

# “One More Night with the Frogs”

Exodus 8:1-15; Mark 8:22-26 <sup>1</sup>

Well, here we are once again at Epiphany, just past the hinge of the year. We graduated five members to glory last year. We gained six new members, two of them by baptism. We gained a staff member. We’ve had quite a number of dinners and special events. We’ve made some changes that should help us do ministry more effectively, and we ended the year in the black. This has been a challenging year, but it’s been a good one, too.

In this season of the year, our thoughts naturally turn to transitions. Some of us are very glad that 2018 is over, with the hope that 2019 won’t be as stressful or as painful. Others of us are looking forward to all the possibilities with which 2019 is pregnant, both literally and figuratively! Only the Lord God knows what opportunities are before us!

Opportunities, of course, can be seized or squandered; and when I think about missed opportunities, I often remember the remarkable conversation Pharaoh had with Moses in our Scripture this morning, in Exodus 8.

Pharaoh had already seen and experienced the first of what would become ten increasingly awful plagues. He’d already seen the Nile and all the water in Egypt turned into blood. But rather than obeying God’s message, Pharaoh had hardened his heart against Moses once again.

The second plague was a plague of frogs. Through Moses, God said to Pharaoh, *“Let my people go, so they can worship me. If you refuse, then listen carefully to this: I will send vast hordes of frogs across your entire land from one border to the other. The Nile River will swarm with them. They will come up out of the river and into your houses, even into your bedrooms and onto your beds! Every home in Egypt will be filled with them. They will fill even your ovens and your kneading bowls. You and your people will be overwhelmed by frogs!”* (Exodus 8:1-4).

After this had happened as promised, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and begged, *“Plead with the LORD to take the frogs away from me and my people. I will let the people go, so they can offer sacrifices to the LORD.”*

*“You set the time!”* Moses replied. *“Tell me when you want me to pray for you, your officials, and your people. I will pray that you and your houses will be rid of the frogs. Then only the frogs in the Nile River will remain alive.”* And Pharaoh responded with one of the most amazing statements in the Bible: *“Do it **tomorrow**”* (Exodus 8:8-10).

*Tomorrow? Tomorrow!?! Seriously?! If my house, yard, bed, and kitchen were full of frogs, I’d want them gone now! I’d want them gone yesterday! But Pharaoh actually asked Moses for “**one more night with the frogs**”!*

Pharaoh knew what God wanted him to do. He knew how God wanted him to do it. He knew the consequences of failure to obey. Pharaoh’s problem was not information, but motivation: *“Do it tomorrow.”*

How often do you and I make the very same mistake? We’re pretty sure what God wants us to do. We have a pretty good idea about how and when God wants us to do it. We just want to put obedience off until “a more convenient time.”

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 6, 2019. Epiphany.

That's what C. S. Lewis was talking about when he observed that "I come into the presence of God with a great fear lest anything should happen to me within that presence which will prove too intolerably inconvenient when I have come out again into my 'ordinary' life. I don't want to be carried away into any resolution which I shall afterwards regret. For I know I shall be feeling quite different after [lunch]; I don't want anything to happen to me at the altar which will run up too big a bill to pay then."<sup>2</sup> Don't raise your hand, but have you ever been there?

My friends, one of the really scary things about God is that in most cases, God lets us do what we want to do. We really can say to God, "I don't want to do that," or "I'll think about that later."

The chief problem with such responses to God is that we're trading gold for sawdust. Speaking for God, Jeremiah wrote, "*My people have done two evil things: They have forsaken me—the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns, cisterns that can hold no water at all!*" (Jeremiah 2:13).

It's a poor bargain to choose any way but God's way. When we choose other ways, as we so often do, God graciously gives us the opportunity to turn around, away from the dead ends and leaky cisterns we've chosen and back toward the beautiful spring Who is the Source of our life . . . at least, up to a point.

Perhaps Jesus was remembering Pharaoh when He said, "*the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes—so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them*" (Matthew 13:15).

My friends, it really *is* possible to refuse to listen to God's still, small Voice so often and so long that we become unable to hear it at all (Matthew 12:31); and because of this very real danger, God works persistently, and in many ways, to bring us back from that point of no return, to protect us from the treacherous paths and cunning voices that seek to destroy us with their promises of fools' gold.

Although we've had so many scandals since that this one may be hard to recall, some of you may remember the lobbying scandals that sent Jack Abramoff to prison in 2006. Abramoff understood quite well that God had tried to turn him around: "God sent me a thousand hints that he didn't want me to keep doing what I was doing," Abramoff said afterward. "But I didn't listen, so he set off a nuclear bomb."<sup>3</sup> Jesus' half-brother, James, reminded us long ago that "*it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it*" (James 4:17).

My friends, God's plan for the Creation will be accomplished in God's own way and in God's own time, and there is no preventing it. But God is flexible in the details, and God invites you and me to have a meaningful and joyful part in bringing in the New Creation. And, like Pharaoh and like Jack Abramoff, each of us chooses to be a part of what God is doing . . . or not. James also wrote, "*Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves*" (James 1:22).

So what does God want to do in your life and through your life in 2019? How will things look a year from now as you reflect on these twelve months? Are you going to choose

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<sup>2</sup> From C. S. Lewis's last sermon, "A Slip of the Tongue," delivered in the chapel of Magdalene College (Cambridge) at Evensong, 29 January, 1956. Quoted in *A Year with C. S. Lewis* (JAN 30). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Abramoff, "Notebook," *Time* (2.6.06), 15.

the Living Water or the broken cistern? Is your 2019 going to be “one more year with the frogs?”

Even if you choose the Living Water, you may still be surprised at how things go from this point. God’s character-shaping activity in our lives doesn’t always proceed as we expect it to, and character shaping is a process that takes a long time and is frequently painful. That’s where another text comes in, giving us an important insight into God’s transforming work in our lives . . . .

*“When they arrived at Bethsaida, some people brought a blind man to Jesus, and they begged him to touch the man and heal him. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Then spitting on the man’s eyes, he laid his hands on him and asked, ‘Can you see anything now?’*

*“The man looked around. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I see people, but I can’t see them very clearly. They look like trees walking around.’ Then Jesus placed his hands on the man’s eyes again, and his eyes were opened. His sight was completely restored, and he could see everything clearly” (Mark 8:22-25).*

There are several things I want you to see in this passage. First of all, it was apparently the blind man’s friends who brought him to Jesus. Perhaps the man didn’t know about Jesus. Maybe he was afraid. He may have been ashamed. At any rate, he was blind, and he couldn’t find Jesus unless someone helped him. In a similar way, sometimes you and I, too, are so blinded in our pursuit of paths that take us away from God that **we need courageous and honest friends who will do what it takes to turn us back to Him.**

Second, Jesus took the man outside the village, which was unusual behavior for Jesus. Maybe this was a way for Jesus to personally and uniquely connect with this man and to meet his deepest needs, needs that aren’t apparent to us. As our Creator and Healer, Jesus knows what we need, and He knows the best way to make it available to us.

Third, Jesus spit on the man’s eyes—which seems pretty gross to us, but was a fairly frequent treatment in those days—and then He asked whether the treatment had been effective. This is the only recorded miracle of Jesus that wasn’t instantaneous, and it’s only recorded in Mark—the earliest Gospel. Maybe later writers were embarrassed by the encounter, as if it revealed some inadequacy in Jesus. I’m glad that Mark recorded this event, though, because without this story, you and I would have a much harder time understanding the process by which God usually works in our lives.

Fourth, after the man said that he could see a little bit, but not clearly, Jesus touched his eyes again, and this **“second touch”** brought full healing and restoration. The man saw everything clearly, and his life was transformed. The process of the “second touch” must have been for the man’s own benefit—perhaps to have seen everything at once would have been too overwhelming. And for us, too, healing is far more often a process than a single, instantaneous event.

In a way, I think this may be the main purpose for our lives here on earth. God’s real CHRISTmas gift to us is the invitation to live forever in God’s radiant Presence, a Reality so intense that it would consume us like Abramoff’s “nuclear bomb” were we not prepared to experience it through years of walking with God. Gold medals aren’t won from the couch, but only after years and years of persistent, painful training in which nothing else matters; years of training in which no pain, no expense is too great, in order to achieve the Goal.

That's what Paul was talking about when he wrote, "*I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven*" (Philippians 3:13-14).

Choosing one more night, one more month, or one more year "with the frogs" rather than in training for glory costs us in the end, but it also costs us along the way, because we miss the many signs of God's activity that are all around us for those who have eyes to see. And we miss many wonder-full opportunities to help bring in the Kingdom.

Sarah was an ultrasound technician at an emergency room in California. On one Friday night, she was called in at 2 a.m. The doctor told her that he thought the woman in Room 2 was having a psychiatric crisis, but they needed to run the medical tests anyway.

When Sarah entered the room, she found a highly agitated woman in her forties who was "bouncing off the walls" and complaining of intense pain. Sarah had a hard time getting the woman still enough to do an ultrasound. Suddenly the woman blurted out, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?"

Unsure of what might come next, Sarah responded hesitantly, "I do."

With a hint of hope in her eyes, the woman asked Sarah, "Would you pray for me? I just need to calm down."

Having never prayed out loud before, and failing to think of a way out of this unusual and unexpected encounter, Sarah said weakly, "Maybe you could pray, or at least get us started."

"No! It hurts too much. You do it!" the woman insisted.

So, right there in the ER, Sarah put her hand on the woman's arm and prayed, "God, please be with this woman in her time of need. Please give the doctors wisdom to know what is wrong with her and how to fix it; and God, please put your hands on her and take away her pain."

Sarah could feel the woman relax, and as she did, Sarah had a sudden prompting to recheck the woman's gall bladder. When she did, Sarah saw a four millimeter gallstone wedged in the neck of the woman's gall bladder, and she thanked God for this spiritual prompting in response to her prayer.<sup>4</sup> Can you feel the thrill?

Otis and Gail Ledbetter were making some church visits one evening, but no one they visited was at home. As they made their way home in frustration, Gail said, "Keith and Dianne [friends and former neighbors] have been on my heart all day. Why don't we see if they're home?"

"I turned the car around," Otis said, "and headed for their house. We walked up the drive to their front door and rang the bell. Keith answered the door. His jaw dropped with a look of disbelief, and he invited us in."

"Today has been almost unbearable. It has been awful," Keith said. "So just twenty minutes ago, I knelt beside my couch and prayed. Twenty minutes ago, I asked God to send someone to pray with me . . . and twenty minutes later, here you are!"<sup>5</sup> Can you feel the thrill?

<sup>4</sup> Bill White, Paramount, California

<sup>5</sup> J. Otis Ledbetter, *In the Secret Place: For God and You Alone* (Multnomah, 2003), pp. 18-19.

Folks who are spending their time with the frogs instead of with the Savior miss adventures like these. The true joy of CHRISTmas is the experience of discovering surprising and exciting encounters with God in the process of living, while we're on the journey.

My friend, God wants each of us—God wants you—to experience His presence, His healing, and His power in 2019 in ways beyond anything that you've ever known before. God's invitation to you this year is to "Come up higher! Come in farther! Come nearer!" Will you open your heart to this gift?