

Tracy Daub
3/7/21—University Presbyterian Church
Exodus 20:1-17

ESCAPING PHARAOH

Escaping captivity is more likely to succeed when you have allies and a plan. Enslaved African Americans who attempted to run away from captivity were far more successful if they had a plan for their escape and allies along the way to help them. Women today who seek to escape abusive relationships are more likely to find safety when they have allies and a plan.

When the Hebrew people found themselves enslaved in Egypt, they also needed allies and a plan. Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, held the Hebrew people in the cruelest kind of bondage. The Hebrew people endured whips and beatings and murder and hunger and suffering and unrelenting labor all so that Pharaoh could build his vast empire and enrich himself and his people.

Have you noticed how Pharaohs have a way of popping up throughout history. We've seen many a Pharaoh take leadership in nations around the world, and in multi-national companies, and even in the leadership of churches and communities of faith. Pharaohs are found wherever people exploit others for their own gain or use their power and wealth against vulnerable people. Pharaoh stands for all those enslaving forces at loose in our world and in our lives—those forces that oppress, and devalue, and grind people down.

The Hebrew people cried aloud to God to save them from Pharaoh. And God became their ally. And then God called Moses, who despite his initial reluctance, also became their ally and led the Hebrew people from enslavement to freedom.

But Pharaohs are not easily escaped. Once emancipated, you have to make sure that you don't fall back into Pharaoh's clutches. God didn't emancipate the Hebrew people only so they

could fashion their own society on the same destructive principles of Pharaoh—and thus fall back into enslavement and bondage. And so God gifts the Hebrew people with the 10 Commandments. These 10 Commandments were given as a plan, a strategy, for escaping Pharaoh. In place of the bondage they knew under Pharaoh, the Commandments offered the Hebrew people the gift of freedom and justice. In place of fear and exhaustion and the brutal lack of regard for others, the Commandments gifted the people with a plan for living that was rooted in respect for God, others, and themselves.

The first three commandments call for God's people to honor and respect their God to the exclusion of every other possible god. Sometimes other gods look like a golden calf, such as the Hebrew people once made, or even a golden statue of a politician, as crafted in recent days here in America. But other gods also come in forms such as nationalism, or materialism, or a kind of tribalism that elevates the family to god-like status. The first three commandments offer a plan for escaping Pharaoh by returning our devotion to God alone.

The last six commandments offer a plan for escaping Pharaoh by turning our attention to living in right relationship with our neighbor. Pharaoh's rule was defined by a brutal disregard for the welfare of one's neighbor, but the emancipating rule of God demanded respect for others.

And then, there in the middle of the 10 comes the emancipating commandment for Sabbath rest. Notice how this commandment honors both God and neighbor, as well as oneself. And Sabbath rest is to be afforded not only to yourself but also to your children, your slaves, your livestock, and also the alien worker in your midst. *Everyone* is to be gifted with Sabbath rest. *Everyone* is to be emancipated from the unrelenting expectations of productivity, from the greed machine that governs so much of life, from the exhaustion that consumes our bodies and spirits.

The Commandments offer an escape from Pharaoh and the possibility that life can be more than anxiety and greed and hostility toward others. They are given to us by God as an escape plan from the tyranny of Pharaoh.

But the Commandments come with a warning. If we do not keep these commandments, we will find ourselves back in Pharaoh's clutches.

We will find ourselves back in a life of endless striving and producing.

We will find ourselves back in a life of alienation from God and one another.

We will find ourselves back in a life of enslavement to hostile forces within ourselves and outside of ourselves.

Lent is the season for examining the ways we have fallen into Pharaoh's grip. Lent is the season for asking ourselves in what ways have we normalized Pharaoh's domain? How have we normalized exhaustion? How have we normalized relentless consumerism? How have we normalized the disregard of our neighbor, especially the weak or vulnerable neighbor, the neighbor of another religion, the neighbor without documents, the neighbor on welfare, the neighbor who is incarcerated? How have we normalized anxiety and stress? How have we normalized hostility toward one another—the person of another political party, another race, another sexual orientation? How have we normalized the ways Pharaoh has enslaved us?

God frees us from Pharaoh's domain and gifts us with an alternative way of living. And that is also what Lent is about. In the season of Lent, we are reminded that God calls us to follow Jesus on a path to freedom and abundant life. Gifted with the 10 Commandments and the way of Jesus Christ, we give thanks that God has not abandoned us to Pharaoh—for we have a plan and an ally.