

Epiphany 2—C Supplemental
Exodus 7:14-24
Free At Last

You know, our country has always had a very conflicted opinion of immigration. Sometimes we're totally for it and other times we fear it and dread it and hate it and try to keep it away and put it down. Probably most of you are fairly knowledgeable about where your particular tribe came from. There is a kind of satisfaction if you're able to trace your peeps back multiple generations and find out where you came from. We all are proud of where we came from and we want to learn more; we're sponges for it. Maybe some of you have roots in Asia; others of you have come from parts of Europe and that's a big deal. Our country was built off of immigration. That's one of America's core values, you might say, in our value system. We are a nation of immigrants and for the first centuries of the planting of America here, this land was so vast, so enormous, and so new, and so under-populated, there were no gates. Come on in! Everybody—we don't care who you are—what you're running away from. If you're a debtor or you're a prison escapee, it doesn't matter. We've got work for you. Get to work and build a country out of this new land. And for the first hundred years of our nation's history—even as a nation from its founding in 1770 until the 1870s—there were no immigration laws or restrictions of any kind. If you could get here and you could still walk, you were welcome and you would have a short path to citizenship.

However, the great influx of immigrants—many of whom had diseases, many of whom had no assets, they were starving, they brought no money, they basically got plopped down by the boats in New York on Ellis Island and they had nothing—made people get anxious and in the 1870s the first of the restrictive immigration laws were passed by Congress crunching down and trying to pinch off that tidal wave of immigrants. There were a million Germans just like me. There were a million Germans a year pouring into America in the 1870s and you know, a few Germans are a good thing. When they're coming in at a clip of a million a year the rest of America thought: "Slow down. There are a little too many Krauts over here. Dial it down a little bit."

Well, you know what that did? All that did then was put the pressure on southern Europe and then after northern Europeans got pinched off then the Italians began to flood into America. That really panicked the congress and in the 1920s they said: "Stop the Italians; too many." But then it turned right around again. We were inundated with refugees whose homes and livelihoods were blown up by the World War II and then also that's when Mexicans noticed what a great place the United States was. And do you know that the backlash to the huge—this immigration that has a lot of people all lathered up right now, legal and illegal immigration from Mexico—man, back in the '50s it was worse! You might think that was a golden age, well, not if you're from Mexico. Do you know that in 1954 alone over a million Mexicans were forcibly repatriated and dragged back across the border?

The fact is, it's an unsolvable problem because there is no answer to the question: "Who should be able to move in here and live here?" So for the rest of our lifetimes and those of your children and your grandchildren, America's going to muddle around trying to figure out who's in and who's out. The fact is this has been going on forever.

I want to talk to you today about an immigration story of Semites in the land of the Hamites—different tribes; different family members of the children of Noah. The Israelites, Abraham's descendants, were Shemites, Semites. They spoke a Semitic language that was common to most of the people in the Fertile Crescent—the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers—but because of a famine, Jacob took his young family, growing family—into the seventies by now—took them to Egypt for what they thought would be the seven-year run that Joseph had told them about; there's going to be a famine for seven years. So they came to live in Egypt. There were given land way in the north, in the Nile Delta. Now you might think that would be great land. Well, maybe it was a little too spongy for farming. You know, the Delta is where the river starts to spread out and it's soggy. Good for grazing, perhaps, but maybe not so good for farmland. So the Egyptians said: "Hey, you can live up there." And because the Egyptians were racially different, completely linguistically different, their

Egyptian language bore no resemblance to proto-Hebrew that the Jewish people spoke, the family of Abraham, spoke.

The Egyptians despised the Hebrews for being animal tenders. They hated shepherds as bad or worse as the cattlemen in the American West hated the sheep men. So the Israelites were happily squirreled away up in the land of Goshen in the Delta, the Nile Delta, where they could live peacefully and where they grew explosively. I can hardly imagine how fast this would happen. A little extended family sort of looking like one of your family reunions this summer? That's the snapshot of when Jacob replants himself for a temporary thing in the land of Egypt. But they didn't leave!

In 1876 B.C. is when Jacob moved to Egypt for what he thought was a temporary gig. It was going to be four centuries before they left and it was good for the first couple of centuries. The 1800s, the 1700s, the 1600s were great for the Israelites; they grew explosively. They grew prosperous. But unfortunately, there was a change in dynasties and instead of welcoming immigration and enjoying a diversity of peoples, what happened in our country many times where the national mood backlashes from celebrating immigration to suddenly fearing and hating people not like us, there was a vicious backlash and suddenly, this little family reunion of seventy people had become a nation of three million. And a paranoid pharaoh, probably Ahmose I, said: "These people are now a threat to us. We either have to drive them out or kill them or enslave them." And the latter decision looked best because he would get some economic benefit. And all of a sudden agents, armed agents of the Egyptian imperial army, began appearing in the land of Goshen and began to seize all their property and began to clap chains on them and they managed to enslave the entire nation of three million Israelites. And God let it; he watched it happen.

Now you might think: "Why did God let this happen?" Well, I've got a few suggestions for you to think about. He doesn't say but he gives us an awful lot of clues. Clue number one is God had to get his people out of Canaan. They had the opposite problem in Canaan. They were being sucked into the violent and sexually addicted culture around them. If you want to check me out on this, read Genesis in the 30s—like chapter 35, 36, 37, 38—for a string of ugly stories at how violent and adulterous these people of God were getting. I think God wanted to put them in like witness protection; get them in protective custody. "I've got to get them out of here! Not just for the seven years for the famine, I need to let them grow up where the shunning of the Egyptians will work in their favor. And then when I'm ready for them to move I'll bring them back once they are big enough that they can take over the whole land of Canaan. If I let them stay small they're going to assimilate and I'm going to lose my people yet again." He had lost most of the descendants of Adam and Eve. Plan B, second quarter, he had lost most of the descendants of Noah; now it looked like he might lose them again. So that's what happened.

Now through three million people—now we're in the 1500s and then in the 1400s, this wave of hating immigrants had taken over, had seized the land, and the Israelites were enslaved. And year after year went by and it got worse. The more they complained the more cruelly they were treated. God appeared to Moses, an Egyptian-trained, educated, literate leader, in a bush that would not burn out in the Desert of Sinai, where he thought he was going to be a sheep herder the rest of his life and God gave him a call that he was ready. And Moses, after arguing right, left, upside, and down, reluctantly, painfully agreed to go if his older brother Aaron would go with him and do all the talking.

Now our story today picks up in Exodus 5 and Moses delivers this request that the Israelite slaves should be let free to go out in the desert and worship. Pharaoh redoubled the cruelty of the slavery. The people of Israel then turned on Moses, howling at him what a jerk he was for making their lives so much worse. Moses returned to the Lord and said: "Lord, why have you brought trouble on these people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name he has brought trouble upon these people. You have not rescued your people at all."

Notice a little pattern here? Have you lived long enough to see God operate in your life this way? You're getting squeezed by something; I don't know what—layoff, job layoff, or extreme stress in your marriage or some conflict between parent and child—and you pray like crazy and it gets worse. It makes you think: "God, are you deaf or blind or senile? Are you losing it? You've got divine dementia or something up there? Hello? Are you listening? Hey, hey, hey! I'm down here. Yo, look at me. It's getting worse. The

more I pray the deeper the hole.” Have you lived long enough? If not, well you will. Not to scare you about your future or anything; just now you know; you’ve been told. He does that on purpose because he’s already designed a rescue plan and he wants to make sure that you can say: “I didn’t get myself out of this by myself. Only God could have lifted me out of a hole this deep. And all the sweating and struggling and praying I’ve been doing is only to get me ready for the gushers or blessings he’s going to pour into my life.”

God said to Moses: *“Tell the Israelites this: ‘Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go.’”* Not because of your clever statesmanship or your glib tongue. It’s because of my mighty hand. He will drive them out—not just let them go—he’s going to shoo you out of his country. And he said to Moses: *“I am the LORD.”* When it’s in all capital letters, that’s his Hebrew proper name. “I am a God who does not change. I am rock steady in my purposes. I will never quit loving you. I am a God of unconditional grace and mercy that loves people because I have decided to. So your performance is irrelevant. My decision, my heart, my mind, my power: that is what is going to carry out my plan.” And that name is summed up with this untranslatable four-letter word in Hebrew: “Yahweh,” which means, “I Am,” a God who is rock steady in his grace.

“I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty”, EL-Shaddai, “but by my name the Lord,” Yahweh, “I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites.” I am not deaf, I am not clueless or senile. *“I have remembered my covenant.”* But my time is now—not when you wanted—but it is now. *“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand.’”* Isn’t that funny? They swore back in the day just as we do in court: “Raise your right hand.” God said: “Hold me to it. I’m swearing to you right now and I’ve got my right hand lifted to swear to you by the honor of my name that I will do what I said. I’ll give you that land as a possession. I am I Am. I am Yahweh, the Lord.”

“Moses reported this to the Israelites but they didn’t listen to him.” “We want action.” Well, they got it, didn’t they? How many of the ten plagues can you name? How many of you can get three out of ten?

God was going to perform miraculous signs and wonders so that every Egyptian would know that he, the God of the Israelites, was the only true God (Exodus 9:14). God then began targeting Egyptian objects of worship starting with the Nile River. The ancient Egyptians were so dependent on the Nile that they had even composed hymns of praise to the world’s longest river. The poor Nile, however, was about to be assaulted with a deadly weapon.

God told Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh when he was out for his morning walk along the river. They were to take with them the staff which had turned into a snake and with it strike the Nile. God promised that this would cause the river water to turn into blood. When Aaron struck the Nile with his staff and then waved it over the land, the river turned to blood as did the streams and ponds connected to the Nile. There was even blood in the containers that held water from the Nile River! Fish died and the river wreaked. With one flick of the wrist God had bludgeoned to death one of the Egyptian gods proving how superior he was.

Do you suppose Pharaoh’s jaw dropped at the spectacle? I doubt it. He probably just smirked before snapping his fingers for his magicians who proceeded to turn water into blood just as Moses and Aaron had done. It must have been with Satan’s help that they were able to do this. But if these magicians were so great, and if Pharaoh really cared about his people, why didn’t he instead command the magicians to turn the blood back into water? As it was, for the next seven days the Egyptians were forced to dig new wells to find water they could drink.

And what did Pharaoh himself do during that time? Listen to our text: *“...he turned and went into his palace, and did not take even this [miracle] to heart”* (Exodus 7:23a). Pharaoh went home and acted as if nothing had happened. He didn’t bother pondering what it meant for him and his people that God had turned the Nile into blood.

Then came the frogs and the gnats. Then the flies buzzing around; I hate one fly in my house. How can you hear one fly a whole room away? How would you like to have them crawling over all of your food? Do you like flies on your food every day? Blech. Then came the sores; ugly sores on their livestock. Then came the sores on the people. Then came the hail. If you're farming you hate and fear hail. God sent it—hail as big as a baseball—smashed all their crops down. Then whatever was left in Egypt that was green, the locusts came and ate and ate and ate and when they buzzed off there wasn't anything green left in the land.

Then came number nine—if that wasn't bad enough—then came the creepy darkness; the sun just never rose. And they had no streetlights back in the day. It was full of dark all the time. That was creepy enough—the dark and the silence—then God saved the grand finale. It was a slaughter of every firstborn child and if you don't think that is a big deal, I want you to think—if you have a firstborn—I want you to think of that child being dead on the bed when you get up; how that turns your heart to ice just to think about it. It gives me the willies just telling you about it! Those were the ten hammer blows by which God gave glory for himself and testified that he is a God that keeps his word. And the people of God were free at last after their decades of sweat and oppression, cruelty and slavery, he set them free. And not only threw them out in the desert and said: “Fend for yourself,” he sent them on the way to gain a land. He built a covenant with them so they could be his instruments of advancing his policy of bringing salvation to the world.

And yet, that was only God's second greatest act of deliverance. The Passover Lamb that saved the believers from the slaughter of the firstborn found its fulfillment in the great Passover Lamb Jesus Christ. And whatever God did in Egypt was only the prelude to the great act of deliverance he did on Calvary when the Pascal Lamb, the Passover Lamb, was slaughtered for you and for me. Now through faith, we can take his blood—the blood of Christ—splatter it on our doorpost, and splatter it on our hearts. We are set free for the angel of death and condemnation now passes right over the top of your head. Through the forgiveness that Jesus bought, you've got everything those Israelites had and more. You have the ability to live a joyful and confident life because you have seen God in action; you know you've been relieved from the guilt and the horrible memories of your failures of the past. You are accepted unconditionally by a God whose dearest passion is to be reunited with you. You are able to live a life that's productive and helpful. You've been given a new way to live that will bring you the satisfaction that selfishness never can. And you've been given the promise of immortality. You cannot die. You are truly bulletproof wherever you go for the worst that man can do to you is get you into heaven a little quicker than you thought you would. That's the worst he can do is just bring heaven to you sooner.

This is what the God of free and faithful grace, Yahweh, I Am, promises to you. You are free at last. And I tell you this for two big “so whats.” First, to lift you up to celebrate your freedom. You watch what God does to keep his promises to Israel and those people crossed over the Red Sea and watched the chariot army of the mightiest—and that's the tank corps; that's like the SS Panzer division getting drowned in the Red Sea—they watched their enemies being drowned right before their eyes. God kept his word. You may keep on God keeping his word to you, as well.

And second, you have got something to give to the people in your life that you know who struggle with guilt, who are depressed, who think nothing is ever working for me, who see no way out of their struggles, who feel like they're in chains. Who are afraid of God now and terrified of dying, who have no hope of going to heaven and live quietly every day with the dread, “I'm in for a hell of a punishment when I get what's coming to me.” And you have the keys to take those chains off of people by sharing the good news for it is shared not by weapons, not by guns, but by talk. And by sharing that message of freedom in Christ, free at last, you help people to shake off their chains. This is good news for God's people!