

Exodus 10:1-20

10 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, ² and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the LORD.”

³ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh, and said to him, “Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, ‘How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me. ⁴ For if you refuse to let my people go, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country. ⁵ They shall cover the surface of the land, so that no one will be able to see the land. They shall devour the last remnant left you after the hail, and they shall devour every tree of yours that grows in the field. ⁶ They shall fill your houses, and the houses of all your officials and of all the Egyptians—something that neither your parents nor your grandparents have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day.’” Then he turned and went out from Pharaoh.

⁷ Pharaoh’s officials said to him, “How long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God; do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?” ⁸ So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, “Go, worship the LORD your God! But which ones are to go?” ⁹ Moses said, “We will go with our young and our old; we will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, because we have the LORD’s festival to celebrate.” ¹⁰ He said to them, “The LORD indeed will be with you, if ever I let your little ones go with you! Plainly, you have some evil purpose in mind. ¹¹ No, never! Your men may go and worship the LORD, for that is what you are asking.” And they were driven out from Pharaoh’s presence.

¹² Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt, so that the locusts may come upon it and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left.” ¹³ So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and the LORD brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night; when morning came, the east wind had brought the locusts. ¹⁴ The locusts came upon all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever shall be again. ¹⁵ They covered the surface of the whole land, so that the land was black; and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left; nothing green was left, no tree, no plant in the field, in all the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. ¹⁷ Do forgive my sin just this once, and pray to the LORD your God that at the least he remove this deadly thing from me.” ¹⁸ So he went out from Pharaoh and prayed to the LORD. ¹⁹ The LORD changed the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea; not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt. ²⁰ But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go.

John 2:13-22

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

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Conflict: A Biblical History

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Both of these passages are about conflict – and imbalanced conflict at that. Pharaoh has far more power than Moses. The temple leadership has more power than an itinerant teacher like Jesus.

But Moses and Jesus are both willing to flip the script, to claim an authority bigger than themselves, which means that their power comes from a different place than ruling power or institutional power. They both claim God’s authority to act, and then they honor their inner voice in order to *react* to the situations they find themselves in.

Most of the time, this kind of conflict is something that is chosen FOR you. No one *wants* it. You have to be born into it. Why do you think we tell the story of Moses being hidden in the basket and found by Pharaoh’s daughter? Why do you think we tell the story of Mary being visited by an angel? It’s almost as though from the very beginning, their fates were determined. Later in life - A bush would burn. A dove would descend. And they would be awakened to this destiny they had to fulfill.

Moses didn’t really want this conflict. He tried running from it. He claimed he didn’t have the voice for it. He gave the Pharaoh multiple chances to do the right thing. And yet, when pushed, he did what he felt led to do. Even though - Egypt had power. Even though - the Pharaoh who knew him in some sense as family wielded that power. These Hebrew slaves that Moses and Aaron represented were thought to be powerless, so why was Pharaoh dead set on keeping them exactly where they were? It’s what big powers have always done – exerted their power to exploit those with little means. Letting the Hebrew slaves go would be economic devastation for the Egyptians. They counted on that free labor. They would argue for it, fight for it, and defend their

practice of enslaving the peoples that they conquered. It was their right. Slavery. Poverty.

Powerful nations nearly always exploit the working class, so their fear of an exodus, an uprising, a revolution is always there - just under the surface.

Did Jesus want conflict with the temple leaders? To me, it seems like he could have had mixed feelings about getting in fights with the scribes and Pharisees all the time. Since Jesus calls the temple “his Father’s house” – I would think that he wants so badly to belong there, to fit in, to be one of the religious scholars who has a place in the institution. But he sees what’s going on and can’t help his anger– again at how others are exploited - and this time for religious purposes. The sale of animals for sacrifice was about earning God’s favor – and Jesus wasn’t having any of it. His anger built up over time, right? It’s been pointed out to me by several other clergy who find this text compelling that he didn’t just get mad and react. It takes time, a good deal of time, to make your own whip. He thought about it. He weighed the consequences. He possibly wondered if there were other solutions, and then he made it political – turning over tables and scattering the animals, making quite a scene to be remembered.

These conflicts are what social researcher and author Brene Brown identifies as “daring greatly.” Her understanding is based on a quote from Theodore Roosevelt who said, *“It’s not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly...who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while **daring greatly.**”* This is about calling – and answering calling. To be awakened to a situation so close to your soul that you will go to any length to see it resolved. Moses was awakened to the plight of his people. Jesus was awakened to a new way of understanding the love of God.

We don't use the language of awakening so much in Christian circles – but the concept is there in scripture if we are willing to see it. Again – a bush burns, a dove descends, blind eyes are opened, a woman breaks her jar of costly perfume. It's a shift within the soul. It's the hunger for purpose. And always, always such awakenings are accompanied then by action that is larger than the individual. The individual may be a catalyst – but the movement is much bigger than that – and looks not to gain power for itself but to gain liberation, deliverance, healing, salvation, or meaning that is always inclusive of the “other.”

In Biblical history – whenever you notice conflict - pay close, close attention to what's happening. American history is written quite differently. Usually, those nations that are at the height of representing the strongest military industrial complex of their own time write about winning – the battles they won – the conquests they made – and their success is measured ONLY by power gained and wealth accrued. There are some driving today for American history to ONLY tell that tale, and to leave the voices that speak in pain and despair behind. It's what we've always done, right? But biblical history is so far from that kind of history. **Biblical history** lifts up a stuttering coward who brings swarms of locusts on Egypt with the wave of his hand and leads an enslaved people to freedom. **Biblical history** lifts up a poor carpenter's son who pays attention to the blind and lame and challenges the religious hierarchy of temple-focused institutional religion.

The Bible tells the story of Exodus – and begs us to repeat the narrative of the slaves who got away. The Bible tells the story of salvation – and begs that we remember the Son, the teacher who sacrifices himself for love. God's voice can be heard in those stories. These are the callings that cannot, will not be ignored. They drive toward action, the kind of action that to rational

minds seems futile, or reckless, or unimaginably stupid – and yet, it is exactly what has the authority, God’s authority, to plant a seed and initiate a whole new way of being in the world.

There’s an interesting sidebar in the “plague of locusts” story that you might not notice unless you are paying word by word attention and are also a geography buff. It says in the story that a strong “east wind” brings in the locusts to destroy all the plant life of Egypt. Egypt doesn’t really get an “east wind” from the sea but Canaan does. It’s how the winds of the Mediterranean move. This story isn’t written for the powerful Egyptians, is it? It’s written in the familiar language of the Hebrew people so that they will know THEIR story, THEIR history, THEIR determination against the might of other large and powerful nations that will be breathing down their national necks again, and again, and again. They need to know that even the winds are with them – God’s wind, the *ruah* present from the beginning of creation, is with them.

What if we began to tell our histories that way? With respect to those with little power? With a significant nod to those who have challenged unchecked power? HOW we tell the tale matters probably as much as the factual information in the narrative. I dare say that there aren’t any completely unbiased histories. Let me be clear though - there is a difference between a factual history and one that deliberately lies to portray evil as good. That’s probably another thought for another sermon for another day. I believe you can judge a history as being true or false without having to correct the author about which ways the wind blows in Egypt. What I’m saying is that history matters to the teller doing the telling, especially to the one who lives into that history and makes it a part of his or her own living narrative. Biblical stories will be as alive as we allow them to be in our own lives. Do you believe that God delivers? Do you believe that Jesus saves? Do you trust this history that awakens the humble soul to challenge might and power? I hope you

do, for when you do, it becomes our history, our story and shows us the foolishness that it takes to make a difference in this old world. Amen.

Kerra's Favorite Monastic Blessing

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you will live deeply and from the heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their mourning into joy.

And may God bless you with just enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this old world, so that you will do those things others claim cannot be done.

Amen.