

Christmas Chaos: God the Deliverer

Exodus 1 and 2
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[Play commercial clip – Duracell Holiday Chaos]

I'm not sure if it's just my house, but chaos reigns a lot of the time. So we train our kids to have table manners, but we train against some malevolent force that for some reason wants them standing on their chairs, eating with open mouths and complaining about even their favorite foods.

And we love our extended family, but this same malevolent force is at work there. So for some reason people I've grown up with, and love more than anyone else have developed different ideas about what should be a priority and what shouldn't. And these ideas have diversified so much that now several of them aren't willing to bend their little ideas to accommodate what I know is going to be best for the family.

All this is just every day life, and then Christmas comes. And this little seed of hope begins to grow in my heart. And this seed is fueled by every commercial and every special on TV. And the promise of this seed of hope is that this is going to be the year that, with the right purchases, everything is going to finally come together.

This Christmas, because I buy enough Duracell batteries, when our family gathers a miracle is going to happen. Instead of chaos reigning and being reminded why we only get together a few times a year this year none of those regular disagreements and arguments will happen and instead peace and love are going to reign. Not only that but those pesky family members are going to blow their budgets buying me something special and they are going to apologize for how off their rockers they've all been.

This year when the kids open their gifts they are going to be filled with genuine thankfulness, and they aren't going to be board with the toys we've picked out. And then none of the regular consequences that occur when kids are over sugared, over tiered, and spoiled are going to happen. It's going to be great.

Is anyone else delusionally hoping for a Christmas like that this year?

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Well, over the next four weeks what I want to do here Sunday morning is offer you something better, not just for this season, but something that is going to outlast the Christmas tree, and the lights and even the Duracell batteries. In fact, I want to offer something that meets us where we are, and promises deliverance from the chaos we all find ourselves living under, and in place of this fills us with a joy that starts now and continues into eternity. I want to offer you Advent.

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Now if you've been around church then you are probably familiar with Advent. But if this is new for you let me unpack it briefly. "Advent" comes from a Latin word that means "waiting" or "anticipating", and that is what this season is about. Actually, it is this waiting and joy-filled anticipation that stands behind our tradition of placing gifts under the tree long before Christmas. Advent is that hungry longing for the unveiling of something good.

So at Advent we draw two things to mind. First we remember back to the days when the people of God longed for the arrival of the Messiah. Something good was coming. God had promised it. And the people couldn't wait. Some day soon God's Messiah was going to deliver them from oppression.

And then in roughly 4 BC Jesus was born. Of course the surprise here was that the first sounds God's Messiah uttered were not the expected pronouncements of a King, but the cries of an impoverished baby.

As Philippians tells us

[Jesus], being in very nature God... made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:6-7)

The King of the Universe became the child of an unwed servant girl; born, not into opulent riches, but the poverty of a barnyard stable, in order that He would be able to empathize with our weakness, taste our pain and ultimately take our place paying for our sin. The first Advent was over.

But at Advent we also remember that the story of Jesus is not confined to history. Jesus left us with a promise saying:

If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:3)

And so Advent is also a period of waiting for the King's second coming. Christians then are people living between two Advents, two comings. And these two periods of waiting define who we are and breathe life into the midst of the chaos we are surrounded by.

And so this season, instead of giving in to the chaos of Canada's Christmas – traditions that make huge promises and then don't deliver – we are going to look at four aspects of the character of God. We are going to stop and breathe, and look at who God is, what He is like, and what He is up to. And we are going to watch this play out in the Christmas narrative that the Gospels give us.

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As an aside, while I want to bring out a different story than the one our culture is peddling, I'm not encouraging you to try to be too spiritual for all the fun that is going around. To be stoic is not godly. Throughout Scripture God commanded way more celebrations than somber moments. And so it is celebration that God wants to invite us into this season. There is good news! And the news doesn't come from Walmart or

Duracell – it comes from the Deliverer and Savior our ancestors waited for, and the one who said He is coming back.

So as we gather over the next four weeks we are going to marvel at who God is. And today we are going to look at how He is our deliverer.

Now when we talk about God being deliverer we are not just talking about life after death. Certainly that is part of it, but it isn't all, or even the main part of it. Rather the emphasis throughout Scripture is that God's salvation is for right now. Jesus said:

The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. (John 10:10 NLT)

So that means God wants to liberate and protect and defend you from the false promises that our culture makes during this season, in order to lead you to more and better life. God wants to deliver you into abundant life that starts right now, and lasts your entire life, and only then into eternity.

In order to draw this out we are going to start by looking at what happened to the people of God back in Exodus.

So here's a brief word of context to make sure we are all on the same page. When we talk about the People of God in the Old Testament we are talking about the Jews, or the people of Israel. And in Exodus this family has really only just become a nation.

So roughly 400 years before our text today God's chosen people ended up in Egypt. At the beginning they were there as guests not slaves. And that's because Joseph, who was a Jew, by the hand of God, was able to save Egypt and Israel from a huge famine that ravaged the Middle East. And so the Pharaoh of the day promoted Joseph to second in command, and allowed him to invite his entire family – the Jews – who numbered about 70 people, to come and live in Egypt. And that's what happened.

But now 400 years have passed and time has muddied the memories of the Pharaohs. So look with me at Exodus chapter 1 starting in verse 8.

[Read Exodus 1:8-14]

Does anyone feel like they've been worked ruthlessly? The people of God are suffering. These are people God loves. These are people God has specifically chosen to be His people, and yet things are not going good for them.

If you were here last week Steve Swan spoke a bit about how suffering is something our culture doesn't know how to handle. For Canadians, having to endure suffering of any kind is the most terrible thing that can happen to a person.

And so if we ever have pain we expect to be medicated. In fact, last year Canada legalized Medical assistance in dying for those who are experiencing “unbearable physical or mental suffering from [their] illness, disease [or] disability.”¹

What this means is that, as a whole, Canadians would rather die than suffer. If we can't have quality of life, then we figure life isn't worth living. But while at face value this seems to make sense, the problem is that suffering is something every human knows. It's part of the human condition. It's everywhere. And so what is surprising is not that we experience suffering, but that we are surprised when we do.

You see we live in a very peculiar bubble within human history. We are incredibly wealthy as a society, and incredibly pampered. And when it comes to suffering we have drugs able to remove even the most minute discomfort. But the result of this is that when we start to suffer – and we all do – we question the very fabric of our being, we question the goodness of God, or even His existence. How could a good God possibly allow me to suffer?

But suffering isn't a sign that God isn't there, or that God doesn't care. In fact, God's people have been walking with God through suffering from the beginning.

And so here in Exodus God's people have been dealt a shrewd hand. And perhaps that's your testimony today. Life hasn't been fair. You put yourself out there. You did the right thing. And yet things didn't turn out the way you expected. You were taken advantage of. You got sick. And you are suffering.

And Israel was oppressed. They were given heavy burdens to carry. And some of us have heavy burdens today. You understand oppression, you understand enslavement. Maybe it isn't people who have enslaved you, maybe it is the darkness that you wrestle with. Maybe it's sin; maybe it is the lust of your flesh that has you in a spot where you would like to stop, but you can't. That's slavery. That's suffering.

And when we get into difficult spots like these it isn't hard to start feeling abandoned by God. But God isn't absent. He isn't uncaring. And so flip a page over to the bottom of Exodus chapter two. Let's pick it up in verse 23:

[Read Exodus 2:23-25]

Another translation says God heard their groaning... and knew. And this is what we need to know in light of our suffering. God isn't a stranger to what you are going through. He isn't ignorant. He isn't surprised. He isn't shuddering at the horror of it. God is in control. He knows, and He is concerned. And this is true no matter what kind of suffering you are experiencing.

So we just finished November which means most of the terrible facial hair people have been sporting has been shaved off, but it also means the reality of the persecuted

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/medical-assistance-dying.html>

church is on our minds. And so during that time we looked at places like North Korea and Myanmar where people are dying for their faith on mass today. If we were in that kind of a situation we could look at a text like this and be encouraged that God knows, and God cares. He is concerned.

But North Korea and Myanmar are a long way away from Prince George, and frankly it is hard or maybe impossible for wealthy, papered people like us to even imagine what life under one of those regimes would be like. But this text isn't just for suffering in situations like that. It is for suffering of all kinds.

So if you are suffering from arthritis, and your joints hurt all the time. Or if you are lonely, and feel like you have no one who understands you, or if you don't have enough money to pay the bills, God knows and cares.

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But the good news is He doesn't just know, He hears. Verse 24 says "God heard their groaning and remembered His covenant." Now that doesn't mean God had an Alzheimer's moment. Remembering here refers to timing. God would deliver now.

And so He does. He steps into History and intervenes. In the height of slavery, oppression and infanticide, a baby boy was born who would be given the name Moses.

And Moses would grow up in Pharaoh's court as the son of his daughter. He would be privileged in every way – the second Jew to rise to dominance in Egypt.

And then one-day he would see an Egyptian guard abusing a Jew and something would spark in him. Moses would lash out and murder. And looking around and seeing no one, he would think he was getting away with it.

But the next day when he would come across two of his own countrymen fighting and realize he had been exposed - everyone knew what he had done. And so this prince of Egypt would flee to the mountains and become a shepherd.

And it would be there, in the mountains, surrounded by smelly sheep that Charlton Heston would find himself bowing before a burning bush and God would speak to him and say: I've heard the cries of my people. I know. And I'm going to deliver them. And I'm going to use you, Heston, to pull it off.

Now Moses is going to respond "I'm not the right guy, I stutter." And God's going to reply "I don't." And Moses is going to come up with a few more excuses about why God's making a mistake. And to each excuse God's response will be, "None of your weakness surprises Me. I'm not looking for Batman to save My people – I'm the Saviour. And just to make that clear I'm going to use pathetic and weak you, and your pesky brother Aaron who is going to cause all sorts of trouble, to do it."

And so Moses heads back to Egypt for a showdown. But it isn't a showdown between Moses and Pharaoh, it's a showdown between two gods.

You see Pharaoh was one of the gods of Egypt. That's what the Egyptians thought in spite of the fact that their Pharaohs kept dying. And so the plagues that Egypt experienced were YHWH doing battle with the gods of Egypt.

So the Nile was a divine fountain of life for Egypt, and so the first plague to strike turned it to blood. Now this would have done it for me. If the Nechako turned to blood, I'd be ready to listen very seriously to anyone who told me this was going to happen. And if I happened to have a few slaves they wanted released I think I would be persuaded.

But Pharaoh's heart hardens at the sight of the blood. After all he is god in Egypt. And he isn't going to be displaced. And so he digs in his heels.

And that's when the goddess of fertility is attacked. Heqet was a woman with a frog's head. And so YHWH's second plague is to send frogs coursing over Egypt. Not just a frog here or there, but millions of them in your basement and crawling around in your bed. A plague of fertility. And then gnats and flies and the livestock dies off. And the Egyptians break out in boils.

Then hail comes and destroys half of the city and armies of locust sweep in and eat whatever crops are left. And on and on it goes until even Ra the sun god is defeated. The 9th plague was a plague of darkness which covered Egypt for three days. The sun just didn't come up.

And each time another plague would hit Pharaoh and Moses would have an exchange where Pharaoh would relent and prepare to release Israel, and then his heart would harden. "No I'm god here. This is my land, and I'm going to do what I want."

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Now before we are too hard on Pharaoh let me ask you, when was the last time you dug your heels in and decided that your way was better than God's way? We do this all the time.

But then finally God instituted Passover which would become the full-on shadow of what Jesus would do for us. The Israelites were told to kill a lamb and smear its blood on their door posts. And that night the angel of death visited Egypt and every firstborn son in Egypt died except for those in the houses of Israel who had obeyed God's command, and substituted God's lamb for their lives.

And Pharaoh's own son – the son of god – died that night. And the scriptures tell us that there arose in Egypt a great cry as sorrow filled the land. And at this moment YHWH won Israel's deliverance from slavery and chaos. And that very night the people set out on foot and began their voyage into the desert.

But as you can imagine, Pharaoh's grief turned into rage and he changed his mind. And so he set out with an army, not to bring Israel back, but to destroy them. The battle of the gods wasn't over yet. And so once again YHWH intervened.

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But maybe this is hard for you. Maybe you are saying “yes, I get that God hears, and God cares, but in my world of brokenness God hasn’t intervened. He’s left me to wallow in depression. I haven’t been set free. The anxiety I’m walking around in hasn’t been lightened. There hasn’t been any deliverance. The people who keep beating me down haven’t found their rivers turned to blood and their beds filled with frogs. God has deserted me to deal with my problems on my own.”

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I want to gossip here a little about Helen Vardy. Here’s a confession first, and that is that pastors have favorites and Helen is one of mine. I’m confessing but I’m not apologizing. I was speaking with her this last week and she is a woman who has suffered greatly. She is in her mid 80’s and is the only surviving sibling of 9. Many of them died years ago. On top of this her parents died when she was young. And then her husband died 20 years ago. And then 3 of her 4 kids died. Now she is sick and alone, she is lonely. But there isn’t a single bitter bone in her body.

And as we spoke she gossiped with me about where some of her encouragement comes from. She talked about Anna and Heinz and others she knows who are suffering and yet faithful. And as I heard her speak I was so impressed that here is a woman who has learned to see through the spectacles of suffering such that the deliverance of her Savior is actually magnified instead of clouded. She sees with Jesus’ eyes, and she has practiced remembering what she sees.

And actually the story of Exodus served a similar purpose for the Israelites. So in Exodus 14 we read:

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in Him and in His servant Moses. (Exodus 14:29-31)

They wrote this account down, so they wouldn’t forget God’s deliverance.

And this is what is going to take us into Christmas. And it’s important that I unpack this because every Advent doesn’t start off with “And all the firstborn sons of Egypt were killed, and a big army drowned in the sea. Merry Christmas.” So what does YHWH delivering His people out of slavery in Egypt have to do with Christmas?

Here it is: Yes, at the end of Exodus 14 the people of God have put their faith in God. And a bit after this they end up in the Promised Land. These are mountain top moments for them.

But in the midst of these mountains their faith waivers – they worship golden cows, they try to kill Moses, and they break every commandment God has established for their own good.

And so the deliverance they experienced at the Red Sea with Moses was a deliverance out of physical slavery, but they still weren't winning at life like God wanted for them. And similarly people are still enslaved today. And that's why Christmas needed to happen. So in Matthew chapter 1 an angel visited Joseph and told him:

[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21)

The salvation and deliverance that Jesus brought was not just from difficulties in the here and now, but from the root issue that causes death and devastation in our lives – namely the plague of sin.

And it is sin that lies behind every aspect of chaos that still reigns. Now some of this sin is our own. God comes to us and says "I know what's best for you, live your life My way and it's going to go good for you. I want you to win." And we say, "No, I've got my life figured out thank You very much. I'll try it my way." And when we do this it always results in chaos. We lose.

But some of the chaos in our lives isn't the result of our sin at all, bad stuff just happens. People get old and sick. Injustice happens. Our world is broken. But this too is a result of sin. The Scriptures tell us that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth² for deliverance. Everything longs for a time when we will be set free from the destructive grip of sin once for all. And that moment will come when the King returns.

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So earlier I mentioned that Advent is about the anticipation of something good. Our consumeristic world looks at this shadow of the greater reality of Advent and believes that one day we will open the Red Ryder BB gun. And one day our boss will start treating us right. And one day our family member will realize how wrongly they've been acting. And one day our financial pressures will finally be overcome. One day we will find what it is we are looking for. And Duracell promises all we need is batteries.

But without Christ all these promises are smoke and echoes. The joy they deliver is fleeting. And everyone who buys in will find themselves disappointed and indebted come January. Slavery.

But Jesus came that we might have life, and have it to the full, both now in spite of the suffering we face, and into eternity when finally suffering will be defeated. And this is the message that Advent brings to our world of chaos. Friends, the King is coming back. And when He comes it won't be as a baby, instead He will invade the kingdom of darkness for the last time and make all things new.

² Romans 8:22

On that day all brokenness will be healed. There will be no more depression and anxiety and pain. All suffering will pass away. But until that time God will walk with us in the midst of the suffering, knowing and hearing, and at times delivering.

And it is that promise, given by the God of the universe, that Advent is built upon. And today Advent tells us we are one day closer.

So as you sit down in your living room over the next few weeks and start to find packages under the tree let yourself be swept up in the joy of anticipation. But don't set your hopes so low that Duracell could satisfy them. Set your hopes on the win the God of the universe wants to make yours today, that will last forever.