

Out of the Waters

RESISTING the POWER of FEAR

A FAITH on the MOVE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Session 3: Moses, the First Mojado – Exodus 1:22-2:10

“...‘because...I drew him out of the water.’” Exodus 2:10b*

Introduction

The story of Exodus has played a central role in inspiring, sustaining, and guiding social change throughout the centuries. In this session we explore how those who could easily be dismissed become God’s agents of transformation.

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: Create a simple display with pictures or books about Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, or others who exemplified nonviolent civil disobedience.

TIP: You may also ask participants to note that many of the biblical characters they have listed—both male and female—have experienced migration in their life.

EXTRA: Migration is also an important theme in the sacred stories of other faith traditions. For example, the Hajj, one of the pillars of Islam, re-enacts the Prophet Muhammad’s journey to Mecca, and in Buddhism, Prince Siddhartha begins his process of enlightenment through a journey that physically moves him from the isolated comfort of his palace and into the daily life of his subjects around the kingdom. There seems to be something about the experience of migration that opens people to the divine.

Opening Prayer

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

Stories

Ask participants to call out biblical stories and characters that come to mind. Write down the names on a board or chart paper. After making the list, note how many of the characters are male and how many are female. If, as is often the case, the majority of those listed are male, ask the group to discuss why they think this may be the case. After some conversation, invite the group to specifically name stories of women in the Bible.

As we saw last week, the text provides us the names of most of the women involved in the Exodus story. What about in the stories we have listed?

Today we continue to explore how Pharaoh discounted women to his own peril!

* 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.

At a Bible study with religious leaders and immigration advocates in Rockford, Illinois, participants saw in Pharaoh's actions a mirror of the "police state" that political leaders have historically resorted to in times of high social anxiety. Nazi Germany and Rwanda in the lead-up to genocide are among well-known extreme cases, but they should not preclude us from realizing the danger of situations such as the blacklisting of people during the McCarthy era in the United States or the participation of average citizens in enforcing Jim Crow laws in the South before the Civil Rights Movement. Connecting back to the social impact of Pharaoh's first attempt to control the Israelites through forced labor in verses 13 and 14, one of the participants observed that "unjust laws legitimize ruthlessness."

The ominous law enacted by Pharaoh is followed by a very "provincial" scene. A man and a woman marry, and even in an environment of death and fear, seek to begin their new life. About nine months after the devastating immigration raid in the small, rural town of Postville, Iowa (at the time the largest immigration raid in U.S. history) community members jokingly commented on the seemingly large number of pregnancies among women who had been directly affected by the raid. While some saw foolishness in these pregnancies, others saw strength in couples' willingness to embrace life in the face of such struggle.

In the span of just a couple of verses, we go from the fearful words of Pharaoh to the provincial scene of a child's birth, and then back to the reality of fear. These various emotions will be later reflected in the birth stories of Jesus himself, where angels' announcements and the visit of foreign dignitaries are mixed with the fear of death at the hands of Herod's army.

Like the midwives before her, Jochebed directly contradicts the law. What is the law? To throw the babies in the river. Does she know it? Obviously... she's been trying to hide her child. What does she do? That's where it gets interesting. She fulfills the letter of the law (Exodus 1:22) by placing the child into the river; however, she puts him in a basket rather than drowning him.

Driven by Life

READ Exodus 1:22-2:2.

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

Pharaoh's offensive broadens. Having tried to recruit people from among the Israelites—supervisors and midwives—to exploit and then eliminate their own people, he now turns to "all his people." What situations, contemporary or historical, can you think of where political leaders have used power and fear to lead average citizens to turn on their neighbors?

Verse 2:1, which reads, "Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman," follows on the heels of Pharaoh's ominous edict. We are then told that they had a child. What do you think of their decision to bring children into the world under such dire circumstances?

The "Levite woman" of verse 2:1 turns out to be Jochebed, Moses' mother (see Exodus 6:20). Let's re-read verse 2:2 and let the details in the story help us imagine Jochebed's mix of emotions, caught between the joy of holding her "fine baby" and the fear that forces her to hide him.

The First Mojado

READ Exodus 2:3-6

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

In session 2 we began to 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 review those questions in light of Jochebed's actions:

- What is the law? What has Pharaoh commanded?
- Does she know the law?
- What does she do?

Return to the situations identified earlier where political leaders used power and fear to lead average citizens to turn on their neighbors. How might or how do such situations force parents to face choices similar to those made by Jochebed in the story?

Repeatedly, Bible study participants who had entered the United States without proper documentation and who are parents of young children related deeply to this story. They connected with Jochebed's despair, courage, and ingenuity:

- Despair: "Every morning when I kiss my son as he goes off to school and I go to work, I wonder if I will see him at the end of the day, or if this is the day I am detained for not having the right papers. Every day I relive the time when we crossed the [U.S./Mexico] border, and the coyote [smuggler] kept yelling at me to keep him quiet so *La Migra* [immigration enforcement] would not find us."
- Courage: A number of mothers saw themselves in this scene, standing near the U.S./Mexico border and handing their small child to a coyote (smuggler) to bring him/her across the border. To get very small children across the border, coyotes will carry them through a legitimate entry point by using the documents of another child of the same age and general appearance. "Twice I ran after him and took my son back," said a woman through her tears. Clearly, she remembered the day as if it had been just yesterday, rather than twenty-one years earlier, when she handed her then 18-month-old baby to a coyote to carry across, while she and her husband undertook the perilous desert-crossing on foot. "Finally I had to entrust him to God... It was two days before we were reunited—those were the longest days of my life."
- Ingenuity: "What do you do when the law goes against your instinct and need for survival, against what you believe to be ultimately right? She [Jochebed] gets quite creative! At the same time, she cannot possibly know what will happen next. When you're desperate, you do what you can... you just take the risk."

It is hard to imagine being in a situation where placing one's child in such danger seems like the only solution. The wisdom in the Bible is to place just such a story and decision at the heart of one of God's most central acts on behalf of God's people.

Again, there is a huge scene change in the story. While on one side of the river a woman makes the agonizing decision to part with her child in hopes that he may survive, on the other side we find a princess living in the lap of luxury. Unlike Jochebed's deliberate approach to the river, Pharaoh's daughter's trip to the river at this precise time is happenstance. While Moses' family has been living in fear and suffering exploitation, Pharaoh's daughter is surrounded by servants who attend to her every need—even to fetching her this peculiar basket that comes floating down the river.

Discussions on this portion of the account evoked some of the most powerful emotions in Bible studies in various locations across the country. One after another, those who had crossed the U.S./Mexico border without documentation shared their experiences. Many of them literally crossed a river, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo that forms part of the U.S./Mexico border (running 1,885 miles along the state of Texas and a small portion of New Mexico). Because of their experience, they could totally envision—almost feel—the fear and uncertainty experienced by Moses' family as they approached the river Nile. They could relate to their fateful decision, surely made after much thought

Share and discuss one or more of the quotes or scenarios of undocumented immigrant parents identified in the left column. Be mindful that such powerful stories can stir deep emotions, either of empathy or of frustration. Strive to keep an open and respectful tone to the conversation, and note any instances where a follow-up conversation may be appreciated after the study.

Verse 5a: "The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river..." Compare and contrast Jochebed's experience as she approaches one side of the river, to that of Pharaoh's daughter as she comes down to the river on the other side to bathe.

"¡Moises fue el primer mojado! [Moses was the first wetback!]" exclaimed a Bible study participant, surprised to see in the story a reflection of his own experience of crossing a river that divided his poverty and oppression from the luxury, freedom, and wealth that he believed to be on the other side. Referring to his crossing of the Rio Grande he went on to say, "Like Moses, I crossed that river against the law."

and prayer, to break a law, even one that they believed to be unjust. Many participants shared openly how their decision to “travel North” came at the end of a long period of discernment and internal struggle. Most immigrants—both those who are able to travel with proper documentation and those who cannot—struggle to make the decision to leave behind home, family, culture, language, and everything that is familiar. In the case of undocumented immigrants, the loss and risk is compounded by a huge financial burden. For example, many undocumented workers from Guatemala who participated in the Bible studies reported having paid upwards of \$10,000 per person to a smuggler to bring them across Mexico and then across the border into the United States. This amount represents over 10 years of full-time labor for the average Guatemalan laborer.

Jochebed’s actions, as well as those of Miriam which come immediately after, provide an insightful and ultimately hilarious sequence of events, as these women outsmart Pharaoh and his plans. The passage raises ethical questions that remain powerfully relevant as we engage the actions and decisions of those who find themselves with no power and feel marginalized by the law.

Frymer-Kensky highlights the fact that women in the story are primarily referred to by their roles as women—the midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, Pharaoh’s daughter: “Acting in their routine roles as midwives, mothers, daughters, and wives, women become the saviors of early Israel and bring on the redemption from Egypt” (p. 24). She also notes, “Pharaoh has a problem. Just as he took no heed of daughters, daughters take no heed of him” (p. 26).

Unlike her father, Pharaoh’s daughter is able to see the humanity in the face of one of these Hebrew immigrants. Finding herself before this individual child, and hearing his cry, she is able to recognize his humanness. There is a danger in sentimentalizing this scene, and attributing it merely to a gender difference between Pharaoh and his daughter. Returning to the framing questions we have been using for the actions of each of the women in the ongoing story can help us see courage rather than sentimentality in Pharaoh’s daughter’s actions. What is the law? Throw the baby boys in the river. Does she know the law? Clearly; she ponders out loud, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children.” What does she do? She acts directly against the will of her father—which is the law of the land. At the point of her pondering out loud that the child in the basket must be one of the Hebrews’ children, Pharaoh’s daughter’s actions are not a foregone conclusion. She could go either way on how she acts on this knowledge of the child’s origin. As a Bible study participant pointed out, “She has papers. She has choices.”

In the midst of a very tense situation, the passage playfully shows Miriam’s courage and ingenuity. Thinking on her feet, she goes from watching in despair (Exodus 2:4) to finding a way to ensure her brother’s survival. Like the midwives (who feared God more than the Pharaoh and refused to destroy life) and her mother (who put the child in the river as the law ordered, but did so using a basket), now Miriam uses her own ingenuity to subvert an unjust system and advocate for life. Sounding quite helpful and innocent, she steps right up to Pharaoh’s daughter—at great risk to herself—and offers to find someone to raise the child. In effect,

EXTRA: Verse 6: “She saw the child... and she took pity on him.” Unlike her father, whose fears and stereotypes prevented him from seeing the Hebrews as people, Pharaoh’s daughter is moved to pity by the simple act of a child’s cry. What humanizes for her the child perceived as so different—as “other”?

Civil Disobedience: Daughters of the Revolution

READ Exodus 2:7-10

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

Looking at the actions of Miriam (Moses’ sister) and Pharaoh’s daughter, let us return to the questions we have been focusing on regarding individuals’ actions when faced with what they believed to be an unjust law:

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

Imagine what it took for Miriam to act. What if she were detained for approaching Pharaoh’s daughter? What if they figured out who she was? How did Miriam hatch this plan?

she manages to get Pharaoh's own resources—from his daughter to Jochebed—to be allocated for the raising of the child who will eventually bring about the fulfillment of Pharaoh's stated fear: "...or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land" (Exodus 1:10).

The etymology (origin and meaning) of Moses' name is a matter of great scholarly discussion. According to Frymer-Kensky, the name has roots both in the Egyptian word for "son" and in the Hebrew word for "the one who draws out." She argues that the name actually points to Moses' later life—he is the one who will draw the people out of Egypt—rather than the conditions of his birth or rescue. Even as the origins of the name are unclear, what is clear is that the writer of the account emphasizes the audacity of Pharaoh's daughter as she acts against her father's stated law and calls the boy Moses, saying, "...for I drew him out of the water." She literally calls him a *mojado* (wetback)!

EXTRA: Earlier in the study we pointed to the connection between the Exodus narrative and the creation narratives at the beginning of Genesis, particularly between God's command to be fruitful and multiply and the proliferation of the Hebrews in Egypt. In Genesis 1, God creates a safe space—a sanctuary—for life to take hold in the watery chaos. Explore the way that the women in the Exodus account mirror God's creative actions; specifically consider Jochebed's carefully prepared basket (a sanctuary for Moses in the midst of threatening waters) and Pharaoh's daughter's daring statement that she had drawn life out of the waters.

TIP: If you have not set up a display of individuals involved in non-violent civil disobedience, simply list some or invite participants to name a few of them at this point in the reflection.

The work of women's cooperatives has gained significant attention in the last decades in everything from craft production to agriculture to advocacy and environmental action. What are examples of such cooperation in your communities? Are there such support groups specifically focusing on advocating for immigrants? How do solidarity groups bring together immigrants to advocate for themselves, and provide a space for immigrants and supportive citizens to come together? How does your church facilitate/how can it facilitate the creation of such cooperation?

In the midst of a harrowing situation, the story introduces humor both through Miriam's daring and ingenious plan and through Pharaoh's daughter's naming of Moses. Discuss both of these women's daring actions.

Connections

With whom do you identify in the story?

Look at the names and images of historical figures who are recognized for their non-violent, civil disobedience.

Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter form an unlikely team in undoing Pharaoh's destructive will. Who make up your cooperatives (*see left-hand column*) or support teams to help you act boldly, guided by your faith and convictions?

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.

