

Exodus 7:8-13
A Staff to Invite
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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God offers us glimpses of his grand plan to keep his people moving along the journey of faith.

This week, we are continuing in a series of messages this Lent through the book of Exodus, and we're looking for the signposts, the markers—as it were—that kept Moses and his people moving toward their future, the goal of the Promised Land. The Israelites were moving into a new way of life, a new paradigm. One that maybe you can relate to—it's the journey from captivity to freedom, from a life of worry and doubt to a life of freedom in trust that God is ultimately in control. And whenever we take these steps, it always requires more than a little faith. Using what you know, and trusting God with what you don't.

Would you turn with me to our passage today? We're looking at Exodus 7 verses 8-13.

Then the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Prove yourselves by working a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.’” So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Let the good news come now, Father, not only in word but also in power, and with great assurance. And now, God, I pray that your Holy Spirit would come so that these words would not just be my words, but yours. Let them breathe your power and your trust into our lives, that we might have the faith to go where you lead. For we pray, not in our own power, but in the strong name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, amen.

This morning's marker is a staff, a plain old piece of wood you would use to guide sheep or to steady you as you walk. It's a walking stick. This week, I paid a pastoral visit to one of our members, and the purpose was for us to introduce our dogs to one another, both lovers of big dogs. Sam had not yet met Max the Chocolate Lab. As we were heading out for our walk, I was offered a walking stick. It's steep and slippery in some spots; this will help steady you as you go.

There was not anything unique or special about the stick, but as I soon found out, it was a very useful in icy conditions—and for corralling dogs back onto the path.

For the two men in this morning's reading, Pharaoh and Moses, this staff has very different meanings. For one of these men, the staff will represent something to know, and for the other man, the staff will represent a way to go.

You recall that Pharaoh and Moses are bound together from childhood; but Moses, growing up in Pharaoh's home, knew that he was somehow different. Last week we read that Moses left Egypt for 40 years, and while he was gone, Moses was humbled in his exile, but it was for a purpose. While he's gone, Moses has an encounter with Yahweh in the burning bush, where Moses is told the great thing Yahweh will do through him, but he doesn't believe it—send someone else. Moses is the reluctant leader, a little different from the Charlton Heston Moses. Moses is constantly second guessing himself. Not Pharaoh, though. Pharaoh doesn't lack any confidence or gravitas. And that's where we see these two men part ways by the presence of this staff.

There is a condition that is even more dangerous than the plagues; it's the condition of hardness of heart. Hardness of heart is not just a condition that afflicts the Egyptians; it's a condition that strikes the Israelites in the wilderness, one that Jesus observes in his disciples in the gospels. Hardness of heart is related to doubt in a way, but is something unique all together. It is, I think, the resistance to the positive influence of God on your life. Hardness of heart is the resistance to the positive influence of God in your life.

Let me show you what I mean. Throughout this Exodus story, the Bible says that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. Ten times Pharaoh does it. Looking closely at our text this morning, we see Moses and Aaron going to Pharaoh, saying: "Let our people go." Pharaoh says, "O yeah? Prove to me why I should let you." God told Moses and Aaron to throw down their staff, and it became a serpent.

Now I can imagine Pharaoh saying, "Wow, that was a pretty amazing trick, but I'm still not quite convinced." You see, Pharaoh had his doubt, but it seems that was all he had. Instead of marveling and believing that this was a sign, Pharaoh says to his court magicians, "Think you could do the same?" He thought it was just a parlor trick. And so it went with a number of the plagues that were to come. He said, "Wow, that was a cool trick, but I just don't know if it's enough to make me believe. Unless I know more, I can't believe."

Pharaoh is, I think, in love with his doubt. As long as there is a margin of doubt, he insists that he must continue to seek more truth, rather than trust. As long as there is some sliver of mystery, Pharaoh continues to seek. Do you see what Pharaoh is doing here? Pharaoh is turning his doubt into a god. He is worshipping not the true God; he's worshipping his doubt.

We do this, too. We say things like, "Unless I know more, I can't believe." Or, "I'll believe if this happens". "Unless you do this, God, I just can't believe." How is it that we think that we could ever know more than an all-knowing God knows? If I knew everything that God knew, I would be God. That, or he would be utterly unworthy of our worship.

Doubt is a necessity when we worship a supreme God, a God who says “I am who I am.”

The role of the staff is not to know more truth; the call of the staff is to take what you do know and to put it into action.

This is Moses’ response to the staff. What happens to Moses in these successive plagues is really quite amazing. If you know the story, you remember that the same staff he threw down and became a serpent, is the staff that God used to initiate the plagues on Egypt. Scholars say that each successive plague was in one way or another deconstructing the gods Egypt worshipped, and saying to them, “Let me show you who *is* God.” So for Moses, it’s like he is having the curtains opened to the truth of reality. All the things he thought were really important, really powerful, the things that dictated the terms of his life meant nothing, in comparison to this great God.

You see, Moses and Pharaoh, I think, in a lot of ways share many of the same doubts and misgivings. They have similar upbringings and educations. But Moses chooses to go forward even though he has doubt, while Pharaoh is stuck wallowing in it until definitive truth comes about. When Moses encounters God in the burning bush, learning the name of God that would go with him, he knew all that he needed to know in order to do what God was calling him to do, which is to take a step forward in faith and trust.

Moses’ staff is a common piece of equipment. Everyone had them. But the meaning behind it was that you were going somewhere. And Moses is going somewhere. Are you going somewhere? The staff was there to keep Moses’ feet steady, to keep him from slipping, but it was also a reminder, like the bush, of the one who is going with him. The staff is a symbol of an empowered journey.

Back in the late 90s, there was a movie released called the *Matrix*. It’s a science fiction film about the future. All the humans have been enslaved, and what they perceive as reality is really just a computer program called the Matrix. The story revolves around a man named Neo, and Neo is the liberator (Moses or Jesus figure). And there is a definitive moment where a John the Baptist character takes him into a room and holds out two hands. In the left hand is the blue pill, and if you take it you will return to your dream state, and you’ll go back to life as it was being shown to you. You take the red pill and you go down the rabbit hole into reality. All I promise you is the truth.

And just like the plagues unmasking reality for Moses, now the Matrix comes crashing down and he is able to see reality as horrible as it is. He can see the truth. But this is not the crux of the movie; just knowing more is not the point of Neo’s calling. The more important moment for Neo is when he faces the question: “Who am I in relation to this truth? What am I being called to do with the knowledge that I have?” For it, he’s going to need a guide, and the guide in the movie is a woman named Oracle.

So Morpheus, this John the Baptist character, takes Neo to her apartment in a tenement building. And there's a moment when they're standing in the hallway when Neo asks, "So, does she know everything?"

Morpheus: "She would say she knows enough."

Neo: "And what? She's never wrong?"

Morpheus: "Try not to think of it as right and wrong. Try to think of her as a guidepost. She can help you to find the right path."

When Neo does go to her, she doesn't give words for him to know what is right and wrong as categories. What she gives him are words of promise and wisdom that come back to him along his journey, words that tell him who he is and what he is called to do as the liberator. In the end, it's this that enables him to lead his people from their captivity within the Matrix. This, it seems, is the job of Moses' staff.

What God is doing in his invitation to Moses and to us, is to take what we know is true of ourselves and of God and trust it enough to step into what God is calling you to do and be. God is inviting you and me on a journey together – a journey of faithfulness, a journey of being formed more closely, more intimately into the image of Jesus Christ. But this journey requires us to take some steps. We must move, must go where God is inviting us, but the good news is that as we do so, the truth will emerge, will break in and we will see more clearly—reality will be revealed more clearly.

When Jesus performs a miracle (lame to walk, blind to sight), he asks the person first to take a step into their healing. "Take up your mat and walk." It's as he takes that step that he realizes he is healed. To the lepers, "go and show yourselves to the priests." It's as they turn and go that they discover that they've been healed. "Go, your servant has been healed," and as he goes, he discovers his servant is healed. It's when Jesus says to his followers take that first step into your future, into your destiny that you will see that I have, in fact, given you what you need to make your journey.

Jesus is inviting us to take the next step. Faith is not just about what's true, but it's also about what we do with it. What's the next step for you? Is there an area of your life where you are being invited to step into? You don't need to have all the answers; you just need to know enough to take that first step. So where is it for you?

Maybe it's the first step of faith. If you feel God nudging you to begin or resume your journey, there is going to be a time after our offering, just before the announcements, where you will have a chance to spend a few quiet moments in reflection thinking about what the next step for you is. If during that time you feel like you need to speak with someone, I want to encourage you to find one of our ushers after worship or talk to me and we'd love to come alongside you in encouraging you in your walk of faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.