

## Commentary: Exodus 8-10:11

Sometimes, it can feel like we're navigating through one grief after another.

Perhaps because the new year is upon us, I recently found myself reflecting on some of the hardships of the last two years: Job loss. Financial insecurity. Racial injustice. Civil unrest. Loneliness. Mental illness. Exhaustion. A global pandemic.

As therapist [Hillary McBride](#), author of [The Wisdom of Your Body](#), recently stated about the upcoming year: “[W]e are likely experiencing the fatigue, disappointment, helplessness, and hopelessness of facing another year of challenges, cancelled social plans, isolation, banality, stressors and restlessness, fear and anxiety, and grief over countless losses both significant and invisible.” McBride named what many of us are experiencing—the grief that comes when one hardship is piled onto another, when it doesn't ever feel like we can catch a break.

In a way, this week's readings much felt the same.

Although the plagues continue throughout chapters 10 and 11 (therefore encompassing next week's readings), after plagues of frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts; plagues of hail and boils; and plagues on livestock, I felt like I was on an emotional and spiritual roller coaster of grief, back in the height of yet another year of challenges.

But I also noticed God's steadiness in his response to the Pharaoh. Just as the Lord gave the directive, “Let my people go,” no less than five times in two and a half chapters, the Lord commanded seven plagues in that same section of reading. Just as the Lord listened to the cries of the Pharaoh when he pleaded, “Pray for me” (8:28b), God once again “hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses” (9:12).

Lest we believe God a happy-clappy, sunshine-and-roses, overly-optimistic being of positive well-wishes and everlasting happiness, we are reminded of God's true nature—which is to say, we are reminded that God demonstrates a range of emotions extending well beyond a Pollyanna kind of perspective.

Instead, we are reminded of God's heart toward God's people: God loves *Ammi* (Hebrew for “Hebrews”) with a fierce abandon. More than anything, when God shows God's true being through various signs and wonders, including a slew of plagues, God makes God's self known.

Is this not seen, when at the beginning of chapter 10, the Lord says to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am the Lord” (10:1-2)?

Over and over again, God is making God’s self known. God is reminding the people so these stories might be told generations later—so that God’s people might know how loved they are and worship God in return.

In these chapters, we see “God establish patterns, and types, and principles. God is a God of order,” one commentator writes. “If history did not show us God’s patterns and principles, and if we did not see them constantly repeated, then we would have good reason to doubt an important pillar of our faith: God never changes.”

If we think about it this way, God’s pattern is quite consistent.

But what are we to make with the seeming inconsistency we feel when we read through these chapters, or when we stop and pause at the actual severity of the last two years? Where then is the consistent, unchanging God on which our faith hinges?

Herein lies that pillar of the Episcopal tradition: mystery. Just as we can see God’s steadfast consistency in the midst of upheaval, we are invited to explore the essence of our own inner lives in these chapters as well.

When the Lord directs the Pharaoh to let the Israelites go so they might worship God in the desert, “for this time I will send all my plagues upon you yourself, and upon your officials, and upon your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth” (9:14), the “you” in the first half of the verse is different from the “you” in the second half of the verse. While the first “you” is directed toward the Pharaoh (as well as the Egyptian government officials and people), the second “you” is the Hebrew word, *leb*, which means inner self.

*Leb* is a human’s soul, “where our conscience and our emotions and our wills and our sense of self resides,” the aforementioned commentator writes. *Leb* is the place of deep knowing. *Leb* is where the divine meets humanity and we cannot hide, for just as we are known, we *know*—and we experience this knowing, at our highest and lowest points.

Perhaps not unlike the roller coaster of plagues found in these chapters, we are reminded of our own souls and of the steady God who infuses into our deepest beings once again. And this steady God becomes our steadiness when everything around us feels rather wobbly, and when we, in turn, feel rather wobbly ourselves.

Plagues of frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts or not, perhaps leaning into the steadiness that is already ours is part of the invitation in this week's reading.