passage, but I think it calls us to sit here and to allow ourselves to be led away from the kind of hope that is individualistic, that is a middle-class privilege, and into a kind of desperation that continues to lead us to struggle in the dark with what we don't understand, with what we can't make sense of, and where we can only trust that God is present.

So I'll end with this. At the beginning of World War II, you might have heard this before, at the beginning of World War II, King George VI of Britain gave this really famous speech.

[27 : 35] and it was basically designed to say, people of Britain, we are at war and we don't know when this is going to end. Right? We're in the middle of it and it seems like night.

And he quoted a famous poem and said this, and this is what I want to leave you with. And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown, and he replied, go out into the darkness.

Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be better to you than light and safer than a known way.

Amen.