

Exodus 7:14-24
Holy Ground All Around, Week Two
June 13, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, ‘Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.’ But until now you have not listened. Thus says the Lord, ‘By this you shall know that I am the Lord.’ See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.” ’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron, “Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.” ’

Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river.

You could think of the Nile and its riverbanks as a character in this story—maybe the main character, because without its participation, perhaps nothing would have happened.

As the author of Exodus tells the story, the Nile was public space—perhaps the most public space in Egypt, since, as the main water source, everyone had to go there. Apparently, even Pharaoh left his palace each morning to go and bathe in its waters. All the rest of the day he might be walled up and inaccessible, but there, on the Nile’s banks, you could catch his attention if your voice was loud enough; and everyone around, from the most pitiful beggar to the most sheltered elite, could witness your demand; or, in this case, they could witness Moses’ demand: “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, ‘Let my people go.’”

That demand, of course, wasn’t met; but everyone knew it was out there. And soon, everyone—from the beggar to the elite to Pharaoh, himself—would feel the pain of Pharaoh’s refusal. Plague upon plague upon plague would be called down on them from that public space. Blood and frogs and lice and flies and diseased livestock and boils and hail and locusts and darkness and, most painful of all, the deaths of the firstborn. Only then—when the dominant culture had been forced to feel the impact of the suffering of the exploited in every aspect of their lives—only then was there finally a political will for change. Only then did Pharaoh give in and let the people go.

In many ways, Kelly Ingram Park has been the Nile River of Birmingham—the place where the curtain that shielded the dominant culture from the suffering of the exploited was thrown open; where the demands for change could not help but be heard, and where a world that had been blinded and sheltered could not help but see and feel the impact of that suffering.

Kelly Ingram Park was one of three parks set up in the original plan of Birmingham. Last week we learned about Linn Park, the one in the center of the plan that was just labeled “Park,” but there were two others, as well: East Park, which is now called Marconi; and West Park, which was renamed in 1932 in honor of Osmond Kelly Ingram, a white, Birmingham firefighter who was the first Navy sailor killed in World War 1.¹

By the time of the park’s renaming, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church stood on one side of the park, facing the all-white Henley School on the opposite side, and Kelly Ingram Park was seen as a “green buffer” between the Black and white areas of Birmingham.²

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kelly_Ingram_Park

² <https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/documents/CMguideACT1answers.pdf>

But in the 1960's, Civil Rights leaders took what had been a buffer to shield white citizens from the realities of Black lives, and turned it, instead, into a staging ground for protest. With the images that came out of the May, 1963 Children's Crusade, in particular, all the world became a witness to the suffering of African Americans, and to the humiliations and brutality that they lived with every day; and all of Birmingham—including the political and civic elite—felt the full impact of public shame and, perhaps most painfully, the disruption of economic activity.

Just four months later, when White Supremacists struck back with the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the murder of the four little girls, the public outcry became a painful turning point in Civil Rights history.

Blood and frogs and lice and flies and diseased livestock and boils and hail and locusts and darkness and, most painful of all, the deaths of children. Pharaoh, let my people go!

I've been to two demonstrations at Kelly Ingram Park. The first was in May of 2020 as part of the wave of protests over the murder of George Floyd. That one was very different from what that crowd of children and young people faced in

May of 1963. Yes, the threat of COVID was in the air, but there was no Bull Connor or fire hoses or police dogs—in fact, the protest was sponsored by the City, and the Mayor was one of the speakers. And yet, it was from that gathering that the public demand for the removal of the Confederate Monument in Linn Park—a demand that had languished for years--finally became unstoppable. Two days later, the monument was down.

The second demonstration I've attended there was yesterday, at a rally by Faith in Action, Alabama, demanding that the City and County invest in an Anti-Gun Violence Strategy. The particular strategy for which they're advocating has proven amazingly effective in several cities across the country. The Faith in Action Alabama Peacemakers have been working on this for years—first with weekly nightwalks in the most impacted neighborhoods, then with research actions and trainings, then with behind-the-scenes work that has successfully enlisted the investment of UAB and of the Jefferson County Health Department; but one, pivotal piece of the strategy remains unmet, which is to get buy-in from the City and County for street outreach workers, who will be crucial to interrupting the cycle of violence. Three years of phone calls and emails and letters and meetings with public officials have yet to secure that commitment, so yesterday, they took it

to the public space. I pray that this action will be as effective as those that have come before.

Quite honestly, though, protests are not my comfort zone. For most of my life, I've rationalized that there were more effective ways that I could work for change. Plus, I'm not really a shouter or a chanter. At the George Floyd rally, when the leader demanded: "Say his name!" and the crowd responded: "George Floyd!" I joined in with my very self-conscious "George Floyd."

In spite of my discomfort, though, I've realized in the last four or five years just how important it is to show up—especially if we're part of the population that *isn't* most directly impacted by the injustice that's being challenged. We may be writing letters and emails, making phone calls and setting up meetings, but if we don't show up in those public spaces alongside the group whose lives *are* being impacted, then it looks as though we don't care, and it gives the powers-that-be less reason to take the demands seriously. That's why it mattered that there were men at the Women's March, straight people at Pride, and people of every color at the Black Lives Matter protests. It mattered.

And it mattered that, alongside the Fred Shuttlesworths and Martin Luther King, Jr.s of the Civil Rights Movement there were white clergy and everyday citizens who were willing to risk showing up in the public spaces right alongside them. Because the point of the protests wasn't for Black people to take over, but to use public space to create a world in which there was room for everyone to belong, equally.

When Sam and I were first married and living in Charlotte, we were included each Passover in the Seder meal at the home of the parents of one of Sam's childhood friends. A Seder meal is the retelling of the Exodus story, with different foods symbolizing different aspects of the story, and, for the most part, it's a joyful evening celebrating God's triumph over oppression--so there's usually plenty of wine, as a symbol of joy. But the part of the evening that never failed to move me was when we got to the plagues. At that point, we would pause, and recite the list of plagues, and as each one was named, we would use our finger take a drop of wine from our glasses and spill it onto our plates—Blood. Frogs. Lice. Flies. Diseased Livestock. Boils. Hail. Locusts. Darkness. The deaths of the firstborn. We did this, we were told, because, while we rejoiced in the liberation of the Hebrew people, we are never to rejoice in the sufferings of others—even when they are the enemy.

If you come with us to Kelly Ingram Park today—and I hope you will, you’ll see monuments that retell the story of the movement that took place there, including a statue of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and one of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a monument honoring the “foot soldiers” of the movement—the everyday people who wouldn’t give up or back down. We’ll walk between the lunging statues of vicious dogs with their fangs bared. And at the northwest corner of the park, facing Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, we’ll see the memorial to the four little girls who died there. The statues capture them in the last moments of their lives, filled with childhood joy that was cut short; but the sculpture captures something else, as well: at its base is an inscription of the name of the sermon the four girls were to have heard that morning. The title was, “A Love that Forgives.”³

A love that forgives. That was the point of that movement, which was nonviolent as a reminder that even our enemies are beloved children of God. And because there is a love that forgives, that public space, which was first a buffer zone of separation, and then a staging ground of protest, could finally become, by the grace of God, a meeting ground for all God’s children.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kelly_Ingram_Park

And that's what we are called, even now, to stand up for, to speak up for, to show up for: a world that is green space where all people can safely gather as the multi-cultured, multi-colored family of God. All of us standing on equal and holy ground. Thanks be to God.