

The Other Holy Land

A Sermon Preached by
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Isaiah 19:1-4, 17-25
Matthew 2:13-15

I think we can make a pretty good case that Egypt is the “Other” Holy Land, the country that God loves, cares, and talks about most, next to Israel itself. But in the Bible despite the promises God has made to *Egyptians*, God is rarely happy with *Egypt* and what it represents. And we should be concerned about it, too. There are places of safety and comfort in life, like Egypt. Sometimes God leads us to them; sometimes we seek them out on our own. But “Egypt” may be more dangerous than we think. We are going to see today why we can’t make “Egypt” our spiritual home.

When most of us think of Egypt in the Bible, we think of Moses and the Exodus. But Egypt figures into many more stories than just that one. Abraham and Sarah went there for food. Abraham’s slave wife, Hagar, and their son, Ishmael, were sent there with God’s blessing. Joseph and his brothers went there during a famine. Hadad and Neco used Egypt to attack Israel. In Jeremiah (Jer 4:24-48) we see Jewish people trying to take refuge there, against God’s will. In Isaiah we hear a promise made to Egypt almost as sweet as anything he ever promised Israel. Finally, we remember that just after Jesus’ birth God told Joseph to flee to Egypt to hide from King Herod.

What picture of Egypt do these stories create in your mind? What does Egypt represent in the Bible? It’s a place of abundance: much more food, gold, and people than Israel. It’s a place of refuge—from famine and from war—but refuge for good guys and bad guys alike. It’s a place of false gods—more on that in a moment—including Pharaoh himself. Egyptians, of course, did not worship Yahweh. Most often it’s referred to as a place of slavery. Egypt’s fabulous wealth and magnificent pyramids were built on

the back of Jews and other slaves. Metaphorically at least, “It’s a nice place to visit, but we wouldn’t want to live there.”

No wonder God’s most common refrain in the Bible is: “I have called you out of Egypt.” God says it again and again, warning the people of Israel of the danger there: the slavery, the lies.

What is your spiritual Egypt? It might be a person or a vice that brings you comfort. Perhaps it’s a job that has made you rich but keeps you in chains. Maybe it was a place or a relationship that you said was only a temporary refuge – “any port in a storm” – but now it’s become your permanent address. Many of us know this routine. You work hard and get a good job, and with those earnings you reward yourself with a car or house or trip, or you start a family. But with those things come new expenses and to pay them off you have to work even harder, or more hours. So you do it, but that new money isn’t enough either. You still feel empty, so you buy more things. But you need a raise just to pay for them... Welcome to Egypt: Land of plenty, Land of slavery.

If you are enslaved to something today—debt, an abusive relationship, addictions, boredom—remember God’s refrain, “I have called you out of Egypt.” Ask for God’s help if you need it (and who doesn’t?). Do whatever it takes to get out of that job or lifestyle that is sucking the life right out of you. Change that relationship that is making you into an emotional train wreck. Get help turning away from a god in a bottle, or a pill, or a refrigerator. It isn’t easy to live Egypt once and for all – remember how the Hebrew slaves kept wanting to go back there? – but it can be done, with God’s help.

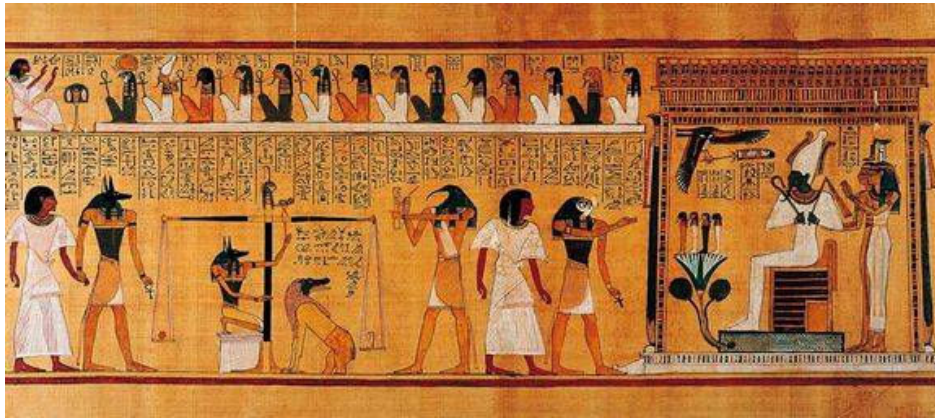
Get up, summon some courage, and say to whatever is enslaving you – even if it was a very good place for you to be in the past – “unless things change, I am outta here.” In the words of Moses (with apologies to the Kingsmen), say to that enslaving power today, “Pharaoh, Pharaoh, Oh, Baby, let my people go. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah” (Note: This was sung to the tune of “Louie, Louie”). If that doesn’t work, try plagues of locusts and gnats. My point is this there is no future for you and me in Egypt.

Of course Moses didn’t leave Egypt on his own. He took a few busloads with him. You’re going to need encouragement and the strength of number as you try to cross that Red Sea ahead. So join a support group,

form one if you have to. Enlist someone to hold you accountable to a goal that says, six months from now I'm not going to be in Egypt anymore. Begin the journey today and God will go with you.

Part of the problem with Egypt is that in the end it enslaves us – financially, emotionally, or spiritually. It makes us trust the wrong things. Each Egypt has its own story what we have to do to be eternally happy. But in the end, each of these stories is just a big hoax, because it's not God's story. Let me give an example.

On your sermon insert is a photocopy of a painted papyrus that I bought in Cairo several years ago.



I chose it because it shows what ancient Egyptians thought the Last Judgment is going to be like. We read it from left to right.



On the far left we see the soul of the deceased (resurrected in a spiritual body) being guided by Anubis, the Black Dog, God of the Dead.

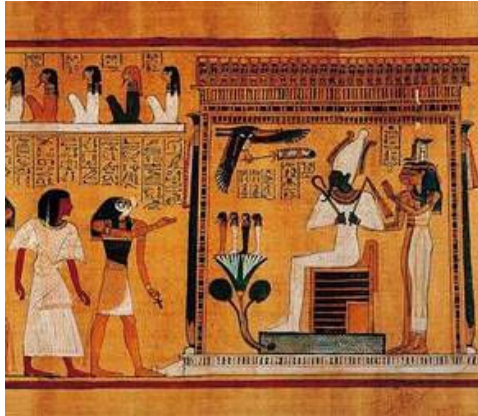
They are going to the place of judgment where there is a large scale – much like the scales of justice.



The deceased's heart is weighed on this scale. You can see it in a small jar on the left side of the scale. On the other side of the scale is a single ostrich feather—the Egyptian symbol of justice and truth. To pass this spiritual “weigh-in” the soul must show that it has “never done evil to anyone.” (Carpiceci, *Art and History of Egypt*, 1994). While Sobek the Crocodile, one of the gods of creation and fertility looks on, Thoth, the Ibis, and scribe of the gods, observes the test and records the results of the weighing.



These results are told to Harakhte, the falcon, associated with the movement of the sun across the sky, who brings the report and the deceased to Osiris the Judge, God of the Underworld.



Osiris sits on his throne with a shepherd's crook in one hand to welcome the saved and a whip in the other to beat those who have been condemned by their sins.

I don't know about you, but I don't like my chances of passing a test like that. My heart gets pretty heavy sometimes with guilt, shame, and remorse. And I certainly can't say I've never done evil to anyone. I'd have to be pretty worried right now if I believed that my eternal happiness and salvation depended upon being a perfect person (or at least good enough to fool God).

Christians see the Last Judgment a little differently, don't we? In our story there's also a judge who requires perfection, but the outcome is very different for those who trust God and God's mercy. Let me paint you a picture of what Christian faith teaches us about the last judgment. Then we can compare the two.

Picture this. One day Ralph was commuting to work when a tire blew and his car veered into a tree, killing him instantly. The next second, he found himself at the "Pearly Gates" where St. Peter greeted him and took him immediately to the great courtroom to account for his life. He stands before God, the Almighty Judge. Suddenly Ralph panicked. He thought he was in mid-life. He was counting on a few more years to clean up his act before cashing in. He played fast and loose with the tax code and his wedding vows and generally pushed ahead of others boasting, "It's not who you are, it's who you know."

The courtroom was jammed, and during the wait Ralph watched the proceedings very carefully, looking for a loophole. What Ralph saw would

have scared him to death if he weren't already dead. No matter how good things a defendant had done, when the Judge heard that they had done something wrong he looked up sadly and with great reluctance pounded his gavel sending the defendant off to pay for their misdeeds.

But then Ralph saw that one group of souls kept getting pardoned. Some of them were pretty good people; some were pretty awful. The one thing they had in common was who was defending them. Finally Ralph saw what was happening. As one poor soul was admitting in tears that he had stolen from his partner and cheated on his wife, Ralph braced himself for the falling of the gavel. But just as the Judge was ready to pound away, the Judge looked up and saw who the defense attorney was. There was a moment of recognition and the Judge said simply, "You're free to enjoy Heaven. You have my pardon. Your attorney and I have arranged this for you."

Ralph quickly worked his way back to St. Peter and asked why such a rotten buy was pardoned. "We have a saying around here, Ralph," said St. Peter. "It's not who you are, it's who you know." Then Ralph said, "I want that fella to be my attorney. Who is he and what do I have to do to get him on my side?" St. Peter shot back, "Oh him, he's the Judge's son, but it's too late to hire him now. For him, you have to plan ahead."

That's our salvation story, more or less. It's a story of justice and mercy. A story of a God who requires perfection, but who understands that we are incapable of it without His help. The story of a God who would rather take on our punishment than condemn us to an eternity apart from him. The Egyptian story would make even Mother Teresa nervous about the future. The Christian story leads us to trust not in our own goodness, but in God's mercy. The Christian story leads us to ask for forgiveness now so that we might be free – not to do wrong – but to attempt to do our very best in the world without fear.

It's no coincidence to me that one of the oldest Christian Churches in the world, the Coptic Church, was founded in Egypt, and it thrives there today. Founded at a time when paganism was pervasive, the Christian salvation story offered the Egyptian people hope for salvation that didn't depend on their own perfection.

Which picture fits best with what you believe? Many people in church pews say they trust Jesus for their salvation, but in their hearts they

are still practicing Egyptians; they live hoping that their good deeds will outweigh their bad ones and that God will grade on a curve. Maybe today we need to resolve to leave our own private Egypt and forget the stories our masters taught us there. Amen.

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