

“Why, Lord, Why . . .?”

Introduction: A kindergarten class took a field trip to their local police station. The Most Wanted pictures on the bulletin board intrigued one youngster. “Are those real pictures?” he asked. “Yes,” the sergeant replied, “those are people the police want very much to find.” “They why,” the youngster asked, “didn’t you just hold on to them after you had taken their pictures?!”

Do you ever wonder “Why?” Why is it called a hamburger when it’s made from beef, or a hot dog when it comes from a pig? Why are they called apartments when they’re all stuck together? Why do you drive on a parkway and park in a driveway? Of course, there are more serious why questions. Why did she get laid off and he did not? What did that mother die so young? Why has my child rejected my faith? These kinds of why questions can bother us, not only because they highlight how unfair life can seem, but also because somewhere in our life experience we’ve developed a notion that every question should have an answer. Perhaps it begins at school where not having an answer means you’d better do some research and find an answer if you want to pass the course! However, though it might happen at different times for each of us, somewhere along the line we run into a question to which we can’t find an answer and “I don’t know” seems so very unsatisfying.

As we’ll hear this morning, Moses and the Israelites have some “why” questions they put before God. They have been enslaved and oppressed for decades and it seemed like God was going to act but then their message fell on deaf ears, they met resistance both externally and internally, and their circumstances got worse, not better. As a result, they grew incredibly discouraged. As those who follow Jesus, I imagine that we have had moments like this, moments when nothing makes sense, moments when we seem to be going backwards not forwards, moments when we can’t for the life of us understand what God is up to...or not! At these moments, God may not answer all our questions, but he does give us a place to start, a firm foundation on which to stand.

### I. From Better to Worse

A. When Moses and his brother Aaron came before Pharaoh, they were on a roll. As we considered last week, called by God to lead his people out of their slavery in Egypt, Moses was thrilled that God had decided to act, but not so thrilled that God wanted to act through Moses! Moses had a bunch of excuses, which we heard, one of which was his worry that the Israelites wouldn’t believe that God had sent him. God’s answer was that essentially it was not Moses’ job to convince the Israelites; God would take care of that. To that end, God gave Moses some signs to perform in their presence (4:1-9) to move them to belief . . . which he did . . . and they worked! Our narrator describes it like this:

Moses and Aaron brought together the elders of the Israelites, and Aaron told them everything the LORD had said to Moses. He also performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped (4:29-31).

B. Happy day, right?! The brothers are filled with confidence, they are feeling bold, nothing can stop them now. Just a word from their mouths and Pharaoh, king of Egypt, will wilt before them. Well,

as you've just heard, not so much, and not so fast. "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: 'Let my people go...'" (5:1). Pharaoh was not impressed. "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him..." (5:2). This is not a request by Pharaoh for more information. This is not Pharaoh hoping Moses and Aaron had come to invite him to an Alpha course. This was Pharaoh declaring that this god, named the LORD, whoever he was, had no hold on him. From that point on, the battle lines were drawn, not between Moses and Pharaoh, nor between Pharaoh and the Israelites, but between Pharaoh and the LORD.

C. Pharaoh began the attack by accusing the Israelites of being lazy and instead of letting them go on a three-day retreat into the wilderness with their god, he increased the output demanded of them, requiring that they make the same number of bricks without having the needed straw provided; they'd have to go find and collect their own.

Illustration: I haven't seen it, but I've read about a document, a leather scroll, in the Louvre in Paris, dated to the fifth year of Ramses II, an Egyptian ruler who undertook a very extensive building program in the 1300's B.C. It's a time when the Israelites very well could have been enslaved in Egypt. The scroll contains a register in which the superior of a particular area has listed his supervisors, the number of bricks each one had to deliver, and the actual delivery made. For example: "Yupa, Urihay's son: 2,000 bricks requested; 660, 410, 560 delivered; total 1,630; missing, 370."

There is no explanation as to what happened to poor Yupa for falling short of his quota, but we do read that such shortfalls caused great problems for the Israelite overseers, including beatings by Pharaoh's slave drivers (v. 14). As you might imagine, they were not at all happy with Moses and Aaron: "May the LORD look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials" (5:21), they cried. And Moses in turn cried out to God: "Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? . . . You have not rescued your people at all" (5:22-23). Circumstances didn't improve when God got involved; circumstances seemed to go from bad to worse.

## II. Evil is Relentless; Jesus is Risen

A. This heart-felt questioning leads to two truths we need to hold together. The first is that evil and oppression, often fueled, as here, by lies and by creating divisions among the oppressed, are ruthless and relentless. Evil will push back when good advances and will not give up without a fight. Much of our world today is no more receptive to God's word and will than Egypt and Pharaoh were. The message we have to share will often fall on deaf ears and hard hearts. What we do will not always be appreciated or affirmed. Our circumstances may not change for the better. It can cause us to wonder, "Why, Lord, why...?"

B. Know that "Why?" is a recurring question in the Bible. Ask Abraham and Sarah who were promised numerous descendants but couldn't seem to produce a single son. Ask Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers and then unjustly put into prison. Ask Daniel who found himself in a lion's den. Ask Esther who found herself in the harem of a foreign king. Ask Jesus who found himself hanging on a cross. Ask Peter and John and James, as well as members of the early church, who found themselves hassled at virtually every turn. We could continue right up until the present day.

C. This push back of evil can certainly lead to discouragement, no matter what God has promised. We see this as we read on. To Moses' "Why, Lord, why...?" God responds:

Now you will see what I will do. . . I have heard the groaning of the Israelites . . . I have remembered my covenant . . . I will bring you out . . . I will free you . . . I will redeem you . . . I will take you as my own . . . I will bring you to the land . . . I will give it to you . . .” (6:1-8).

All of these are really good promises but are followed by this: “Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and harsh labor” (6:9).

D. I really appreciate the honesty I find expressed, and recorded, here. The promises of God can sound wonderful, but they can be hard to stand on, especially when our circumstances are harsh. We can grow so discouraged! In this vein, I think of the state of the church in the West in these days. Some are quite pessimistic. They highlight the failure of leadership, the hostility of the culture, the fact that young people leaving, the deep divisions along political and/or racial lines among those who remain, all as reasons to despair about the future of the church. Others are optimistic. They note that the pandemic has not caught God by surprise and that the struggle the church is facing is actually God purifying his church, that a new digital mission field has opened up, that churches are viewing the uses of their facilities in a new light and seeing the communities around them with different eyes, and so they see the future for the church as one of great opportunity and that exciting and amazing days are ahead.

Thinking about both ends of this spectrum, I appreciated the sentiment expressed by author and Anglican priest, Tish Harrison Warren, in an article entitled, “The American Church Is a Mess. But I’m Still Hopeful (CT, 6/15/21). Warren reflects on the upheaval being experienced by the church in the West, and reports that she and other church-leader friends are regularly asked how to fix the problems, and that they regularly get together to talk about what they don’t know and about how the problems are becoming even more complex. But she takes heart in a comment by British theologian and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, “I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.”

This is the second truth we need to hold, alongside the relentless push back of evil and oppression – “Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.” Newbigin’s, and Warren’s point, is that because of the resurrection of Jesus the Holy Spirit continues to be at work, and so who knows, exactly, what God is up to? Who knows what God may still need to purify? Who knows how we might be surprised? “The fact is,” Warren concludes, “things are bad in the American church. I’m not optimistic they will get better. But I’m not pessimistic either. Jesus is risen from the dead. Our call is simply to be faithful in the small sphere we are in, in the ways we can, in the midst of uncertainty.”

And so in the midst of discouragement, when circumstances seem to be getting worse, not better, God calls us, like he called the Israelites, to trust that he is still in charge, to stand, even if somewhat wobbly, on his promises, and to seek the way of repentance and renewal and reform in the imperfect and incomplete ways we can. And all of this, we need to remember, is grounded in and secured by the One who defeated death on the cross and whose tomb remains, gloriously, empty. No matter what lies ahead, evil and oppression will not have the last word.