

We continue this morning in the book of Exodus, the second book of the Old Testament. Last week God revealed God's name as "I AM who I AM" to Moses in the burning bush. After promising to never leave Moses, God called him to go back to Egypt to save God's people, Israel. The Great I AM told Moses to first go to the elders of Israel and tell them that the God of your ancestors has sent me to you (3:13) to bring you out of Egypt. It won't be easy, but God promises to stretch out His hand and strike Egypt with all God's wonders and after that...Pharaoh will let the Israelites go. But Moses said, "What if they don't believe me?" (4:1). The Lord then put a staff in Moses' hand and had him throw it on the ground; it became a snake, and Moses drew back from it (4:3). But God told Moses to grab the snake by the tail, and as soon as he grabbed it, it became a staff again (4:4). That was just one of the three signs God gave Moses to show them, if he needed back up proof. But Moses continued to give excuses as to why he wasn't the one God was looking for. Among those excuses was that he had a speech impediment and wasn't comfortable talking in front of others. So after bringing his disability up three times God allowed Moses' brother, Aaron, who was a much better with his speech, to go with him. Moses filled Aaron in on what he was to say and do with the signs, and Moses and Aaron then returned to the elders in Egypt. The elders believed Aaron after his words and signs and upon hearing of God's plan to deliver them out of Egypt, they bowed down and worshiped God. Then Moses and Aaron made their way to Pharaoh's court- though we don't know how exactly they got in to see him. We pick up today where Moses and Aaron are before Pharaoh with

a message from the Lord. Before we turn to God's word for us today, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

"Let my people go!" As my Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann says, "This is the mandate that changes everything!" It's a command, not a request, directly from the Lord to Pharaoh. There's nothing polite about it. It's a demand, even though it was delivered through Moses on behalf of God. We're told in Scripture that Moses was tongue-tied (Ex. 4:10, 6:12) but that doesn't seem to hinder the message nor Pharaoh's understanding of that mandate. With the demand of "Let my people go" came the reason why...SO that the Israelites can celebrate a festival to God in the wilderness. Basically, so they can worship the Lord. Moses and Aaron are standing in front of Pharaoh- the big pooh bah- and demanding- not on behalf of themselves but on behalf of the Lord- to let the Israelites off for a three-day weekend to worship Someone Pharaoh has never heard of before. We aren't told, but I'm sure Pharaoh laughed out loud and through that laughter managed to get out a big fat NO. "I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go," Pharaoh said (5:2b). Moses and Aaron tried again- this time pleading for Pharaoh to let them go and worship the Lord else the Lord will strike them down with either disease or death (5:3). But that didn't faze Pharaoh, either. He probably thought Moses and Aaron were out of their minds. Why on earth would they suggest that the Israelites be given a three-day weekend? Who does that? No, there are more bricks to be made to fill up more storehouses! So Pharaoh showed them who was boss. Maybe he knew that "productivity numbs attention to the voice of

new possibility" (*NIB*, p. 730)? After all, the pressure of productivity is the way to keep things from changing. Because once the people have taken a three-day weekend, they may have the time to actually listen to other voices that authorize and encourage dangerous change, even a revolt. Pharaoh immediately sent down orders to the slave-drivers and their underlings to no longer bring straw to the brick makers. Make them get their own straw- even while they're being mistreated- AND they still have to produce the same number of bricks as before. Daily quotas must be met! They were expected to play by Pharaoh's rules- fair or not- because they belonged to Pharaoh's economy and kingdom. After all, the Israelites were his slaves, and Pharaoh wasn't about to give up his labor supply. After giving those orders you could almost hear Pharaoh talking to himself. "These people are lazy and ungrateful. Can you believe them? The nerve! Going around asking for time off so they can worship their God- whoever that is! Well, I'm going to show them. This will surely cure them of their whining and god-fantasies." (*The Message*, vv. 6-9).

But you see, the Israelites weren't Pharaoh's at all. They are God's children. Moses did everything God asked of him and now what? The supervisors complain to Moses and Aaron and blame them for what has happened. If only they wouldn't have opened their big mouths! What happened to the mandate that changes everything? The Israelites were worse off now than before. I think Moses anticipated Pharaoh not being agreeable, but I don't think Moses expected Pharaoh's cruel retribution against the Israelites as a direct result of his mission. So what did Moses

do? He wasn't happy, and he took his laments straight to God. For someone who is supposed to be inarticulate, he sure held his own, and he let God have it! God promised to be with them as well as to deliver them. So where was God? How is God going to deliver on God's promises?

Some scholars call this pericope- this section of text- "an Interim text," as it covers the waiting for things to be put into motion by God. But God seems unavailable. No wonder Moses lamented! He was grieving. He was upset! Most lamentations in the Bible do not leave us in our complaint to God- instead they urge us to remain steadfast- to trust and to have hope. I could have chosen to continue reading a few verses through chapter 6 of Exodus where God chimes in, but I didn't. I didn't because many times life or the interim times of life aren't fair. And many times communities of faith don't create space for folks to grieve and to lament. I am so thankful to Pastor Amanda and Rachael, one of Triune's social workers, for co-leading a grief support group on Thursdays. Many of us, instead of acknowledging our grief or pain, learn to deny it or hide it or ignore it or sedate it with drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, you name it. There's a reason why lament is biblical. When we are overcome by the presence of chaos, brokenness, suffering and death, or by a sudden sense of our human vulnerability, such as war or acts of terrorism or violence, we're allowed to go to God and lament! When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt religiously, we cry out in lament. Lamentation can be described as a loud, religious "Ouch!" ([link here](#)). What is it about us as Christians that we think we have to have it

together all the time in our walk with God? Is that being authentic or faithful? God knows anyway. Who are the people in your life with whom you get most angry or sad or joyful or excited? Isn't it with those whom you love the most? Should it not be the same way with God? Lament is a prayer of pain that leads to trust. That's why over 1/3 of the psalms are prayers of lament. Prayer causes God to do things that God would not otherwise do (Karl Barth, *Lord's Prayer Book*). Prayer changes things; there is power in honest, heartfelt, hold nothing back prayer- whether we sing it or shout it or weep through it." (Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*).

That's what Moses is doing here. He is holding nothing back from God. "The frankness of Moses' questions to and charges against God is startling. Yet, Moses identifies with the earlier cries and groans of the people (2:23-25)" ([link](#)). Moses is taking very seriously God's promise to be with him and to deliver God's people. Moses is holding God accountable. "In the world of divine promise, everything depends on God doing what God promises. There is no conversation about trying harder, praying harder, being more sincere, repenting more fervently, or anything that involves Israel's action. God must act; hence, the directness of Moses' questions and challenge" ([link](#)).

Across the globe and throughout all time, peoples have used music to express truths about the Divine, and truths about the human condition. That's what slaves did here in the South. Music can serve as a means for deepening prayer, or sharing stories, or communicating information.

Our last hymn today is one of hundreds of songs that came out of slavery. In the Civil Rights Movement many of these songs bound people together, gave courage and helped folks march together. Sometimes *our only hope is to march ourselves to the throne of God and in loud lament cry out the pain that lives in our souls*" (Ann Weems). "Over my head, I see trouble in the air...there must be a God somewhere."

"Lament is an expression recognizing that things, in their present condition, are not right. Telling the truth in a broken world can only begin with the capacity to grieve. Biblical lament is not hopeless; it is a hopeless cry for help that threatens the established order, which is why Pharaoh had no tolerance for such lament. He didn't want the Israelites' lives to change for the better. His harsh treatment was an attempt to silence their voice and quash any hope for change. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). It might seem strange that grief could open a door to blessing but that is essentially the message of the cross (John 20:11-18; Hebrews 12:2; 1 Peter 2:23-24). On the cross, Jesus spoke the opening words of Ps. 22, a psalm of lament- 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46). **Friends, the difference between lament and resignation is that lament refuses to break off the conversation with God"**

(Influence [Magazine](#)). God has broad shoulders and invites us to cry out to him. God can hear and hold it. God sees our tears and will one day wipe them away (Rev. 21:4). But in the interim time of the already and not yet, the cross not only makes space for lament, it also demands it. Here Moses is using lament as a statement of candor before the God

from whom no secret can be hid. He tells the story of hurt in forceful detail- not as a statement of guilt nor a statement of helpless despair- but rather as a statement of insistent hope. Because Moses expects and claims a transformative answer from God (Brueggemann, *Truth & Hope*). Don't we all?

Life isn't fair. Such a confession is liberating. We cannot let the Pharaohs of this world silence voices. Like the Israelites and Moses, we should cry out against injustice to God, holding God accountable to keep God's promises. I hope you will join me in participating in a listening group with our justice ministry here at Triune. We continue to cry out to God as we seek to do justice, trusting that God will fulfill God's promises to deliver each one of us. And together we wait for God to establish an alternative governance and kingdom where exploitative regimes like that of Pharaoh will be displaced forever. May it be so! Amen.