

March 15 & 16, 2025

In and Out of the Wilderness:

For the Love

Exodus 5:1-3, Luke 15:1-32

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Years ago, around the time my wife and I were married, lots of people in our friendship group were getting married. And I remember one of our friends asking us about invitations. Who did we invite, how many people we invited, how many people actually showed up and more importantly, did we get all the stuff we picked out for our gift registry. I remember telling them to make sure to invite those people who invited you to their wedding and especially not to forget to invite the people who had you in their wedding party. Yes, that happened. I forgot to invite a friend who I was a groomsman in their wedding. Awkward.

I also remember this friend saying that they were going to invite as many people as they could because then they would receive more gifts. As if simply inviting someone meant they were then obligated to buy a gift. Ah... so that's the way it works? They found out that is not the way it works. But we as humans have all kinds of ideas about gift giving, gift receiving and it centers a lot around a sense of obligation. "Well, they gave me a gift last year so I should give them a gift this year." Or "We can't show up without a gift." Or... and this is a really good one "If we don't give them a gift they will be upset, or they might withhold something from us."

All of this is also transfers to our relationship with God. It's called appeasement and it is as old as humanity. The thought goes that if we give gifts, ourselves, our resources, our worship to a god then that god will either not hurt us or that god will help us in some way. This whole idea revolves around the idea that we are basically bad, and God is mad and we better give something to this angry god or we will pay a price. God will smite us. Many Christians still believe this, and my heart goes out to them because this is not what our God asks of us.

We are in the beginning of Exodus, and we are about to hear the first confrontation that Moses has with the Pharaoh of Egypt. Moses's people the Israelites have been held in captivity for generations and God sends Moses to initially bring hope and then bring freedom. And here is the opening conversation.

Exodus 5:1-3

*Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the **LORD**, (Yahweh) the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may **celebrate a festival** to me in the wilderness.'"*

First let us notice the name of God that Moses uses. Remember this is an introduction and in this introduction to Pharaoh Moses uses the name. Yahweh – God of the people. Yahweh – God who had a relationship with their ancestors. This is God who knows you and wants to celebrate with you from a place of gratitude not out of a place of appeasement or obligation but out of a sense of gratitude. Gratitude leads to celebration.

² *But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, (Yahweh) that I should heed him and let Israel go? **I do not know the LORD**, (Yahweh) and I will not let Israel go."*

Of course Pharaoh does not know this God. Pharaoh is polytheistic who has tenuous, at best, connections with gods, based not on celebration or gratitude but on appeasement with many gods. This is the world that Pharaoh lives and how he expects others to engage with him. Fear leads to appeasement

³ *Then they said, "The **God of the Hebrews** (Elohim) has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God, **or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword**."*

So, Moses has to change the request to reflect what Pharaoh may understand. Moses, in order to deliver his people, has to speak Pharaoh's language. Pharaoh lives in an appeasement world so Moses responds in kind. Changes the name from Yahweh Elohim – the Almighty God. The one true

God – the God of the universe. And in this case the one who has to be appeased by sacrifices to avoid pestilence or sword. Now you are talking Pharoah's language and the discuss can continue.

However, we are going to stop right there because this is very significant in our lives and our relationship with God. Do we see the world as Pharoah sees it? Are speaking Pharoah's language? If so, we are stuck in the world of soul shattering appeasement. In Pharoah's world gods don't have any connection to him other than shame, guilt and debilitating, paralyzing fear. In Pharoah's world, these gods are not with you in your pain, in your struggle. In Pharoah's world these gods are distant, aloof. In Pharoah's world these gods are not with you in your joy. The only reason to celebrate is the fact that you did not get the pestilence or sword. And if you mess up there is no coming back. And none of that leads to gratitude.

Yahweh though is the God who knows you.

O LORD, (Yahweh) you have searched me and known me.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

(Psa 139:13 NRS)

Jesus puts it this way. He tells a story of a son who asks his dad for his part of the inheritance and his dad gives to him and the son squanders every last penny. He lives a life of depravity and excess and when he runs out of money finds himself in mess that he caused for himself. But he remembers his dad and his dad's love and decides to try to go back home. In Pharoah's world, not a chance, but in Yahweh's world we know this son as the prodigal son. And Jesus even tells us that in Yahweh's world the dad has been out each day waiting for his son to return and when the dad sees his son in the distance runs out to meet him with a hug, love and then throws a party for the son.

This is our God.

This is our God and worthy of our gratitude, our gifts, not out of obligation but out of a response to this kind love. This is our God who has a standing invitation not as some kind of transactional

relationship. This our God that no matter how long or how far we stray always welcomes us back.

So, these words to Pharoah are also for any part of us that still thinks like Pharoah. These words are for us who are gripped by Pharoah thinking.

Exodus 5:1-3

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