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February 21st: Exodus 1 & Matthew 8:18-34

February 20, 2020



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The children of Israel multiply and Pharaoh's response. Calming the waves and delivering the Gadarene demoniacs.

Some passages referenced:

Genesis 46 (the list of those descending into Egypt); Genesis 35:23-26 (the order of the sons); Genesis 35:10-12 (the blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication given to Isaac); Exodus 15:27 (twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees at Elim); Genesis 1:28 (the blessing of fruitfulness and multiplication); Genesis 15:13 (God's statement to Abram that his descendants would be afflicted and enslaved).

Luke 13:32 (Herod the fox); Daniel 7 (Son of Man in Daniel); Matthew 27:51-52, 28:2 (earthquakes in Matthew); Matthew 9:27, 20:29-34, 21:1-7 (Matthew's pairings).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Exodus 1. These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin,

Dan, and Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons.

Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died and all his brothers and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly.

They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us.

Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. Therefore they set taskmasters over them, to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Ramses.

But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied, and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves, and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work of the field.

In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves. Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah, and the other Puah, When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live. But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.

So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, Why have you done this, and let the male children live? The midwives said to Pharaoh, Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them. So God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families.

Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live. Exodus chapter 1 begins the great story of God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. This passage takes for granted a general knowledge of the book of Genesis, and more explicitly recalls Genesis chapter 46.

Its opening words, and these are the names, directly recalls Genesis chapter 46 verse 8. This story is taking up the threads that we have just left in Genesis. If Genesis looked forward to the events of the Exodus, with the stories surrounding the burial of Joseph and of Jacob, the story here looks back to the story of Genesis and picks up some of the details from it. While the sons are listed in Genesis chapter 46, the order of the sons that we have here comes from Genesis chapter 35 verses 23 to 26.

This is possibly because in the context, in verses 10 to 12 of chapter 35, there's the

promise of being fruitful and multiplying. The tribes are listed according to their mothers, not according to the order of the birth of the children themselves. The two handmaids are reversed and correspond to the respective wives in a bookended form.

So it starts with Leah and it ends with Zilpah. And in the centre you have Rachel's child Benjamin, and then the children of Bilhah. There's one detail that's different from Genesis chapter 35 that's worth noting.

Reuben is not referred to as the firstborn here, perhaps on account of his demoted status. The text refers to the 70 who came down into Egypt, and it also highlights 12 as the number of the tribes. 12 and 70, as we've seen already, are significant numbers.

They're associated with the identity of Israel and appear at many points in Israel's history. There's 12 tribes and there's 70 elders. In a few chapters' time we'll encounter Elim, where there are 12 springs and 70 palm trees.

Israel is fruitful and multiplying, recalling the blessing of Genesis chapter 1. They're fulfilling the calling given to Adam and Eve and the promise given to Abraham. And this can be contrasted with the struggles of the story of Genesis, where the women within the story, whether it's Rebecca, whether it's Sarah, whether it's Rachel, are struggling to give birth and experiencing painful birth. Here, while there are struggles surrounding birth, those struggles come purely from outside.

The women are giving birth at a rate of knots. There's no way to stop them. There is an exponential growth of the population of the people.

The language here is not just the language of fruitfulness and multiplication. There's language more typically used of the swarming of insects. You can imagine how the Egyptians are seeing this.

They're cockroaches filling the land, or like locusts devouring the land. That's how they appear to the Egyptians. And the cluster of words for growth in verse 7 drive this point home.

They are increasing in number at a truly incredible rate. And while we usually associate death with terror, there's something about an excess of life that can be monstrous and terrifying too. And perhaps this is the way that the Egyptians are seeing the Israelites at this point.

When they finally leave, it's not with the 70 that they first came down with, but with 600,000 people, which gives some sense of the growth that they have experienced. The rising of a new king might refer not just to someone new coming to the throne, but to the start of a new dynasty. It's not just someone in the existing line of succession.

And this person doesn't know Joseph. Well, maybe he knows Joseph on the history books,

but there's no sense of a duty to Joseph or an appreciation of what he has done for Egypt and the responsibility that Egypt has to his descendants and his family. The Israelites have now become a threat, as a large and powerful foreign population is distinct from the Egyptians.

They haven't assimilated into the nation. They're a distinct body of people. And Pharaoh fears that if there is a war, the Israelites will fight on the side of the enemies of the Egyptians, rise up and gain supremacy.

Pharaoh perhaps knows that there's an order to the blessing that's given in Genesis 1. Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and they've reached that stage, and subdue it. There's a concern that they're going to subdue the land. Pharaoh's concerns here are those of a shrewd politician, if a particularly unscrupulous one.

He sees the parameters of the situation, he sees that they don't look good, and so he wants to take a preemptive strike against this potential enemy of his people, and to ensure that they do not rise up in such a manner. We need to be aware of reading Exodus simply as a story of straightforward good versus evil, although there is good versus evil. It's a more subtle and consequently powerful story than that.

Pharaoh is a typical baddie in most tellings of the story, but Pharaoh has motives, Pharaoh has reasoning behind his approach that make clear to the careful reader that he is a three-dimensional character, and that perhaps by reflecting upon this story we might learn something about our situations. Israel is then afflicted and enslaved, as God foretold to Abraham in Genesis 15. They're reduced to a sort of servitude, and Pharaoh conscripts the Israelites into a great city-building project.

The alert reader might think back to the story of Babel in chapter 11 of Genesis, where once again a story begins with, Come let us, bricks are fired in order to build a great city and a building project of a tower, and here we're seeing that same thing playing out again. This is a Babelic project. However, even as the Israelites are oppressed, they grow in number and they spread out even further.

The Egyptians are in fear and dread of the Israelites, much as the animals were in relationship to man after the flood. And Pharaoh moves at this point on to infanticide. This is plan B. The initial plan has failed, and so he wants to move on even further.

So he instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys. Now the midwives are either Hebrew midwives or midwives to the Hebrews. Their names suggest that they are probably Hebrews, but the important thing to notice is that their names are given to us.

Pharaoh's name is forgotten, and there's much debate about who this Pharaoh actually is. But the names of the midwives are remembered, and their heroism ensures that they are still remembered and spoken of to this day. They're the first names that we

encounter in the actual story of the book of Exodus, beyond the initial statements about Joseph and the family of Jacob.

Their names stand out in the context of anonymous figures. Pharaoh's name is not given to us. Pharaoh's daughter's name is not given to us.

Her servant girl's name is not given to us. Moses' mother, her name is not given to us here. And even Miriam's name is not mentioned at this point.

Even though we are told the names of Jochebed and Miriam later, the Hebrew midwives then are the only ones whose names are given at this point. It's not entirely clear what the stones refer to. Some have seen it as the birthstool, the stones on which women squatted while in labour.

Alternatively, it could refer to the genitals of the child, to see the sex of the child and to kill the boys. The boys were to be killed, and presumably the girls were to be taken. The girls were to be brides for the Egyptians.

We can think back to the story of Genesis chapter 12, where the threat was that Abraham would be killed and Sarai would be taken. This is the same sort of thing that we're seeing here. The threat often in scripture and elsewhere in history has been the removal of the men, leaving the women vulnerable to being taken by foreign powers.

As in the story of Genesis, deception is the response. The Hebrew midwives deceive Pharaoh. They play upon the Egyptians' xenophobia and superstition it seems.

When we fear another group, we can easily ascribe to them some special quality or power that exceeds or diminishes regular humanity. And this seems to be what's taking place here. The Hebrew women are not like regular Egyptian women.

They are far more vigorous, and as a result they bear children even before the midwives get to them. The Hebrew midwives' deception of Pharaoh probably plays upon the story of the fall. In the story of the fall, the woman is deceived by the serpent.

And in story after story in the Old Testament, women deceive tyrants. There is a poetic justice as the women get their own back upon the serpent, upon the tyrants. The midwives stand out for their courage.

They disobey orders, they deceive Pharaoh, and Jonathan Sacks has suggested that this is the first recorded account in history of civil disobedience. This is an example of people just disobeying orders. When those orders are wicked, they refuse to obey.

And their courage has stood testament to them to this day. God blesses the midwives with families of their own. Bear in mind that many of the women who would have become midwives would have done so because they had no children of their own.

And here God blesses these midwives with children of their own. The Israelites continue to multiply and they're fruitful. And the response to this is Plan C. If subjection to servitude was not enough, if the instruction to the midwives didn't work, then time for a different option.

Time for the nuclear option. We're going to kill all the baby boys. And so Pharaoh tells his men to drown the baby boys in the River Nile.

The Nile will both be the means of killing them and it will cover up the crime. A question to consider. It's no accident that the book of Exodus begins with themes of birth and struggling in birth.

These are themes that relate not just to individuals within the nation, but to the nation as a whole. The nation is struggling to be born. And this story plays out the birth of Israel as God's firstborn son.

Not just the birth of baby boys to women within the nation, but an event of national and epochal significance. And in its presentation of this reality, the book of Exodus begins with women's centre stage. The Hebrew midwives, the mother of Moses, the sister of Moses, Pharaoh's daughter and her handmaid.

This is a story that begins with and focuses upon women. There are other stories that begin and focus upon women in the Bible. Which stories are these and what similarities are there between this story and those stories? Why do you think that God begins such stories with such a focus upon women? Matthew chapter 8 verses 18 to 34.

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to him, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

Another of the disciples said to him, Lord, let me first go and bury my father. And Jesus said to him, Follow me and leave the dead to bury their own dead. And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him.

And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves. But he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, Save us, Lord, we are perishing.

And he said to them, Why are you afraid, O you of little faith? Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marvelled, saying, What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him? And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, What have you to do with us, O son of God? Have you come here to torment us before

the time? Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them.

And the demons begged him, saying, If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs. And he said to them, Go. So they came out and went into the pigs.

And behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. The herdsmen fled, and going into the city, they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.

Matthew 8 begins a series of dramatic actions that Jesus performs in healings, exorcisms and other wonders. Here we have an interruption of that narrative with a message concerning discipleship. And we've seen something of the order of these miracles and signs and actions, where Jesus will perform three things, and then there's a message concerning discipleship.

Three more, another message. This message underlines the difficulty of discipleship, both in the fact of not having somewhere to lay your head, and also having to leave things behind in a radical way. Jesus' statement concerning the foxes and the birds of the air might be a subtle reference to rulers within the land, and to Gentile rulers more generally.

The foxes are those like Herod, who's described as a fox in Luke 13, verse 32, and the birds of the air are people like the Romans and others. This is the first use of the expression Son of Man in the Gospel. And this expression brings back the background of places like Daniel, the references to the suffering of the Son of Man, to the heavenly authority of the Son of Man.

This is an expression that Jesus uses of himself, particularly when speaking to people outside of the immediate disciple group. The term is a somewhat enigmatic one, and perhaps it's a challenge not just to slot Jesus into an existing slot. There is a slot called Son of Man that you find within the prophets, like Ezekiel and Daniel, but it's not clearly defined, and so you have this one character that's a bit mysterious, and Jesus can define himself relative to this character, but also fill out a picture that has surprising elements to it, such as the Son of Man who's rejected, who's not received, who has nowhere to lay his head, presenting the starkest contrast with the rulers of this age, who, unlike the one who has all kingdoms and authorities given to him by the Ancient of Days, dwell in mighty palaces and beautiful houses.

The final statement that Jesus makes here is perhaps the most arresting. In response to a disciple who asks first to bury his father, and then to follow, Christ says, follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead. It's surprising break with what we'd expect of filial piety, that the Son has to be loyal to his father and bury him.

Elsewhere, Jesus teaches against the teaching of the Pharisees, who allowed people to be absolved of their responsibilities to their parents. So presumably that's not quite what Jesus is saying here. However, Jesus' statement still should shake us.

The statement, let the dead bury their own dead, suggests that there's a cycle of death that's playing out, that generation after generation, the dead are burying their dead, and these people are walking dead. There's no actual life that's taking place. The cycle is one of death.

And Jesus, throughout this chapter, has been introducing a cycle of life. He's been dealing with people who are dead, dead in the sense of being outside of fellowship with God and other people, or dead in the sense of experiencing deep sickness and approaching death. And then we'll see other forms of death as we go through.

Jesus has come to break this cycle, and those who want to follow him must recognise their loyalty to this cycle of life, and not just perpetuating the cycle of death. There is something that must take precedence over that. Now it's worth bearing in mind that this father had presumably not died yet.

Rather, the man is waiting for his father to die, and then going to follow Jesus. But by that point, it will be too late. This mission has an urgency to it.

There's only a few years before Christ will die, and if he's not on board at that point, he may miss the boat. And the urgency with which Jesus presents his call to discipleship starts to sharpen the distinction between the following crowds and the committed disciples. That distinction becomes much clearer.

Jesus is followed by his disciples into the boat and out into the sea. And we might think about the story of Jonah as there's this storm that rises up, and the people on deck are frantic and trying to deal with the situation, whereas Jonah is asleep in the hold. Here Jesus is asleep, but the situation changes when he rises up.

The storm rises, and Jesus is asleep. Then Jesus rises, and the storm sleeps. There is a quaking of the waters.

Now there are three earthquakes in the book of Matthew. The quaking of the sea here, there's a quaking at the cross, and there's a quaking at the resurrection. And I think this should be a clue that there's something more going on here.

Jesus is asleep in the grave, and then he rises up and he delivers his people. The time will come when the disciples feel that they're left all alone, that Jesus is asleep, that he's not helping them, that he's gone from the scene. And they face this great storm around them, and then Jesus rises up and delivers them and stills the waves.

That will happen at the resurrection, and this is a preview, as it were, of that pattern

already taking place. The little faith of the disciples contrasts sharply with the great faith of the centurion earlier in the chapter. Jesus is in control of the situation.

He's able to rule over the waves in a way that causes the disciples to marvel. They don't know who this person could be. This shouldn't just be presumed to be a proof of Jesus' divinity, but rather of the prophetic authority of an appointed man, a man who has had incredible authority vested in him.

And we'll see as we go through Matthew that actually Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth invested in him, an authority that only God himself can enjoy. But at this point, they're wondering whether this is a great prophet, a prophet greater than all the other prophets. At the other side of the sea, they arrive at the country of the Gadarenes.

There they encounter a sort of trifecta of extreme impurity, demonic possession, tombs, and pigs. Why are there two demoniacs here? It's not the only time that Matthew has two of some people or two of some things where the other gospels only have one. We see two sets of blind people in chapter 9 verse 27 and in chapter 20 verse 29 to 34, and then also a donkey and a colt in chapter 21.

We can see pairs of persons healed, two demoniacs, a woman and a girl, two blind men. Pairs are more common within the book of Matthew than in some of the other gospels. We see the pair of thieves at the cross, we can see the pairs of brothers in chapter 4. And so maybe Matthew's making a broader point about pairings here, as witnesses perhaps or something else.

It's quite possible to harmonise these accounts with the accounts that we find in other gospels. Perhaps Matthew has less of a scenic immediacy than Mark does, and so focuses upon the numbers of people more than the specific engagements that Jesus has, in which one of the demoniacs would have been the lead figure. Another possibility to consider here is that Matthew is consciously collecting a series of miracles in a way that highlights numbers.

So you have 12 people that are delivered in some way. The leper, the centurion and his servant, Peter's mother-in-law, two demoniacs, paralytic, a woman and a girl, two blind men, and a mute man. And putting all these together, it's a sign of a new Israel perhaps.

The demoniacs address Christ as the eschatological judge, as the son of God, as the one who will torment them. We've already seen Christ presented as the eschatological judge at the end of chapter 7, where Christ is the one who will judge people who come and say, Lord, Lord, and he will say, I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of wickedness. Elsewhere we've also seen Satan recognising Christ as the son of God.

The use of such a title underlines the fact that Christ's identity was known to spiritual beings. He is not just a mere man, he is one who has come from heaven to act in a

decisive manner. Many people reading Matthew's Gospel or the Synoptic Gospels more generally can suggest that they have no concept of Christ's pre-existence, that Christ is one who has come from heaven but yet has always existed before that, thinking of Christ just as a great man perhaps.

But passages like this suggest that even in the Synoptics there is a concept of pre-existence. The demons beg that if they are to be cast out, they be cast out into the herd of pigs. The pigs then career down the steep bank and are drowned in the waters.

It's similar to the drowning of Pharaoh's army in the sea. Christ is the son of God who binds the strong man. He is the one with the power to exorcise the demons, to drive them out, to deliver people that have been held in bondage.

But yet there's a twist in this story. We might expect it to end with the deliverance of the demoniacs and then the rejoicing of the people of the town but that's not what happens. The Gadarenes beg that Christ would depart from them.

Much as the demons begged, there's an association between the demons and the Gadarenes. Now one interesting thing to observe is that these men were cast out of the town. They were dwelling among the tombs.

They were in many ways like scapegoats of the town. And now the demons are cast out of them and the demons enter into a herd of pigs, a great many of them according to the Gospel of Mark. This is not the way such scenes usually go.

Usually you have the one or two being cast out by the herd. But now the one or two are delivered and the multitude of the herd rushes into the waters. So there's a reversal of the scapegoat pattern.

René Girard has argued that within this story we're seeing a reversal of the scapegoat pattern. And in the scapegoat pattern typically a few people are cast out by a larger group as a sort of lightning rod for the problems within their community. And perhaps that's what happened to the Gadarene demoniacs.

Perhaps all the demons and issues of the community were being cast out into them. And they were the ones dwelling among the tombs, holding all these demons of the community. And then Christ deals with those demons, releases the demoniacs from that oppression.

And those demons then go into the herd which represents the people of the town. The herdsmen run into the town and tell the people and they beg Christ to depart. Christ upsets the social order.

Christ ends up being the one who is cast out, not just the demons from the demoniacs. I've commented upon the patterns of threes within these signs. And here I think we've

seen a movement from more private miracles in the first three signs of chapter 8 to more dramatic signs of authority causing people to fear with an emphasis upon reaction.

So the first one is what sort of man is this that even winds and sea obey him? And the second reaction is that of the people of the Gadarene city who beg Christ to depart from them. In these reactions we're seeing some of the options that people have in their response to Christ. Will they seek to drive him out as their fear leads to a rejection of Christ? Or will they be people who marvel at his works and follow him? A question to consider.

Within these verses we see that Christ is one who shakes things up. Christ is one with great power and authority. Christ is one who upsets the social order.

How can the example of the people of the Gadarene city help us better to understand responses to Christ in our day and age?