

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Moses: The Plagues | Exodus 5-12**

Good morning! My name is Melissa Schaser and I'm one of the pastors here at Christ Presbyterian Church. As you can tell, we are talking about Pharaoh and the plagues this morning.

Last week, John began a series on Moses that will carry us through the fall. As he introduced the story of Moses, he talked about how Moses lived a life of transformation because he was able to be present and hear the voice of God speaking to him through the burning bush. This week we learn what that call truly means and what it demands of Moses. We're going to find that it isn't Moses' perfect faith, it isn't his perfect trust—Moses actually fumbles quite a bit during this text—but it is Moses' willingness to understand his identity as a child of God that allows him to show up and to follow through on the call that God has for his life.

As we get started, one of the main things we need to know this morning is that Moses has an Egyptian name. If you'll remember, it was Pharaoh's daughter who found Moses in a basket in the reeds. She bent down and scooped him up. And so, this Egyptian, Pharaoh's daughter, gave this little baby an Egyptian name. And it was a really popular name—there were a lot of Moseses running around in the ancient world. Moses' name means "child of." It's almost a partial name, because then we have to ask the question, "Child of whom? Who is this child?"

So, what was really common in the ancient world is to actually put the name of the parent or the name of a god or someone who they really love before the name Moses. It's just like when we name our children after us. So, as you can probably tell at this point, my husband and I are expecting in January. If we made the bold decision to name our child Moses—and we're not!—what we could do is name the child Nick Moses, or Melissa Moses, child of Nick or child of Melissa. Then we would be naming our child after ourselves—and we're not doing that—but this was a very common practice. What we find is that although Moses has this partial name, "child of," God continually calls to him and shows him that he is a child of God.

You can open up your Bibles if you would like. We are covering nine chapters this morning, so we are really getting into some text. I have our verses up on the screen so you can follow along that way, too, but we will start in Exodus 3. John read this passage last week. It's the call that God gives Moses in Exodus 3:9 and 10. It says,

⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them, the

Israelites. ¹⁰ Come, I will send you, Moses, to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” [Exodus 3:9-10]

Now, in this relationship between parent and child, father and son, I like to think that this phase is kind of Moses' toddlerhood, because after he receives this call, he starts asking why a lot. Five different times, there are “Why, why, why, why, why?” questions that Moses directs at God. He asks, “What if they don't know my name? What if they don't listen to me?” At one point, he says, “But oh Lord, I am heavy of tongue and slow of speech,” which is the most eloquent way that someone can say that I'm not good at talking. He's making up excuses and pushing against this call, and finally, in Exodus 4:13, he gets down to the point and just says, “Please, my Lord, send someone else.”

Moses does not want to follow through on this calling, and even though parents often do extraordinary things for their children, sometimes kids have to show up. We, as children, have to show up for our parents even when we're resisting it.

There is a story that came to mind as I was thinking about this. A few years ago, I was down in Florida in August and it was around the time of my dad's birthday. He wanted to do something different and fun for his birthday, so he suggested that we go out to the Everglades and go on a fan boat ride to look at gators. Now, I am not really an outdoorsy person. I get hot and itchy and it's just not my thing. My husband and I actually made an agreement before we got married—we shook on it—that we can never ask the other person to go camping. We're not outdoorsy people. My dad really wanted to go look at these gators, despite it being August in Florida. So, that day I found myself sitting on the back of a fan boat with probably not the best attitude, but I still showed up, and we went through the Everglades for a few hours looking at gators. I resisted it, but I still showed up, because he's my dad, and because sometimes you do things for your parents, even when you don't want to. Moses still shows up, and there are reasons that he resisted the calling that God gave him.

There are two things that we need to know about Moses' calling in order for us to understand the Biblical text about the plague. The first is that the Israelites had been enslaved for 430 years at this point. That's a long time. If we go back 430 years from where we are today, it puts us in the late-1500s. So, if you can imagine, the Israelites have been living in this system of enslavement for generation after generation after generation. And that didn't make it any easier on them. It was just as hard, but the system was set into place. It was going to be challenging for Moses to break in and change that system, so understandably he resisted it.

The second thing we need to know is a little more about this Pharaoh character. Now, the Pharaoh was not just a president or a prime minister. I think it's easy for us to think of the Pharaoh as being like one of our national leaders, but the Pharaoh had a lot more weight on his shoulders than one of our national leaders. The Pharaoh was understood to be the representation of the Egyptian's gods, of their god here on Earth. The Pharaoh who was in power during Moses' time was named Ramesses II, and what we see in Ramesses name is that his name is made up of two Egyptian words. The second word

we should recognize as “Moses.” It’s Ra-Moses. Put together, his name means Rameses is a child of Ra. Ra is the chief god of the Egyptians. This is the god worshipped by the people who were enslaving the Israelites. What we ultimately have here, then, is we have the child of Ra, this other Egyptian god, going up against Moses, the child of God. And Moses finds his identity through the power that God gives him to free the Israelites.

Just as a side note, when the Israelites, these slaves, would hear the name Rameses, Ra, they would hear “child of evil” because that name, “Ra” in Hebrew, means evil. What they heard is “child of evil”, and every time they looked at that leader, they saw their oppressor and they knew what his character was like.

So, Moses goes into the first conversation with Pharaoh with some understandable trepidation. He knows that this is not simply a matter of this world, but a matter of cosmic significance in that God is going to really need to show up if he is going to be able to free the Israelites. This first conversation that Moses has with Pharaoh, there isn’t even mention of a plague. He doesn’t threaten anything. There isn’t much on the line. Moses simply asks Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.’”² But Pharaoh said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.” [Exodus 5:1-2]

Pharaoh is asking, “Who is this god that you’re talking about?”

After this encounter, Pharaoh digs his heels in. He digs them in deep, and this is a representation of what he will do before, during, and after every single one of the plagues. Moses makes this request, “Please let my people go,” and Pharaoh says, “No, I will not.” After Moses makes this request and Pharaoh says no, Pharaoh actually makes the work of the Israelite slaves twice as hard, and Moses watches their oppression increase under the weight of what he had just asked of Pharaoh.

And what we see happen in the relationship between Moses, this child, and his father God, is that Moses is willing to be honest with God in a way that I think sometimes we are uncomfortable being. In Exodus 5:22, Moses calls God to account. This is what he says.

²² Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? ²³ For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done evil to this people, and You have not delivered your people at all.” [Exodus 5:22]

Moses is willing to call God to account in a way that I think often, we struggle to, in the midst of so much tragedy and pain that has happened in this world, in the last few months in particular, and in our own lives, where I know so many of us have felt loss in

new ways. I've had conversations with person after person where we are willing to open up about the questions that we're asking about our faith, like "Why would God do this?" Or, "Why is there such pain in the world? Why does suffering happen?" We can talk to each other, but when it comes to asking those questions of God, we get nervous and worried. We're afraid that God will not respond to us with grace and with love. We can easily sugarcoat our relationship with God and acknowledge to Him all of the great things that He's doing, the really nice stuff and the easy stuff, but when it comes to bringing the hard stuff to God, what Moses shows us is that God can handle our honesty. We can trust God. He can handle our hard questions, and when we bring them before God, He responds to us not with anger and rejection, but with grace and a renewed sense of calling. Moses walks out of this encounter with God with a new sense of commissioning and confidence that God will follow through on what He has commissioned him to do.

As we move into the plague stories, we head earlier how brutal some of them are, and it can be hard to wrap our minds around why these plagues happened, especially when we look at them individually. They can even seem a bit arbitrary; they can seem just a little bit odd. So, we're going to look at them, and the reason they happened, as a whole. The reason for them is found in Exodus 4:22.

²² Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, ²³ and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." [Exodus 4:22-23]

Moses is a child of God and Israel is God's first-born son. Because of that, God is going to go to any length necessary to get His child out of slavery.

We're going to look at the ten plagues that take place. When I read that there were ten plagues, that number triggered something in my mind: that number 10 first shows up in Genesis 1. What we have in Genesis 1 are ten "Let there be . . ." statements. God says, "Let there be light. Let there be water. Let there be vegetation. Let there be, let there be." In the ten plagues, we have God taking away each of those pieces of creation for the Egyptians. The Egyptians have used God's creation against the group that God loves so dearly, and because of that, God is willing to go to any length, even undoing creation, for their sake. We watched this play out in the first "Let there be . . ." statement. It's "Let there be light" in Genesis 1. Genesis 1:3, "Let there be light, and there was light, and God saw that the light was good." It should not shock us that in the first plague, we read in Exodus 10, there was pitch darkness in all the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt. But in the homes of the Israelites, the lights stayed on. God creates this gift of light in the world, turns on the switch, and then he looks at the Egyptians and he says, "You have not let my people go," and he turns it off.

Then we read, "Let the waters be gathered to create seas and rivers, pools of water," this gift that brings life to us and sustains life. And it shouldn't shock us that in one of the plagues, all the water in the Nile turns to blood. It stinks and it's putrid. This gift that brings life turns into something that takes away life because they would not let the Israelites go.

The third one, “Let the Earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed and trees bearing fruit,” is supposed to nurture us and feed us and sustain us. In Exodus, God says, “The hail strikes down every single plant of the field.” And not only that, but then God sends locusts, and after the locusts descend upon the vegetation in Egypt, we read that not a green thing remained in all the land. This gift of life and fruitfulness is taken away from the Egyptians because they will not let the Israelites go.

The next one is: “Let the waters teem with living creatures and let birds fly across the sky.” We read these two plagues: “The Nile shall teem with frogs. They will get up into your homes and into your kneading bowls, your cookware.” Starts to get a little grosser as we move into these last ones. “They will get into your kitchens. They will fill your homes and your beds. And I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants.” These beautiful fish of the sea and birds of the air that God made in Genesis 1 to fill the Earth and bring life to it, God says to the Egyptians, “If you do not let my people go, I will turn those fish and those birds into frogs and flies that will fill your home.” God turns off that particular piece of creation.

And then the second-to-last one: “Let the Earth bring forth livestock and creeping things, according to their kinds. Cows and horses, barnyard animals, caterpillars and ladybugs.” And then we read, “The hand of the Lord will fall with a very severe plague upon the Egyptian livestock.” Not the Israelites—the Egyptian livestock. “And the dust of the Earth may become lice in all the land of Egypt.” Those creeping caterpillars that were supposed to be so sweet turn into lice that cover the homes. God is taking each piece of creation that He worked hard to produce, that He has spoken into existence for a reason, and He is saying to us, “I will free my children. Give me anything and I will change it in order to rescue my people.”

At this point in the story, we need to keep in mind why God is doing all of this. I think what we see happen—often too in our own lives—is that we are willing to take on more hurt ourselves. We’re willing to defend ourselves less than we’re willing to defend our own kids. When it comes to our children, there’s a fierceness that can get stirred up in a new and different way.

A story came to mind while I was thinking about this dynamic. When I was in high school, I had quite a few mean girls that I had to deal with. They ran in a group, but there was one in particular who kind of led the group. I was a cheerleader with them, for better or for worse. So, we had to kind of be in the same vicinity a decent amount. This one particular girl had been pretty brutal to me all year, and then at one point in the year, she got pretty vicious. She was being really mean, saying awful stuff, doing horrible things. And I told my mom all of the things that she was doing. I gave her the full story of all of the stuff that was happening.

So, one night, we were having a late-night practice, and I told my mom, “You know what? I’m going to go in there and I’m going to put on a smiley face, and we’re going to pretend like this isn’t happening, because I don’t want to talk about it and I don’t want to

make a big deal about it.” So I got to the practice and I put on that smiley face, showed her the love of Jesus, and we bopped around pretending everything was fine. My mom was helping at the practice, though. And partway through the practice, this other girl goes bouncing over to my mom and says, “Hi, Mrs. Reginelli! Can you help me with da-da-da-da...” And my mom looks at her and said, “Oh, honey, I’m sorry. I’m not as nice as my daughter.” There is a fierceness from parents that rises up. We want to defend our kids often more than we even want to defend ourselves, and that’s what we see God doing here. God knew that Pharaoh was never going to let the Israelites go unless he changed every single piece of the creation.

Before the final plague, Moses went to the Israelites and told them exactly what they needed to do, and he gave Pharaoh the most preparation, saying, “Let us go or else this plague of the firstborn is going to happen.” But Pharaoh sunk his heels in deep. So, on the night of this final plague, the Israelites took the blood of a lamb and put it over their door frames, and when the spirit of God passed through the city, it passed over every door that had blood on its frame. This is how we have the celebration of Passover, because in this moment, God takes His gem of creation, the thing that He loved the most and cherished the most, and He takes it away, but He protects the Israelites.

In Genesis 1:26, we read, “Then God said, let us make human beings in our image after our likeness. And God saw everything that He had made and behold, it was very good.” It was very good. These firstborn of creation were very good.

²⁹ At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. ³⁰ And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. ³¹ Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, “Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. [Exodus 12:29-31]

This was the answer that Moses and God had wanted from the very beginning, but it took tragedy and devastation in order to get there. God knew that Pharaoh was not going to let them go easily. He knew that Pharaoh was against the freedom of God’s own children, and so the undoing of creation. God fills this world with beauty and then takes it away, and in doing that He shows that He will go to any means possible to ensure that His children are free.

A friend sent me this quote earlier this week. It’s a quote by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who said, “Faith is a footbridge that you don’t know will hold you up over the chasm until you are forced to walk out on it.” As Moses watched these plagues unfolding, he showed up with his faith, and he didn’t know if it would hold him up. But over and over again, God walks with him and carries him, so Moses continues to show up and continues to do what God calls him to do.

What we learn here is that we don't have to be perfect. We don't have to have an unwavering trust or a perfect faith. What God calls us to is to know that we are children of God, and that He will go to any length for His children. God has chosen us because of His deep, deep love for us, and God is willing to sacrifice anything for us. It should not surprise us that this is the same God who—hundreds of years after freeing the Israelites from Egyptian slavery—was willing to take on the form of a human being, to come to Earth, to be the sacrifice that every single one of us needs in order to live in freedom from the bondage of sin. We need this freedom, and God will go to all lengths to save us. He showed us that when He became flesh and dwelt among us.

⁶ It is Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [Philippians 2:6-8]

God fills creation and is willing to empty it if it means that he can free His children. God takes on the form of a human, shows us what it means to be a disciple and to love your neighbor, and to be here and with Him, and then He takes on the cross and empties Himself. God does not want us to live in the bondage of sin, but He wants us to live in freedom, as children of God. We are meant to live into this identity, and it is not about having the perfect answers, and it is not about having blind confidence, but it is about showing up in our honesty and our hard times, being willing to bring all of ourselves before the feet of God because we know that we are His children. When we understand that it is not about what we do, but about who we are, we can faithfully listen to the call of God and become a vessel for His freedom in this world.

Will you pray with me?

Holy and heavenly God, Lord, you call us to freedom. You are willing to move mountains to do anything to get us to live in the light that You offer us. And Lord, we pray today that anything that feels as though it's binding, that it's holding us back from living as disciples of yours, God, that we would be freed from that. Lord, we praise You for being a god who calls us His children, and we ask God, that we would learn in new ways what it means for us to draw closer and closer to You. It's in Your name we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.