The Hebrew Scripture recitation of the plagues that are visited on the Egyptians as a result of Pharaoh’s insistence on keeping the Israelites in slavery is a familiar one. The authors use this story as metaphor, connecting it to suffering and survival that chaplains and those to whom they minister encounter within the context of the twenty-first century.

“SOMETIMES, CHAPLAIN, I FEEL LIKE...” I’m in the middle of the ten plagues. The situation was bad to begin with, and it seems to keep getting worse and worse.” As professional chaplains, we often hear this plaint in one form or another.

For example, listen to John, an individual in his mid sixties relate recent events in his life: “First my Dad died. He had cancer. I tried to make really good decisions for him, but the doctor kept saying do one more treatment, one more treatment. Dad kept getting weaker and weaker, and he lingered on and on. It was hard to see him. I hadn’t visited in a month when he died. Then my brother had a stroke that left his right side paralyzed. He lives in another state, and his wife wants me to come. My daughter just told us that she and her husband are separating, and she wants to move in with us. To top it off, my Mom, who has lived alone since Dad died, has some dementia. We never did get along very well. There’s no clear direction to take, and I seem to be unable to do anything. I wanted to retire this year, but now ...”

Undoubtedly, we begin by listening and by honoring people where they are in their life journeys. Simply by affirming their sadness and discomfort, by recognizing and acknowledging the difficulties, we let them know that we are willing to walk with them in their times of trouble.

Sometimes, there may be opportunity for further discussion especially if the person is a hospice patient or long-term care resident, or family member. In such instances, the biblical image of the ten plagues actually is a good place to start. The broad details of the Exodus narrative are part of popular culture. People generally are aware of this story and how the events devastated Egypt. Virtually everyone knows the phrase “Let my people go.”

Life in Egypt: a metaphor

The analogy of the hard life in Egypt and the devastation of the plagues illustrates some of life’s difficult issues:

- The use of power.
- The loss of power
- The consequences of stubbornness.
- How intimately all of life is connected.
- How suffering comes to the guilty and innocent alike.
To be sure, one should not be too literal with this analogy. As chaplains our hope is to offer spiritual succor, not a strict comparison to the details of the biblical text. The goal is to use the story as a broad metaphor, as a connection to others who have suffered and survived.

The Israelites are enslaved for a long period. Their lives are totally out of their control. They are trapped in a life of hardship (Ex 1:13-14). When Moses first appears, Pharaoh retaliates against the people, making their life even worse (Ex 5:6-21).

Then come the plagues. Technically, they are brought upon the Egyptians, many of whom are not of the ruling classes and have no influence on the decisions of Pharaoh. Nevertheless, one has to believe that the plagues also affect the Israelites. There is no record that they stop working. While they may be spared the effects of the plagues when they go home at night, during the day they live with what God is doing to the Egyptians. Thus, they also bear the results of Pharaoh’s stubbornness.

Initially, Pharaoh’s advisors support him (Ex 9:34). Eventually, they counsel Pharaoh to change his position, but he rejects their advice (Ex 10:7-11). It is Pharaoh’s total power and his unwillingness to change his mind that cause suffering for all those in his realm.

In the midst of plagues

When reviewing Exodus 7-12, one notices that the first nine plagues come in sets of threes. In each case, Moses announces the first two, and then the third one comes along, almost without warning. In a sense, this often reflects real life situations, Things happen, they get worse, and then, without warning, they escalate even further.

The plagues offer many images to explore, especially the ninth, the plague of darkness. In the context of chaplaincy, when a person is suffering, darkness provides a rich metaphor. We chaplains do well to remember that the word melancholy comes from a Greek root meaning something like “dark mood.” Individuals may be caught up in a spiritual or a psychological darkness. They may feel a sense of hopelessness, depression and/or dark dread. They may be cut off from resources, isolated, unable to find something with which—or someone with whom—to connect.

Raising the question of responsibility

In the biblical narrative, Pharaoh is offered the opportunity to take action, which presumably would avert the next disaster. Instead, he chooses stubbornly to refuse God’s warnings and commands. This may or may not be true of the person we encounter. Where this does apply, e.g., a refusal to listen to the advice of medical staff or to the call of one’s soul, it may be a place to begin the conversation.

When the challenging events of one’s life are brought about by unhealthy behaviors, attitudes, or negative thought patterns, the first step toward healing may be to accept responsibility for one’s actions and thoughts. Helping a person to explore his/her life in light of current circumstances and to look at new ways of living may be a first step toward healing. When forgiveness is one of the actions a person needs to take, an honest opening of the heart to God and to others with the goal of reconciliation may set the person on a new path. Repentance, the act of seeking a new direction, is a spiritual action that may have profoundly healing physical side effects.

In Judaism, there is a three-part process to achieve repentance/reconciliation:

- *Teshuvah* (repentance)
- *Tefilah* (communication/prayer)
- *Tsedaqah* (charity/good deeds)
One begins by honestly admitting to oneself that one has done wrong and that, if given the chance to repeat the action, one would not do it again (repentance). Next one needs to go to the person(s) one has wronged and seek forgiveness. This is followed by praying to God and seeking God’s forgiveness for one’s acts of commission/omission (communication/prayer). Finally, to complete the process, one needs to make up for one’s deeds—or lack thereof—by adding to the goodness in the world, a kind of reparation/restitution of kindly acts (charity/good deeds). To achieve true repentance/reconciliation, one must complete all three of these steps and vow not to return to wrongful behavior.

In Christianity, repentance and forgiveness are central to one’s relationships with God, Christ and one another. Christians are to forgive as God forgives and are admonished to forgive that they may be forgiven. Forgiveness is an act of the heart and mind that opens a person to reconnection with God, self and another. Repentance is a turning around, a turning away from sin and toward a life that is more Christ-like. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), and all are welcomed back into God’s house just as the prodigal child was welcomed home in Jesus’ parable.

An opportunity to catch one’s breath—to move in a new direction?

Even if repentance/forgiveness is not relevant in a given situation, individuals may find that seeking a new direction is both pertinent and timely.

In the biblical context as in real life, when facing a series of setbacks, one often worries that matters will deteriorate even further. Within the persistent devastating drum roll of the nine plagues, it is natural to expect that the next one is on the way. Exodus chapter 10 recounts the eighth plague (locusts) and the ninth (darkness). Chapter 11 predicts the final devastation. Then, surprisingly, chapter 12 abruptly changes direction. It begins not with a narrative of the anticipated plague, but rather with significant religious instruction: “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.” (Ex 12:2)

In chapter 12, God instructs Moses and Aaron to speak to the community, to tell them to prepare for something new. For a time at least, the inexorable movement of events, one plague after another, ceases. Analyzing the Scripture, we see that during these moments of respite, Moses requires the people to ready themselves both physically and spiritually. Normal food preparation and eating habits are to be changed. They are to gather with family and to eat well but also to be ready to move at a moment’s notice. They are to mark their doorposts and lintels with a sign that they are aligning themselves with God and God’s plan for them. They are to decide if they are going to join their community or not. In short, they are to be active, rather than passive.

There are lessons here for us as chaplains who work with those who suffer. Patients who are in the midst of ongoing treatment may feel caught in round after round of dehumanizing tests, labs, surgeries, side effects, and complications. The outcome is uncertain. Each step of the way brings losses, questions, struggle, and doubt. John’s life experience, which began this article, illustrates this situation. He did not know whether he was making good decisions or which path to choose going forward.

Sometimes we need to help people slow down long enough to assess their life goals. By reflecting on the message of Exodus 12, we provide space for them to pause and to catch their breath. We may suggest that they “stop the clock” for a few moments while they evaluate where they are and where they want to be.

In the Exodus story, we hear the voice of Moses calling out for freedom from enslavement. We hear Pharaoh being stubborn and not wanting to lose control. We hear the voice of Pharaoh’s advisors telling him to listen and to let the people go. There are similar voices inside all of us if we listen closely enough.
As people sort out what steps to take next in their lives, we may assist them in hearing the different voices calling for their attention. For example, John heard the desire to help his family, the desire for the freedom of retirement, the desire to stay in control when everything felt so out of control, and, in the midst of this cacophony, the quiet voice of wisdom calling for him to consider different decisions and perhaps a new direction.

Each of us may claim the time at hand as the beginning of a new year. Instead of continuing along the same path, any given moment may “mark for [us] the beginning of months; it [may] ... be the first month of [a different kind of] year.”

We chaplains also sometimes feel that we are in the “midst of the ten plagues,” for we hear and experience so much sorrow and sadness. We would be well served to ask ourselves if we are suffering from secondary traumatic stress/compassion fatigue. No less than those we serve, we need to listen to the voices within us: “You want to let this grief go; you need to address the sadness you carry around; you should make changes in your life so that this will be a different kind of year for you.”

A time for action?

In the book of Exodus, Moses calls the people to be involved, to be active participants in the process. The people are told to be ready for the changes that they will soon experience. The internal, spiritual shift to move from whatever enslaves us to a newfound/newly established freedom takes bold, creative action, community, and a commitment to embrace something new.

As chaplains, we often interact with people in the midst of very difficult times, what many may describe as plague-filled lives. They often feel that they are in the midst of darkness. Those who are suffering may need help to identify necessary actions to change the course of their lives. They may profit from encouragement to reflect on what it might mean for them to start anew. They may welcome assistance in recognizing God’s active presence in their lives. They may benefit from a community ritual that marks the end of what has been and invites what will be.

Clearly, we are not miracle workers, and we cannot bring about physical changes in the lives of others. We can however, bring a caring presence and spiritual support. We can raise questions and perhaps offer areas of consideration for them to ponder. We can help them to pause in their struggles to ask themselves where they are, where they want to be, what choices are open to them, how they are going to face the days ahead, what they might do—or not do—to make life better for themselves.

The Exodus story is a story for today. The narrative of the days in Egypt depicted in chapters 7-12 offers paradigms that are rich in metaphor and meaning for those who suffer. These voices from so long ago speak to all of us as we search for hope and attempt to bring order to our chaotic lives.