

“The Stronger One Always Wins”

Text: Exodus 8:16-24

March 7, 2021

I don't know if you've noticed it, but there was a rather large construction project completed recently at Greenfield-Central High School. Yep, within the last year our high school opened up a brand new weight room, containing all the latest equipment. It's a big ol' thing, costing millions of dollars. The reason they built it was because of something we see addressed in both our O.T. and Gospel Lessons for today: the fact that the stronger one always wins. Let's look at that now together ...

We begin by returning to today's O.T. Lesson, where we hear again that:

“The LORD said to Moses: ‘Say to Aaron, [Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats in all the land of Egypt.]’ And they did so. Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats in all the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 8:16-17)

As you're all probably aware, the LORD – Whom Moses knew as Yahweh – had sent Moses to Egypt to free His people Israel from slavery there. Upon his arrival there, Moses told Pharaoh (the King of Egypt):

“Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: ‘Let My people go ...’” (5:1)

Pharaoh responded:

“Who is Yahweh, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh, and besides, I will not let Israel go.” (5:2)

And from that moment on Yahweh / the LORD acted, through His servant Moses, and Moses' brother: Aaron, to free His people.

Of course, Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let Israel go. And so the LORD worked a total of 10 plagues (negative miracles) upon the land of Egypt, culminating with the slaying of the firstborn of Egypt. With that final plague – from which Israel was spared by the blood of the Passover Lamb – Pharaoh's will was finally broken and he allowed Israel to go free from Egypt.

Today's O.T. Lesson narrates for us the 3rd and 4th of those plagues (1=Nile to blood; 2=Frogs; **3 & 4=Gnats & Flies**; 5=Pestilence; 6=Boils; 7=Hail of Fire; 8=Locusts; 9=Darkness; 10=Angel of Death). With regard to the gnats, some translations say they were lice, and I've

even seen it described as maggots, in one particular reading. Pretty gross, no matter how you choose to render it.

But there's an interesting statement in v.18 of the text, which reads:

“The magicians tried by their secret arts to produce gnats, *but they could not.*” That's interesting because, in the case of the first 2 plagues, the magicians *were* able to reproduce what the LORD had done. Not only that, but when Moses appeared before Pharaoh, he attempted to prove his legitimacy to Pharaoh by turning his staff into a snake. But Pharaoh's magicians duplicated the miracle, giving Pharaoh cause to doubt Moses. Of course, in that instance Moses' snake consumed the snakes of the magicians; and in terms of the first two plagues, the magicians' ability to duplicate merely made the effects of the plagues worse. All of which shows that the LORD was superior to Pharaoh and his magicians.

We see that today, with Pharaoh's magicians *unable* to do what Moses and Aaron did. They even said to Pharaoh:

“This is the finger of God.” (v.19a)

They understood that the God of Israel was the stronger One.

But of course, Pharaoh hardened his heart. So the LORD next told Moses to tell Pharaoh:

“Let My people go, that they may serve Me. Or else, ... I will send swarms of flies on you and your servants and your people, and into your houses. And the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies, and also the ground on which they stand.” (v.20c-21)

And then there's an additional Word from the LORD that, in addition to testifying that He is the stronger One, also shows His goodness to His people, as Moses says:

“On that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth. Thus I will put a division between My people and your people.” (vs.22-23)

Remember how Pharaoh said to Moses, when Moses first came to him:

“Who is Yahweh, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh, ...” (5:2)

Well he soon would know Him, as Yahweh expressly says the reason for the 4th plague was:

“... that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth.”

And not only would Pharaoh know Who Yahweh was, but He'd also know that He dwelt among His people, taking care of them. For the Israelites dwelt in the land of Goshen, and Goshen was the only place in all of Egypt where there would be *NO flies*.

You see, throughout the story of Moses and Israel being set free to exodus (exit) from Egypt, Pharaoh is presented as a strong and very capable adversary. It's one reason why it took 10 plagues to set the Israelites free. I mean, the LORD could've done it with 1 plague, but with every stiffening of Pharaoh's back Pharaoh shows himself to be mighty. But while Pharaoh is mighty, *the LORD is mightier*. The God of Israel is the stronger One, and in the end He uses His strength to care for His people.

Of course, He doesn't always use His strength the way you'd think He would. I mean, all the while He worked the plagues in Egypt, Israel remained in slavery. In fact, when Moses first arrived on the scene in Egypt, Israel's plight became worse, as Pharaoh commanded them to make bricks without straw, making their work harder. That's the way it is sometimes – the LORD's strength can be hard to see, hidden as it often is in weakness.

And yet the LORD is *with His people IN WEAKNESS*. With ancient Israel, the LORD was with them *in the land of Goshen*, sheltering them from the plague of flies. And the LORD is with you too, *in the “Goshen” of His Church*, sheltering you from the plague of sin with His all-powerful / all-forgiving Word. That Word keeps you under the care of God throughout this life of sin, and it promises you a future life in the Promised Land of God's New Creation, forever. Indeed, for all who trust in God's Word, His strength wins out in the end.

Nowhere do we see that more powerfully than in the cross and empty tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ. Talk about being the stronger One – Jesus even cast out a demon in today's Gospel; you can't get any stronger than that! And yet He allowed Himself to be weak in suffering and death, hanging naked and bleeding from a cross for the world's sin. As St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians:

“... God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong.”
(1:27)

Those “weak things of the world” are suffering and death, things to which God Himself submitted in the Person of His Son. As Paul also says:

“... the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1Cor. 1:25)

Talk about being strong – *to have your weakness BE STRONGER than others’ strength*. That’s strength! And that’s the way it was/is with God’s Son: the Lord Jesus Christ, Who overcame sin and death with His death on the cross. With Jesus’ death, mankind’s slavery to death has been abolished. With Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, a way has been paved for all to exodus from the reign of Satan, into the reign of God forever. Jesus is the true stronger One.

Which brings us back to where we began, where we took note of the fact that, in sports, the stronger one always wins. That’s certainly the case with God and our eternal life with Him. As Jesus even says in today’s Gospel, again:

“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one *stronger than he* attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor ... and divides his spoil.” (Luke 11:21-22)

The strong man that was the Egyptian Pharaoh was overcome by the stronger One that was the God Israel, Who divided the spoil that was Israel, making them His people. The strong man that is Satan was overcome by the stronger One that is God in the flesh: Jesus Christ, Who divided the spoil of you and me – and all Christians of all times and all places – making us His people forevermore. True, at times in this life of sin, God’s strength appears to be weak – I mean, just witness the fact that being a Christian doesn’t necessarily make life easier; just witness the cross of Christ. But in the end, God’s strength prevails.

So my dear friends, go out into the world and be what you are: the people of God. Love; forgive; do good, even to those who don’t do good to you. And pray for those who don’t do good to you. Be strong. The stronger One always wins –

– in Jesus’ ✠ Name,
Amen!