



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Delivered: A Battle of Wills”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Exodus 8:20-32; 10:3-11

October 4, 2026

We had an interesting conversation at the Wednesday Bible discussion group a week and a half ago about the ‘heroic’ nature of so many characters of the Biblical narrative. The hemming and hawing of Moses in the early chapters of the Exodus story served as a distinct reminder that the many individuals whom we label as ‘heroes’ of the Bible aren’t, in fact, innately heroic people. The story of God is not generally one in which God plucks out especially capable, dutiful, courageous people of impeccable faith and utilizes those heroic characters to carry out heroic things. No, the story of God is far more often one in which God takes the willing hearts of broken and flawed individuals and lifts them up to those heroic ends. The heroes of the Bible most often aren’t especially heroic people; they are broken people who, with divine help, overcome the flaws of their humanity for Godly purposes.

What I have found so compelling as we have come through these past two weeks in our series, however, is the manner in which the story of Pharaoh and the plagues of Egypt reveal much the same truth about those Biblical villains we love to hate in the story of God! Before we go there, however, let’s talk for a couple minutes about that plague narrative in the book of Exodus.

The ten plagues that overwhelm Egypt each tend to unfold in much the same way. There is some variance from one to the next, but they fall within the scope of a 6-step pattern.

1. God tells Moses to approach Pharaoh with an ultimatum – demanding that Pharaoh let the Israelites go.
2. Pharaoh rebuffs the ultimatum and insists that the Israelites remain in servitude to Egypt.
3. The threatened plague (whichever it may be) is released across the land of Egypt.
4. The devastation causes Pharaoh to relent, and Pharaoh commits to releasing the Israelites from the land.
5. In the wake of Pharaoh’s concession, the plague is lifted.
6. Once things have settled and the plague is gone, Pharaoh’s heart is ‘hardened,’ he reneges on the deal, and the cycle starts all over again.

Again, there’s some minor variance, but they all tend to fall within that scope. Each time, however, things seem to get just a little bit more intense. The plagues started with annoyances like the river being turned undrinkable and frogs, gnats and flies overtaking the land. The annoyances turned to more intense disruptions with livestock and people being overcome with

disease. Then, things begin to get truly destructive as storms and locusts overtake the land before eventually turning to darkness and death.

It's in that latter portion of the evolution of the plagues, however, that we start to see a shift in those around Pharaoh. Each time – each plague – Pharaoh has followed that pattern of rebuffing the warning, experiencing the devastation, relenting in the face of the wreckage, and then turning back to his oppressive ways as soon as things begin to look a bit better again. It seems that some of those around him, however, are a bit more ready to break that cycle.

This is from the tenth chapter of Exodus – the eighth plague of locusts – starting in verse 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 serve 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? Send the people away, so that they may serve 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, serve 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 serve the Lord, for that is what you are asking." And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.

Pharaoh's attempt at bargaining continues here. Pharaoh continues to look at things through the lens of how he might get what he wants to get out of all of this. Those around him, however, are starting to see things differently. His own advisors are pointing out that his narcissism and hunger for control are driving his people to devastation. Later in the story, as the Israelites make their way out of Egypt, we are told that the Israelites are given supplies and valuables from the Egyptians themselves, as it seems most of the population eventually comes to see the hand of God in all that has transpired. All the while, we are left with this image of Pharaoh – last man standing – refusing to give in, no matter what his stubbornness might bring upon himself or others.

Now, let me take this back to where we began. We sometimes have trouble identifying with the heroes of the Bible because we put them on a pedestal and set them apart from the rest of us. The truth, however, is that the heroes of the Bible most often aren't especially heroic people; they are broken humans who overcome the flaws of that humanity for Godly purposes. That's something that we can relate to. What I find so compelling about this plague narrative, however, is that Pharaoh can be a reminder that the villains of the Bible aren't necessarily ubiquitously

villainous people who should be set apart as more evil than the rest of us but are broken humans who are unable to overcome the flaws of their humanity who as a result end up doing extraordinarily destructive things.

It's so easy to vilify Pharaoh in all of this – and rightly so. It's easy to look at his willful stubbornness and self-assured reliance and to frame our understanding of Pharaoh as the defiant king who brought devastation upon his people. And that's all fair. That's all reasonable. It is also, however, a frame of understanding that makes it far too easy for us to fail to see the humanity in Pharaoh that might be reflective of the humanity in us. Said another way, the grand and almost incomprehensible nature of the plague narrative causes us to miss the heart of Pharaoh that may not, in the end, be all that different than our own.

There is no question that the scope of impact in Pharaoh's story is so far beyond anything we know in our daily living. And, most certainly, I would hope that we could come to some sense of clarity in our own willfulness long before we ever allowed such devastation to occur. I think if we can set aside the near incomprehensibility of the plague narrative, however – if we truly drill down to the heart of the matter – what we find is the story of a battle between human will and the will of God, and the almost ubiquitous manner in which that tug-of-war constantly unfolds in the lives of God's people.

Now, to be clear, we are not Pharaoh, and most in this room, I suspect, are more akin to those who slowly came to see the wisdom of God than we are inclined to Pharaoh's unfettered obstinance. Still, I argue that there is a bit of Pharaoh in each of us. There is a bit - and sometimes more than just a bit – of willfulness in us all. We are all a bit inclined to plan our steps, direct our ways, and set our sights on the path that we devised while resisting (sometimes knowingly – sometimes not) that voice of God trying its best to pull us another way. We are all prone to the bargaining, temporary submission, and relentless stubbornness that lies beneath the distracting destruction of Pharaoh's plagues. I'm pretty convinced that it wouldn't take ten plagues for most of us to relent. I'm also pretty convinced, however, that there is a lot more of Pharaoh in us than any would likely want to admit.