

UNRAVELLED

SEEKING GOD WHEN OUR PLANS FALL APART

What happens when our world falls apart? How do we press onward when our tightly-knit plans unravel into loose ends? What do we become when our identity—or the path we’re on—comes undone? What if all this is not the end we fear it will be?

In our unraveling, sometimes life surprises us with unexpected joy, love, and hope—with a new beginning we couldn’t have imagined. Sometimes we need God to unravel us, for we long to be changed. Throughout this summer we will explore biblical stories of unraveled shame, identity, fear, grief, dreams, and expectations. These are stories where God meets us in the spiraling, unraveling of our plans—and us—into something new.

July 14, 2019 (NRSV) – Exodus 5:1-2; 7:8-23

Pharaoh Hardens His Heart to Moses’ Requests: When Humans Unravel God’s Plans for Justice

5 Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’”² But Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go.”

⁸ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹ “When Pharaoh says to you, ‘Perform a wonder,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.’”¹⁰ So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as the Lord had commanded; Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake.¹¹ Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts.¹² Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron’s staff swallowed up theirs.¹³ Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

¹⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.”¹⁵ Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake.¹⁶ Say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.”’ But until now you have not

listened.¹⁷ Thus says the Lord, “By this you shall know that I am the Lord.” See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood.¹⁸ The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.”¹⁹ The Lord said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.’”

²⁰ Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood,²¹ and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt.²² But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said.²³ Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart.

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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Theme Connections – Today’s story in Exodus follows a long journey of God’s people from those who knew and enjoyed God’s blessing given to Abraham and Sarah in Canaan to those who found themselves enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt. In a plan arranged by Joseph, a son of Jacob who was sold into slavery in Egypt by jealous brothers, but who rises to power and favor under the Pharaoh, the Israelites settle in Egypt as resident aliens to escape famine at home. All goes well until the famine threatens Egypt and Joseph, dies. The Book of Exodus begins, “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” This new Pharaoh is fearful—that the Israelites who have become numerous and prosperous

will threaten his power. Pharaoh gets organized to control the land, the food supply, and the Israelite people. He enslaves them and becomes increasingly more oppressive. It is into this situation that God calls Moses to come out of hiding in the desert and follow God's plan to save his people—stand up for justice for the Israelites. Don't give up the fight. Demand what is right. However, Pharaoh has another plan—keep the Israelites as slaves. Every time it seems as if Pharaoh is ready to give in to Moses' demand to let the Israelites go, Pharaoh changes his mind. How do we press onward when we receive repeated nos? What do we do when broken systems—created by human sin—unravel God's plans for liberation and justice? How can we counter the myth of scarcity by living a liturgy of abundance?¹

From the Artist - Lauren Wright Pittman reflects on her painting, "Anti-Creation Narrative":

As I sketched this image of Pharaoh, I realized how cartoonish and irrelevant this character had become in my mind. What would Pharaoh look like today? I sat with this question as a creeping sense of irony came over my body. I would argue, to my surprise, that a modern Pharaoh might look a bit like the reflection in my mirror, and maybe yours.



This story of Pharaoh's hardening of heart leads to a kind of anti-creation narrative—one where the world is coming undone and actively being destroyed. Sound familiar?

As a society, we are actively undoing God's creation through our consumption while clinging to ease, convenience, and our power over our environment. We harden our hearts to the ways our actions cause harm. We value our comfort over the health of our coastlines while the first climate refugees flee their homes due to rising tides and sinking land. As water becomes scarce, violence will increase. Many will have to fight for their basic needs. I believe Pharaoh's hardening heart is prophetic. This narrative reveals to us how a person's clinging to power can literally unravel creation. We often undo the threads of creation, while God entreats us to become co-creators. We have seam rippers in our hands when God wants us to have needle and thread. There is a difficult hope in the narrative, however. Our own unraveling of God's dream for creation is not strong enough to thwart God's plan. Ultimately the Israelites find liberation. In this image, the waters of the parted Red Sea frame the chaos of the plagues. We will succeed, with God's help, in healing the earth. We just need to allow God to soften our hearts, to take initiative in changing our perspective, and to welcome the challenge of restoring creation.

Guiding Questions

- What has unraveled and/or is unraveling in this story?
- God sees the oppression of the Israelites and calls Moses (hiding out in the desert) to facilitate their liberation (Exodus 3). Moses follows God plan (Exodus 5:1-2), yet faces repeated nos from Pharaoh. What do you imagine are Moses expectations and fears throughout this process? How does he push through them?
- The enslavement of the Israelites (Exodus 1:8-14) is impacted by the famine in Genesis 47 when a previous King of Egypt monopolizes its resources. To what, exactly, is Pharaoh's heart hardened? Why is he driven by power and control?
- Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann writes, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if liberal and conservative church people, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity? How does this quote and the myth of scarcity, inform your reading of this text? How do you see the myth of scarcity impacting your life and the life of your church?"

¹ Walter Brueggemann. "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity." Published on *Religion Online*, Article first published in the *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999. https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/?fbclid=IwAR1fxG2e4kITWshJDp4EfW5jd0pTZ88Dw6bSAbTzDCwXp7df_v1sDSq7oRo#content