



First United Church of Oak Park

Keep Your Friends Close and Your Enemies Closer

Exodus 5:22–6:9

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You've probably heard the story before: God told Moses to go talk to Pharaoh and tell him to release the Hebrew slaves. Moses went to Pharaoh and said his famous line, "let my people go" and guess what Pharaoh said. He said no. Not only did he say no, he instructed that the Hebrew slaves must continue to meet their daily quota of bricks but would no longer be given any straw with which to make the bricks. They would have to find it themselves and the slave drivers would have to up their cruelty.

Moses did what God said, Moses asked for justice, and things didn't get better. In fact, they got worse. That's where we find Moses now as we pick up the story today. Listen for a word from God:

Then Moses turned again to the LORD and said, "O LORD, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land."

God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The LORD' I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'" Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

What do we do when we say, "let my people go," and what we hear back is "no." What do we do when we are staring down an impossible, large scale crisis and feeling entirely hopeless? When despite all our best efforts, things only get worse?

It has been 10 days since the last school shooting. If statistics hold, there will be another school shooting in approximately 35 days. It seems that gun manufacturers and the NRA, who have the power to ensure better safety features and more secure distribution of guns hear us screaming "let our students go!" And yet, they refuse. That leaves me with a broken spirit. Moses and his people knew the feeling well.

It makes sense that Moses would ask why God hasn't fixed this. But we also know why God hasn't fixed this...

God is love and love is not a quick fix. It's a slow burn of a solution. It's annoyingly slow. That's why most people give up on love and resort to control, force, and violence. But violence isn't a quick fix for the huge problems humanity faces either. There is no quick fix. The factors that came together to create racism in America, for example, are complicated and there is absolutely no easy way to untangle them. There is only persistent work. The factors that came together to create the gun violence epidemic in America are complicated and there is absolutely no way to quickly untangle them either.

The factors that came together to create the Hebrew people's slavery in Egypt were complicated and despite the deep pain and suffering of the Hebrew people, there was no quick fix that God could offer. God didn't have a quick fix, but that doesn't mean God didn't have a fix. God knew this was going to take a really creative solution. God knew this was going to take a faithful trickster with a unique position in the crisis...

Moses says, "why me?" But we know why God chose Moses. Moses grew up with a strange mix of identities. He was a Hebrew boy, and therefore should have been drowned in the Nile according to Pharaoh's decree to kill the Hebrew children. However, because of the creative trickery and basket weaving skills of a whole bunch of women, both Israelite and Egyptian, Moses lived as a prince in Pharaoh's court. By the way, if the book of Exodus doesn't feel like the best drama/adventure novel you've ever read, you're not reading it right. Moses was raised as an Egyptian prince, and as a Hebrew man of the house of Levi. That means he had cultural currency and a great deal of privilege in both his identities. Royalty in one and keeper of religious and political tradition and law in the other. He was an insider everywhere he went.

Moses, as a Levite among the Hebrews, had a close relationship with God, his source of power and strength. Moses, as an Egyptian prince had a close relationship with his people's enemy.

But no one really wants to get close to an enemy. Especially after talking with them has already failed once. Who wants to go back? But God knows problems don't get solved from a distance, so Moses did go back, and go back, and go back to Pharaoh demanding, "let my people go." It took 10 times. That's no quick fix.

Metropolitan Industrial Areas Foundation, or Metro IAF, is a network of groups, rooted in faith communities. Over five years ago, they began a campaign called "Do Not Stand Idly By." The phrase comes from Leviticus. As a side note, that's Leviticus, as in house of Levi, the keepers of religious law of whom Moses was one. The Levitical law says not to stand idly by while your neighbors are being killed. Seeing the unconscionable rate at which Americans are killed with guns, Do Not Stand Idly By is an attempt to curb gun violence.

When the campaign began, Metro IAF started discussions with gun company CEOs about adding safety features to their guns and creating responsible distribution chains for their products. You'll never guess what they said... no.

But, they did not give up. They began organizing gun buyers. Since 15% of guns in the U.S. are bought with tax dollars, they began talking with law enforcement leaders. Eventually, police chiefs and sheriffs representing 124 municipalities, counties, and states across the U.S. submitted a request to major gun manufacturers for information on their safety practices. You'll never guess what they said... no.

But they still didn't give up. Leaders in the Do Not Stand Idly By movement decided they would have to do something creative and something no one wants to do; they would have to get really close to the Pharaoh. They bought stock in the publicly held gun companies, attended shareholder meetings and began reaching out to the major investors who own big parts of these companies. You'll never guess what they said: you think I'm going to say no, but I'm not!

Here's what's happened so far. These trickster shareholders have put resolutions in front of two company shareholders meetings for a vote. The resolutions demanded a report on the company's safety procedures and distribution practices and both resolutions passed! Sturm Ruger and Co. and Smith and Wesson now have to report to their shareholders what they are and are not doing to make guns safer. This is an actual, measurable, significant step forward in reducing gun deaths in the United States. This has taken years and it has not been easy. It's not a quick fix, and it's not over.

As we read the list of victims of school shootings, it is easy and natural to shout at God, "WHY, GOD, WHY?"

When Moses asked why, God said the name that the NRSV translates "Lord," but you may have heard translated as "I am that I am." Since tenses are ambiguous in the Hebrew language, that may or may not be quite right. I read a scholar translate this "I am who I will be and I will be who I am." That may have sounded like nonsense upon first hearing, so listen again... I am who I will be and I will be who I am. That's a statement of faithfulness. In this context that translation makes so much sense. God says, remember how I was faithful to Abraham and Isaac? That's who I am and that's who I'm going to be for you, always. It may take time and I may need you to do some difficult things along the way, but I am who I will be and I will be who I am. You can trust me.

In some Native American cultures, children are revered because they are believed to be the ones who were most recently with God, and it is believed that while they are young, they still have not forgotten what God is like. I believe that adults in America have forgotten what God is like; who God is and will always be. They have forgotten what it looks like for the long arc of history to slowly bend toward justice.

Young people, students, you are doing your very best to remind us and we thank you! After the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, FL, Emma Gonzalez, who was in her senior year of high school, powerfully said, "...maybe the adults have gotten used to saying, 'it is what it is,' but if us students have learned anything, it's that if you don't study, you will fail. And in this case if you actively do nothing, people continually end up dead, so it's time to start doing something."

Friends, God will not allow us to be held captive by the gun manufacturers and the NRA! Hear me again, God will not allow us to be held captive by the gun manufacturers and the NRA! God is looking for faithful tricksters with unique positions in this crisis. God is looking for people who are so close to God, from whom they receive their power and strength, and so close to the gun manufacturers, as hard as that may be, that they have the influence and insider status that can lead to justice. God is looking for folks who are willing to go back to the Pharaoh again and again; as many times as it takes, until our schools are no longer held captive by the carelessness of corporations, until they have finally let our students go.