

Gnats and Flies
Exodus 8:16-24

Well, it's not at all hard for us to relate to insect plagues this week, is it? These buffalo gnats or black flies are tough and relentless. And just when the weather is nice and you want to be outside, they make everyone miserable. The experts assure us that once the weather gets hot they'll go away, but then we won't want to be outside either.

But what can we learn from these gnats? And what can we modern American Christians learn from today's passage? After all, these were plagues God sent on the Egyptians because Pharaoh wouldn't let God's people go out of Egypt. But during this season of the year, we've been celebrating the freedom Christ has already won for all those who trust in Him. Because He has walked out of the empty tomb, we are no longer bound in the chains of sin. We no longer need to fear even death itself. So, what do these plagues of gnats and flies have to teach us?

First, and perhaps most obviously, that we are not in charge of this world. Oh, we have a desire to be, because that was why God originally made us. God made Adam and Eve in His image, and gave them dominion over the world, and all the plants and animals living in it. It was our sin that cost us this control, severing our connection not only with the Creator but with creation.

But ever since Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, we keep trying to claw our way back in, to reshape the world to be the way we want it to be. That's really all that modern science is – the study of God's creation so we can master it, harnessing its properties and powers for our own ends. And that's the same reason that Pharaoh employed his magicians – he was trying to control both the natural and the supernatural world.

And so even though in the first plague God had turned the Red Sea into blood, and even though in the second plague God had sent swarms of frogs across the land, the magicians weren't that impressed. No, because they had somehow been able to replicate the first two plagues, albeit on a smaller scale, they thought they understood how Moses was controlling the Nile and the frogs. Their science, however primitive and superstitious it might have been, was confident in its understanding of rivers and frogs.

But they, and we, have met our match when we confront the alien world of insects. Oh, we have the occasional victory, such as the boll weevil eradication project. But scientists still debate why one third of the honeybee colonies in the US have died off since 2006, just as they can't figure out any way to rid us of cockroaches and fireants, at least not without killing all the rest of the bugs and birds and frogs we want to have around. And as far as these buffalo gnats are concerned, their best advice is just to wait for the weather to change. In short, the insect world still has a valuable lesson to teach all of us proud human beings – we are not in charge. We are not in control.

And we learn the same lesson over and over again throughout our lives, don't we? I know I have over the last few weeks. A month ago, the screen fell out of my cellphone, and I was assured that it was under warranty and that it would be returned within a week. So I sent it off to be repaired and finally got it back a month later. But it turned out to be a replacement phone – something that could have been shipped in a day or two, and something I have to do a lot of reprogramming on. In spite of my best efforts, I am not in charge.

And then last Wednesday I had a great bike ride out on the Trace, but then noticed I couldn't get my shoe to unlatch from the pedal. I was able to unlace the shoe and got off the bike without crashing, but had to order a new set of cleats – which only arrived yesterday. Oh no, I am not in charge.

But sickness is the worst thing of all, isn't it? I've been wrestling with some sort of allergy since last spring, through all the seasons of the year. Medications can control these sorts of things, but can't cure them. And whenever we or our loved ones get sick, and especially when those we love don't recover, we feel so helpless. And that's because, when you get right down to it, we really are. No matter how careful our scheduling, no matter how cautious our stewardship, no matter how great our scientific knowledge may be, we are all helpless before so many of the circumstances of life, before the forces of nature, and especially before death itself.

And that is the same lesson we are supposed to learn from the cross of Christ. For the cross shows us not only the terrible penalty that all our sins deserve, but also how helpless we are to pay that price. It thus highlights what Paul tells us at the very end of Romans chapter 6: the wages of sin is death. Death is all any of us have earned. It's all any of us deserve, and none of us can do anything about it.

But Paul goes on to say that the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. And that's the second lesson we can learn from these plagues. For if they underscore sinful humanity's helplessness in the face of God, if they show us in no uncertain terms that we are not in charge, they also teach us that God is in charge, and that God in His sovereign grace chooses to be merciful to His people. These plagues show us that when we are unable to help ourselves, God is able and willing to protect us.

For look at what God says to Pharaoh in verses 22 and 23. Yes, He would send a terrible plague of flies upon the land. Yes, they would cover all the land of Egypt, even in their houses. But God said He would make a distinction in the extent of this plague. God said that this plague would not strike the land of Goshen, where His people lived. In other words, God said He would protect His people, treating them differently from their enemies. And that's exactly what happened. In the midst of that plague, God's people were kept safe.

And that's another lesson we learn from the cross and the empty tomb, isn't it? For Jesus came into our plague-filled world to protect us. He went through everything we go through – all the temptation, all the poverty and hunger, all the disappointments and betrayals. When He was arrested, put on trial and beaten, He knew what it was like not to be in charge. And on the cross, He went through the worst thing any of us will ever face – death itself.

But in the midst of all those trials, God protected Him. For even though He died, on the third day, He walked out of that tomb alive, victorious over everyone and everything that had conspired to defeat Him. And He promises to share that victory with all who would respond to His grace with faith, with all who repent, who turn away from their sins and turn to Him as Savior, with all those who bow the knee to Him as King and receive His gracious pardon.

No, we are not in charge of this world. But the good news is that God is. And in Jesus Christ, God welcomes us to receive His pardon and His protection, no matter what plagues we may face.