

I

I haven't been sleeping all that well lately.

Oh, don't get me wrong, I'm not ill or anything, it's just there's so much going on in the world these days – between all the information and guidance that keeps changing about the pandemic and all the vitriol in this election season and worrying about how all this is affecting my wife and my kids and my parents and of course all of you – it's just a lot. And I suspect I'm not the only one.

II

It's been over a hundred years since our nation has been through a pandemic like this. We've never had a football Saturday in this town quite like the one we had yesterday. We've never seen a presidential debate quite like the one that happened last Tuesday evening. And the news just keeps on coming, including learning Friday that the President and First Lady are ill. Everything is just weird these days, and it seems like everyone I know just has an uneasy feeling about, well, everything. Someone said to me the other day, "I keep hearing people say these are unprecedented times. When can we get back to the precedented ones?"

And given all the uneasiness in the world, given all the uncertainty, it's natural for us to start asking some big questions. Does God even notice what's happening? Who will save us from this mess?

And that brings us to our story for today.

III

This fall, we're doing something of a high-level overview of the Hebrew Scriptures, also called the Old Testament.

And this morning we turn the page from Genesis to Exodus, and the Book of Exodus opens on an ominous note. A new king, called a Pharaoh in Egypt, came to power, and the narrator tells us that this Pharaoh did not know anything about this Israelite named Joseph or how he'd saved Egypt from disaster years before. And when this new Pharaoh looked out over his nation and observed the descendants of Abraham and Sarah living in his nation, he did not see a prosperous, thriving immigrant community. He did not see neighbors. He did not see fellow human beings made in the image of God. No, he saw that the Hebrews were different, and in his eyes, that made their very existence a threat to Egypt.

And so Pharaoh began to act on his own fears and insecurities. He instituted a system whereby immigrant children were forcibly separated from their parents, ordering that all Hebrew baby boys were to be thrown into the Nile River. He presided over the wealthiest nation on the face of the earth, but he saw to it that Egypt's wealth was built on the backs of Hebrew slaves.

And when those Hebrews asked for three days to go and worship the Lord, he accused them of being lazy and pressed down harder, requiring them to make bricks for Egypt's monumental glory, but denying them the supplies necessary to make the bricks, and then ordering them to be beaten without mercy when their quotas were not met.

In Egyptian culture, the Pharaoh was not just a king or a political or military leader. In Egyptian culture, the Pharaoh was worshiped and revered as a living god. Later cultures, including the Romans, developed a similar view of their supreme leaders – they weren't just political figureheads or kings or military leaders – they were viewed as gods on earth.

And so as the Book of Exodus unfolds, the narrative tension builds. The promise that the God of Israel made to Abraham and Sarah – that their descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the heavens, that they would be a blessing and that in and through them, God will bless all the families of the earth – is endangered once again. Will they perish under Pharaoh's brutal regime? Or will the God of Israel deliver them?

If you've seen the Cecil B. DeMille classic movie, "The Ten Commandments," or the animated feature, "The Prince of Egypt," you know that God sends a Hebrew named Moses to demand that Pharaoh release the Hebrew slaves. When Pharaoh refuses, God sends a series of nine plagues on Egypt, but Pharaoh's heart remains hardened, and still, he refuses to let God's people go.

And then God announces to Moses the tenth plague – the death of the firstborn of every living thing in Egypt – the animals, the livestock, and the humans, too. And that brings us to our story for today. Listen for a Word from God from Exodus 12:1-13 and 13:1-8.

12:1 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: 2 This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. 3 Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. 4 If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. 6 You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. 7 They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 8 They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. 9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. 10 You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. 11 This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand;

and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. 12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. 13 The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

3 Moses said to the people, "Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the Lord brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten. 4 Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. 5 When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. You shall tell your child on that day, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

It's a terribly frightening and troubling story, full of death and despair, one with which modern theologians and ethicists continue to wrestle.

But I invite us this morning to step back and take a broader view, and to read this story through the lens of a cosmic battle, to read this narrative as a contest between two competing value systems.

Let's consider the value system of Pharaoh's Egypt. In Pharaoh's system, diversity within the population is viewed a threat to Egyptian purity and national identity. In Pharaoh's system, the people of God living in Egypt are not people made in the image of God – they are a problem to be solved.

In Pharaoh's system, there can never be enough. Ever greater storehouses must be built to store the wealth of Egypt, and consumption is the name of the game.

In Pharaoh's value system, might makes right, and the object of life is to accumulate as much wealth and power as possible, by whatever means necessary, and then take it all with you in the life to come.

But the God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, operates under a very different set of values.

For example, notice how diversity is assumed and accounted for when God gives instructions for the Passover: "If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it."

In the value system of God, there is enough to go around for everyone, but there are to be no leftovers.

“You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.”

Leftovers can be fought over and bought and sold. But in the value system of God, everybody gets because of the goodness of God, not because of marketplace conditions.

And so what’s happening here in these terrifying and troubling stories is something of a cosmic battle between Pharaoh, who as the ruler of Egypt who is viewed as a living god, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What’s being laid out in the text is a juxtaposition between these two competing value systems, these two very different ideas about what it means to live in community.

IV

And my friend, here’s what I want you to know. You are loved, you are cherished, you are worthy, not because of what you can produce, not because of what you can contribute, not because of what you’ve done or not done, not because of what you’ve said or not said. You are loved and cherished and worthy because you were made in the image of God and you belong to God - full stop. God would rather go to the cross for you than live without you, because you are God’s chosen one, holy and beloved.

My friend, it is precisely because God has rescued you from sin and death in Jesus Christ, it is precisely because you have been marked the blood of the Lamb in the waters of your baptism, that you are called to live your life not according to the values of Pharaoh, but according to the values of the kingdom of God - Not out of fear of divine punishment if you don’t, but out of a sense of deep gratitude for what God has done for you in Jesus Christ.

And Lord have mercy, my friend, aren’t we all being presented with some challenging views about value systems and leadership and what it means to live in a community these days. Every four years, it seems like candidates for elected office keep telling us that if we vote for them, all our wildest dreams will come true, or if we don’t vote for them, the nation will be visited by a plague of flies and locusts and we will all get boils and sores. My friend, don’t you forget for a second in these crazy times that elections come and go, and leaders come and go, and leaders certainly have their place, but the world already has a Savior, and his name is Jesus of Nazareth, whom we rightly call the Christ, the Messiah.

It is precisely because God has delivered you that you come to this Table today, not because you’re worthy, not because you’re ready, but because you are hungry and thirsty and God has provided this meal to sustain you for the journey ahead.

V

But you never come to this Table alone. In the kingdom of God, everybody eats together, and there is always enough to go around. When we come to this Table, we remember once again who and whose we are – God’s chosen covenant people whom God has rescued so that in and through us, all the families of the earth might be blessed. We come to this Table remembering that our Savior does not lead with spear and scepter, but with towel and washbasin. We come to this Table remembering that our Savior gives us his body, that we might eat. Our Savior sheds his blood, that we might seek and receive forgiveness.

We come to this Table, practicing kingdom values, remembering what the Lord did for us, when we came out of Egypt.

Thanks be to God. Amen.