

Out of the Waters

RESISTING the POWER of FEAR

A FAITH on the MOVE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Session 2: They Are Not Like Us – Exodus 1:15-21

*“But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.” Exodus 1:17**

Introduction

Fear and stereotypes play a central role in the story as Pharaoh attempts—and fails—to control the growing immigrant population. Together we explore the role of fear in our own lives and in our approach to others, particularly those who are different from us.

To orient yourself to the series, be sure to download and read “Faith on the Move Bible Studies: Series Introduction.” To prepare to lead the session, review the materials in this document. The column on the left below is your guide for personal preparation for leading the study. The column on the right is to be used to facilitate participant discussion during the session itself. Make enough copies of this session’s Scripture handout for all participants.

TIP: Collect and display magazine or newspaper ads that play on common stereotypes of men and women.

TIP: You may want to have some initial ideas in mind about common stereotypes of Americans and Europeans to get the conversation started. Encourage people to have fun with this activity—for example, if someone has traveled in Europe, invite them to share any experiences of stereotypes they may have had during their travel. Feel free to choose other categories that may work better with your particular group—you could play with denominational identities, common ethnic backgrounds in your community, age groups, etc.

Look up the definition and derivation of *stereotype* in a standard dictionary.

Opening Prayer

You may offer an opening prayer or invite a participant to lead the group in prayer.

Narrow Vision

Write the words “American” and “European” side by side at the top of a chalkboard or on a piece of chart paper. Draw a vertical line between the two words to create a two-column chart. Tell participants: “Call out images or words that come to mind when you hear ‘American’ or ‘European.’” Jot down the answers in the appropriate column.

Where do these images and ideas come from? How does categorizing help us organize our world? What limitations result from the stereotypes?

Last week we talked about how a new Pharaoh arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph (Exodus 1:8). What role do you think stereotypes played in how this Pharaoh perceived and dealt with the Israelites? What role do stereotypes play in contemporary perceptions of immigrants?

* All Scripture passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition. Copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

EXTRA: We do not know the names of many of the women whose stories come to us through the Bible. The fact that women's names are often omitted, makes it even more significant that we are given Shiphra and Puah's names. In contrast, we are not given the Pharaoh's name, but rather know him only by his title or function! In fact, through later passages we also come to know the names of the other women who are important to the Exodus story: Jochebed (Moses' mother, Exodus 6:20), Miriam (the prophet and sister of Moses, Exodus 15:20 and Numbers 26:69), and Zipporah (Moses' wife, Exodus 2:21).

Encourage participants to use their imagination in "fleshing out" this encounter. Familiar with the experience of home searches, both from military regimes in their country of origin and more recently through difficult experiences of immigration enforcement, participants in a Bible study at Holden Village in Washington State imagined agents from Pharaoh's army coming to get Shiphrah and Puah in the middle of the night. Arriving at the palace, the women would have been taken through several layers of security—intended as much to protect the Pharaoh as to communicate his power. Once they were before Pharaoh, every aspect of his appearance and his surroundings would have been intended to further convey a message of power and instill fear in those who were brought before him.

Having attempted to control the people through hard labor and taskmasters, now Pharaoh tries to use the midwives (their knowledge of the community and the trust the community has placed in them). He wants to co-opt into his death project the women whose very identity and calling as midwives is to facilitate life.

Bible study participants who grew up in small, rural towns throughout Latin America readily understood why Pharaoh chose to use the midwives. Reflecting the significant role of midwives in rural community, the Spanish word for midwife, "comadrona," is used in common speech to refer to the female baptismal sponsors of one's child. Families carefully choose baptismal sponsors from those they trust, often identifying someone who holds a position of honor in their circles, someone they would want others to associate with their child.

An additional aspect of the role of midwives was highlighted by a Bible study participant who said, "Comadronas are the town's gossips; they have unrestricted access to people's home and personal lives. They are the women who know everyone in town... and they know everyone's business! Because they make several visits to a home both before and after a child is born, they get to know much more about individuals and their lives."

Pharaoh expresses his fear of male Israelites by seeking to destroy them—first by the hand of the midwives, and then, as we will see in our next session, by drowning them in the river. By fixating on his fear of the male children of Israel, Pharaoh indirectly discounts the women. Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes in *Reading the Women of the Bible*²: "But Pharaoh is worried only about the boys. From his perspective, the girls are insignificant. Without men, they are not even Israel. Their wombs have not yet been claimed and branded. If married by Egyptians, they will produce Egyptian children. The boys, however, may grow to be men who will fight against Egypt." (p. 25).

Blinded by his stereotypes—in Pharaoh's view only the boys could become a threat by joining with his enemies in the event of war (Exodus 1:10b)—Pharaoh ironically fails to see women as a threat.

Comadronas—The Hebrew Midwives

READ Exodus 1:15-16.

What do you hear? What do you notice? What stands out?

Verse 15: "The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives..." This encounter comes right after we have been told (twice!—vv. 13a and 14b) that the Egyptians were ruthless in their dealings with the Israelites. What do you think it would have been like for Shiphrah and Puah to be brought before Pharaoh? What might we expect them to have been told by Pharaoh? Were they threatened? Were they bribed?

Why do you think Pharaoh chose the midwives?

Why does Pharaoh order the midwives to kill the boys, but spare the girls?

² *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*, Tikva Frymer-Kensky (New York: Schocken Books, 2002)

A central theme in the story of Exodus, and in many ways throughout the Bible, is that of fear. It is fear that leads Pharaoh and his people to attempt to exterminate the Israelites. In contrast, almost every encounter between humans and the divine in the Bible is prefaced by the words, "Do not fear."

Acts of terrorism, like the horrendous events of September 11, 2001, are aimed at controlling our lives through fear. The challenge in responding to these very real threats is to do so without allowing those responsible to accomplish their goal.

Unfortunately, the fear caused by 9/11—compounded by the current economic crisis—has fueled a growing animosity and stereotyping of immigrants. In Bible study across the country, the role of fear in the lives of immigrants was both obvious and painful. A Bible study participant who was born to immigrant parents stated, "Our communities live in fear—fear of 'La Migra' [the popular name used to refer to the immigration enforcement agency] and its increased focus on enforcing a system that many recognize is broken. It is important to note that the fear created by the emphasis on enforcement of immigration laws extends well beyond those who are undocumented. First of all, people who are undocumented in the country—an estimated 11 to 12 million people—are directly connected to millions of others, both documented immigrants and citizens of the country. They are parents to children born in the United States, married to long-term residents of the country. Many families have "mixed" status, where some members of the immediate family are documented while others are not. Additionally, many immigrants and descendants of immigrants suffer because of profiling."

The excessive use of force and incarceration as a way to enforce the civil matters of immigration law has translated into a general concern among people who are foreign-born, regardless of their immigration status. "On any given day in the United States of America, more than 42,000 immigrants are being held in local jails, detention centers and prisons across the country," states the website for the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services. The vast majority of those detained have no prior criminal record and are often not protected by basic expectations of due process. Additionally, immigration enforcement has become increasingly more forceful in the last decade, sending a message of fear throughout the community and create an atmosphere that can encourage strong anti-immigrant sentiments. The May 12, 2008 military-style work-site immigration raid in the small, rural town of Postville, Iowa, is a troubling example of this trend. Over a fifth of the town's population was arrested in a single day, devastating those who were undocumented and threatening the economy and well being of the whole town.

The law orders them to kill the baby boys when they are born. The midwives know the law as they heard it directly from the mouth of the Pharaoh. Still, they choose to directly disobey the law and "do not do as the king of Egypt commanded them." The midwives actions are introduced by saying that they feared God. Note that it does not specifically say whether they feared Pharaoh or not—they likely were terrified of him, but what the story highlights is their action—an act of civil disobedience, done directly against an unjust law. Their motivation seems to be a "higher" moral law born out of their fear of God. We will address this in more detail in the next session.

They Did Not Do As the King of Egypt Commanded Them

READ Exodus 1:17

In the last session we talked about the role of fear both as a motivator for Pharaoh's actions and as a tool for subjecting the people of Israel. Verse 17 begins, "But the midwives feared God." How is the midwives' fear of God different from the fear Pharaoh may have instilled in their hearts?

How is fear a positive or a negative factor in our own lives and in the life of our nation?

What role does fear play in the lives of immigrants in our country, particularly those who live and work here without proper documentation?

In this session and in session 3, we will use three questions to focus the conversation on how the characters in the story acted in the face of what they believed to be an unjust law. Let's begin with Shiphra and Puah and their actions:

- What is the law? What has Pharaoh commanded?
- Do they know the law?
- What do they do?

The story of Shiphra and Puah speaks profoundly to those who live without power and who must find alternative ways of responding to their commitment to life in the face of laws that limit their ability to seek life. Many participants in Bible studies across the country were working in the United States without proper documentation. Rejecting the dismissive label of “illegals”—put on them by many politicians and the media—participants related to the Bible’s portrayal of the midwives as heroes for choosing to act even against what they saw as an unfair law. As one participant put it: “Unlike the picture often painted of undocumented workers, they are indeed people with a high moral compass—a compass that leads them to make a decision that goes against every fiber in their body as peaceful, law-abiding people... as people who fear God.”

In spite of limited formal education, many of the participants who were undocumented knew they did not make their decision to migrate in a vacuum. On the one hand is the opportunity for work that they see by migrating. According to the National Immigration Forum: “The U.S. labor market demands up to 500,000 low-skilled workers a year, while the current U.S. immigration system allows for only 5,000 permanent visas for that category.”

On the other hand is their own desperate need. One participant who was left his work as a coffee picker in Guatemala to come to work at a meatpacking plant in Iowa said: “We would pack truck after truck of coffee beans to send to the United States and then in the market I would see the corn that came from Iowa... yet when I realized I needed to go somewhere else to look for work, I wasn’t allowed to go.”

Unable to obtain the proper documentation to migrate—yet knowing that they needed work to provide for their families—thousands go against an immigration law they feel is not fair, not life giving.

The issue of undocumented migration stirs deep passions. As Facilitator, you will want to encourage respectful dialogue and encourage participants to become informed about this complex, yet pressing, topic. Emphasis can be placed on the broad agreement that the current immigration system in the United States is broken, and commit to the need to find solutions that reflect our values and move us forward together.

Law and Order

What does the passage’s portrayal of the midwives’ direct disobedience of the law say to us today?

The story of Shiphra and Puah’s actions has been central to civil disobedience movements such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s. How may these stories be heard by those who, out of desperation, choose to enter or remain in the United States in order to work and provide for their families, even though they do not have the proper documentation?

What constitutes unfair laws?

How do we balance “law and order” with “justice”?
Are they always the same?

Closing Prayer

After inviting any final comments and providing details for the next session, you may conclude by offering a prayer or inviting a participant to lead the group in prayer.