

PHARAOH'S STORY
 (A First-Person Sermon Monologue)
 Exodus 12:1-14 (NRSV)
 September 7, 2008 – Ordinary 23
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
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Exodus 12:1-14 (NRSV)

- 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.*
- 14 *This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.*

My sources told me what happened that night.

There they were, that motley-looking bunch of slaves, gathered by family groups in their hovels, dressed for a journey, standing up and hurriedly eating their roasted lamb and unleavened bread...

But, I get ahead of myself.

My name is **Merneptah**, son of Rameses II, *Pharaoh of all the lands of Egypt and lord of the River Nile.*

I have returned from the past to tell you my story, and who knows.....it just may be that you will come to a better understanding of the God whom you worship: the One they called YAHWEH.

In your own country these past weeks, you have been watching the tragedy and destruction of the powers of wind and rain and tornadoes. So you have a feeling for human suffering. Your holy scriptures tell you the story of how the Children of Israel came to live in the land of Egypt during a **terrible famine** that covered our part of the world. There was a lot of suffering. Years later, by the time that I became *Pharaoh of all the lands of Egypt and lord of the River Nile*, the Children of Israel--or Hebrews----or “Habiru” as we called them, had been in Egypt for about 400 years.

The years of my reign were from 1224 – 1214 before the time of your Jesus.

Your Bible has it that “**There arose over Egypt one who knew not Joseph.**” (Exodus 1:8) That Pharaoh was my father, **Rameses II**. By the time of his rule, over 300 years had gone by, and the Children of Israel had become quite numerous; they were a fertile people!

Back in the day in which we lived, every Pharaoh was the commander-in-chief of his armed forces; he knew the fear of invasion from foreign enemy forces, and to have a large foreign population in your midst only made the fear worse. You were afraid that during a war the foreign people might side with the invading enemy and rise up within your midst to help the invaders. I believe that panic hit your nation concerning the Japanese during your own Second World War. It may be that today you feel uneasy about Middle Eastern Muslims being in your midst.

My father, **Rameses II**, did two things to try to gain control of the situation to better our national defense.

1. The first thing that he did was actually to enslave the Children of Israel. Prior to his edict, they had enjoyed the privilege of being servants and herds-keepers for our people while they lived on our land. But my father, **Rameses II**, actually placed them in forced labor and used them to build two of our great cities, **Pithom** and **Raamses**. Since you live in a land which has used slave labor, you know what I mean.
2. The second thing that my father did was to tell the Hebrew midwives that they should kill all of the boy babies that were born to the Hebrew women.

You remember, of course, the clever way that the Hebrew baby MOSES was saved by my sister that day when my sister was bathing down by the bulrushes. Little did my sister know, when she brought MOSES into the palace to be raised among us, how I would later rue the day that she saved his life!

Your Bible tells you how MOSES fled from my father’s kingdom to the land of Midian, there to marry a Midianite woman named Zipporah. Her father, Jethro, was a priest of Midian, and he must have had a great influence on Moses, not only in teaching him to tend sheep but also in developing a deeper understanding of God.

It was while Moses was keeping his sheep one day that Moses was confronted through a burning bush by YAHWEH GOD, the God worshiped by the Children of Israel. And it was through that confrontation that Moses and his brother AARON returned to Egypt to make my life a hell on earth!

One day, along with his brother Aaron, Moses appeared before my court and shocked us all by saying: “YAHWEH, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you saying, ‘Let my people go so that they may serve me in the wilderness.’” (Exodus 7:16)

After I had finished laughing at the audacity of the man, I regained my composure and told him that he would have to prove himself as YAHWEH’s spokesman.

With that, Moses turned to his brother Aaron who proceeded, as if on cue, to take his walking staff and throw it on the palace floor. When he did that, his walking staff immediately turned into a snake!

It frightened me greatly, and so I summoned my wise men and sorcerers and magicians to see what they thought. To my surprise, I discovered that almost all of them could perform the same trick.

All of which is to say that the encounter simply hardened my heart.....not only toward Moses and Aaron and their tricks but also against all of the Hebrew slaves. I was not about to free the major portion of my labor force!

However, Moses’ trick soon turned to tragedy for me and for all of my land. I am sure that you have heard about the plagues.

1. First, the River Nile and all of our water turned blood red.
2. Next, the frogs fled the water and began dying and decaying and rotting all over the place.
3. With all of those dead frogs everywhere
4. a plague of insects and gnats and flies inundated us.
5. Then, all of our cattle began dying, almost as if they were being infected by the gnats and flies.
6. The next plague hit human beings: everyone began getting these very sore boils all over their bodies. (Whether or not they came from gnat bites, I do not know.)
7. Then a hailstorm hit, destroying many of our crops.
8. And that was followed by a plague of locusts; what the hailstorm did not get, the locusts did!
9. Then, perhaps the most frightening, if not the most destructive plague came: for three days it was totally and completely dark.....dark as the blackest of nights. it was so dark that you could feel it!

Now, I must confess that throughout all of these experiences that were brought by Moses, I would alternate between giving-in and hanging-tough. But the end of the story was that throughout it all, my heart remained hardened: **I was not going to give in and free the slaves!**

The last time that Moses appeared before my court, I told him that I had had enough of his “dog and pony show” and that I did not ever want to see his face again.

10. And that brought on the 10th and final plague. Before stomping out of the palace in all of his fury, Moses literally shouted it just the way your Exodus writer has it:

Thus says the Lord: “About midnight I will go forth in the midst of Egypt; and all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits upon his throne, even to the first-born of the maidservant who is behind the mill; and all the first-born of the cattle. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there has never been, nor ever shall be again. But against any of the people of Israel, either man or beast, not

a dog shall growl, so that you may know that the Lord makes a distinction between the Egyptians and Israel. (Exodus 11:4-7)

I began my talk with you this morning by telling you that my sources had told me what happened that night. The motley-looking bunch of slaves gathered by family groups in their hovels, they were dressed for a journey, and they stood up while eating hurriedly their roasted lamb and unleavened bread.

What I did not understand then but what I have learned from history is that the night's experience is what has come to be called, in Jewish liturgical terms, **"THE PASSOVER."**

For it was that night that the Lord God YAHWEH carried out the terrible performance of the death of the first-born of all of Egypt....including my own son.....while the Lord God YAHWEH **"passed-over"** the house of the Hebrew slaves.

One of the most important symbols of "THE PASSOVER" was the BLOOD which was placed on the doorposts and the lintel above the door. The remembered liturgical words were: ***"For the Lord will pass through to slay the Egyptians; and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will PASS OVER the door, and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to slay you."***

(Exodus 12:23; RSV)

Now, my friends, long before there were Egyptians or Children of Israel or South Carolinians, there were stone-age people who had discovered that BLOOD was LIFE. They knew that if a human being began to bleed from a wound or an abrasion, and if the flow of blood was not stopped, the human being would die. BLOOD was LIFE!

And in the development of religious cults, the greatest gift that could be made to a deity was the gift of LIFE, symbolized by BLOOD (which was LIFE). Many religions in history made use of human sacrifice to make things right with their deity, their god.

The religious contribution of the Children of Israel to human society included not only MONOTHEISM, the teaching that there is only one God. It also included the belief that human sacrifice was wrong. In its place developed the use of the blood of birds and animals. BLOOD was LIFE! And that was the greatest sacrifice that one could give to make things "right" with God.

THE PASSOVER.....blood was life

THE PASSOVER.....setting people free

THE PASSOVER.....an experience of the love of God

THE PASSOVER.....one of the greatest experiences in the Old Testament.

Is it any wonder that your forebears in the Christian faith, coming out of the Old Testament religious experience found the New Testament "Passover" in the cross of Jesus?

THE CROSS.....blood was life

THE CROSS.....setting people free

THE CROSS.....an experience of the love of God

THE CROSS.....one of the greatest experiences in the New Testament.

I wonder if this helps you to understand in your hymnbooks the many references again and again to Jesus and his blood that was shed for the sins of the world?

*“Alas! and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die!
Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I!”*
(The Presbyterian Hymnal, #78)

In commenting upon that hymn which is in our hymnbook, Bishop Warren A. Candler, in his book, High Living and High Lives, tells about its influence upon a former Governor of the State of Georgia, **A. H. Colquitt**. Listen:

Just before he arose to address the meeting, the choir sang one of the sweetest hymns of (Isaac) Watts. It seemed to fill him with holy rapture. When he rose to speak, his handsome face shone with supernatural brightness, his lustrous eyes were filled with tears, and his utterance was choked with emotion as he said impulsively: “Oh, how I love that song! It was my mother’s song. And today, if I could hear her sing it again, I should have greater joy than if I had heard all the choirs of heaven.”

“Alas! And Did My Saviour Bleed!”----that was the song they sang. Because his Saviour bled and died that men might live, this noble man has found at last the eternal home and the “vanished hand” for which he sighed. (Haeussler, Armin, The Story of Our Hymns, St. Louis, Eden Publishing House, 1952, p. 209)

I, Merneptah, son of Rameses II, **Pharaoh of all of the lands of Egypt and Lord of the River Nile**, have returned from the past to tell you that the blood of the Passover changed my life forever.

Dare any of you who profess your faith in Christ make the claim that the blood of the Cross has changed your life forever?