

Out of the Waters

RESISTING the POWER of FEAR

A FAITH on the MOVE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Session 4: Hyphenated Egyptian – Exodus 2:11-3:10

“...‘I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.’” Exodus 2:22*

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 display with items that point to the immigrant heritage of your congregation or community. Include items such as early documents written in another language and promotional materials for a heritage festival in the congregation or the town.

The use of the phrase “hyphenated American” has become more common in the last few decades:

It indicates ancestry, but may also connote a sense that individuals straddle two worlds—one experience is specific to their unique ethnic identity, while the other is the broader multicultural amalgam that is Americana. (Wikipedia.org)

Unlike its more acceptable contemporary use, the term actually originated as an insult. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was used to disparage Americans who were of foreign birth or origin. As tensions built up in the years leading to World War I, former president Theodore Roosevelt said:

There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else. (“Roosevelt Bars the Hyphenated,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1915)

The change in usage of this term reflects varying cultural attitudes about diversity and maintaining one’s ethnic identity. (See Wikipedia for further details on this topic.)

Opening Prayer

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

Coming of Age

Distribute pens and index cards or paper to all participants. and say: “At the top of the card, write down the hyphenated identity you most relate to, for example, Norwegian-American, Irish-American, African-American or Mexican-American. Below it, indicate how this hyphenated identity has been a part of your life: How is it reflected in your family’s traditional foods, celebrations, jokes, language and so forth?”

After a few minutes, invite participants to share some of the items they have written. Depending on the size of the group, you may do this in pairs or with the whole group. Then bring everyone back together and identify the various “hyphenated-identities” represented in the group. You may also refer to any others that are part of your church or community.

* 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.

Moses' identification with the Hebrew victim in verse 11 indicates that, along with nurturing him physically, his mother Jochebed also shaped his identity—likely by sharing with him the sacred stories and traditions handed down to her from her ancestors. Moses' violent reaction, however, also reveals the mark Pharaoh's use of violence has left on him. The cycle of violence is played out in the verses that follow. By relying on violence, Moses loses credibility before his Hebrew kinsfolk and provides Pharaoh an opportunity to act out of his long-held resentment.

In [Facing the Myth of Redemptive Violence](#), Walter Wink explores the prevalence in contemporary media—from cartoons to news reporting—of the portrayal of violence as a solution to issues. He writes:

The belief that violence “saves” is so successful because it doesn't seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts.

OFFERING AN ALTERNATE NARRATIVE...

Bible study participants who live in communities affected by increasing levels of youth violence shared their struggles to directly address the consequences of violence, while also attending to the frustration and fear that often lies behind it. A participant in Washington State said:

Many children of immigrants grow up seeing adults use violence. They may be aware that their parents left their country of origin to escape violence. Then, in this new country, they see their parents living in fear of violence and the use of force against them, especially if they are undocumented.

What impact does this prevalence of violence have on young people when they become aware of injustice—either directed at them or at others—and seek to address it? Talking specifically about gang violence in her community, the participant quoted above went on:

“In our community, we have found that it is important that we deal with gang violence not only as a ‘criminal’ matter, but that we recognize that many kids turn to gangs because they think gangs can give them what, as immigrants or children of immigrants, they often don't get from the broader culture—protection, a place to belong, a way to get ahead in life.”

The biblical text does not specify where Moses grew up, only that he was raised by his mother on an unintended “scholarship” from Pharaoh! Traditionally he is portrayed as having grown up as a privileged son of the empire. However, when he sees an Egyptian attacking a Hebrew, Moses identifies with the Hebrew victim as one of “his kinsfolk.”

READ Exodus 2:11–15.

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

According to verse 11, Moses becomes aware of the injustice suffered by his people “after [he] had grown up.” Can you remember the first time you became aware of a particular injustice? What was your reaction? What was Moses'?

What was the consequence of Moses' reliance on violence to address the wrong he saw taking place?

How does this “cycle of violence” play out in today's culture?

Identity

READ Exodus 2:16–22

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

What role does Moses' hyphenated identity (as a “Hebrew-Egyptian”) play in this text?

The complexity of Moses' identity is further highlighted by the fact that his status within Egypt, as the child of "foreigners," is precarious. Having committed a crime, Moses is not protected by his connections to Pharaoh—not even the fact that he is the adopted child of Pharaoh's daughter. Instead, his crime gives Pharaoh an opportunity to finish the job he had begun when Moses was a child: Pharaoh seeks to kill Moses (verse 15). Moses flees across the desert to Midian (today's northwest Saudi Arabia, along the coast of the Red Sea), increasing the complexity of his immigrant identity.

In this new land, Moses takes a risk by helping a group of local women who have come to draw water at a "public" well. The women, commentators have pointed out, were likely outsiders themselves, since local customs looked down on families with no male heirs. This fact is further emphasized by the treatment the women receive at the well and by the very fact that they are caring for their flock on their own (without the traditional male protection). When reporting what happened at the well to their father, the women identify Moses as an Egyptian (v. 2:19). Imagine the identity struggle he is going through. He had to flee Egypt for the crime he committed because he had identified with the Hebrews. Yet, here in this new land, he is identified as an Egyptian. His firstborn's name, Gershom, reflects Moses' identity struggle!

"No soy de aqui, ni soy de alla [I am neither from here, nor from there]," said a Bible study participant, quoting a popular song in Spanish. This basic phrase captures the ambivalent reality of immigrants and, increasingly, the feelings of those who move even within national borders for work purposes or for another opportunity.

Pharaoh dies, but his devastating policies continue. The people of Israel have been suffering for over a generation, and there seems to be no relief in sight—that is, until God hears their cry. This image of God hearing the plea of God's people is presented as good news throughout Scripture, highlighting the power of prayer and the assurance of being heard by God. You may invite participants to call out the verbs they are highlighting in the passages and write them on a chalkboard or chart paper. Encourage conversation about ways in which people have experienced God as an "active listener" in their lives. You may also note that God's deep, active concern for the people challenges any easily drawn division between faith and politics. Addressing Moses, God speaks at length about the specific political grievances of the people of Israel. Along with

Moses names his firstborn Gershom, saying, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land" (שֹׂמֵר גֵר *ger sham* meaning "sojourner there," v. 22). What does this say about his sense of belonging? How might questions of identity and belonging be similar or different for immigrants today?

Increasingly, people experience moves in their lives, following new opportunities or needing to move because of the loss of a job. How have you (or how has someone you know) dealt with questions of identity and belonging following a move to a new community?

Call

READ Exodus 2:23-3:10

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

This is one of the best-known and most-loved scenes in the Bible. In pairs, share memories, images, or insights about this story that have been important to you.

Moses' impulsive reaction to the injustice he witnessed in verse 2:11 is contrasted here by God's intentional response to the suffering of the Hebrews. Take a moment to underline the verbs that describe God's actions in verses 2:24-25 (*heard, remembered, looked, took notice*) and 3:7-8 (*observed, heard, knew, come down, bring them up*). Discuss the feel, significance, and message behind such active language.

the *spiritual* liberation from God, which gets a lot of our attention, we see in this account that God's plans are to liberate the Hebrew people *physically* from the oppression they are suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. Spiritual and physical liberation are intricately connected throughout the Scriptures.

Moses' encounter with God will prove transformative. That transformation begins here with physical movement—by the simple act of turning aside. In the Bible, the experience of transformation is often expressed in this kind of physical action.

Write the quote from the movie so that all participants can see it. It might be helpful to introduce the quote with the following bit of trivia about the movie: Selena is played by Jennifer Lopez, and her father by Edward James Olmos.

The Bible passage highlights Moses' experience of movement. Out in the desert tending sheep (v. 3:1), he is as physically removed from his past in Egypt as he is, we can assume, emotionally distanced. Given the difficulties in his early life and the new life he has built for himself in Midian, he is likely to be at a point where he wants very little to do with his past. That's just when God, identified twice as the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob, comes to him. God's revelation and call to Moses requires both the openness that comes with movement and a new place, and the rootedness of his past. Be attentive to the way that this balance can be explored with participants.

EXTRA: If you have a map of the region, you could identify Egypt, Midian, and Mount Horeb. Mount Horeb is also known as Mount Sinai. While its exact location is not known, most scholars agree it was somewhere in the middle of what is now known as the Sinai Peninsula. Similarly, Moses' task of reconciling the various parts of his hyphenated identity take place in the physical middle between his past in Egypt and his present in Midian. Like many immigrants—and, in a way, many of us who must navigate various roles and identities of whatever kind—Moses is called to live out his calling straddling two worlds. His best gifts will flourish when he seeks to reconcile the identities within himself.

EXTRA: Verse 3:8 recognizes that the land being promised to Moses and his people is already inhabited by others. You may find it important to address, or at least acknowledge, this issue in the study. It is important to note that the Bible offers various versions of the account of Israel's entrance into the "promised land"—from the "conquest" emphasis in Joshua to the less forceful "settlement" in the book of Judges. In fact, diverse accounts coexist even within the narratives of each of these two books. (For further reading, see <http://www.crioice.org/conquest.html>).

TIP: Depending on your group's dynamics, you may need to take a more active role in helping participants connect Moses' own experience of self-discovery—reconnecting to his past while imagining a new future—to their own sense of call and who they are. At the same time, this kind of conversation will require some space, so be mindful to allow time—even in silence—for participants to reflect and come to the point where they are able and willing to share with one another.

"When the Lord saw that he had turned aside..." (v. 3:4). How might this physical "turning" indicate the kind of internal transformation that will be required of Moses?

"We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time! It's exhausting!" says a frustrated Abraham Quintanilla to his daughter, Mexican-American pop star Selena, in the 1997 film by the artist's name. In our Bible passage, Moses encounters a similar tension between his present and his past. In a new place ("beyond the wilderness," v. 3:1), he is confronted with his past (a call from a God identified twice in this section as the God of his ancestors, v. 2:24 and 3:6). How will he need to draw on both of his "identities" in order to be able to answer the call? How is he, as a Hebrew-Egyptian, particularly suited for the job?

I Will Send You

Like youth and young adults across the generations, Moses "grew up" when he became aware of some challenging realities, and by spending time "away from home." How has your understanding of yourself evolved over the years?

Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush was transformational. In pairs, share a particular moment or experience that was important in making you the person you are today.

Moses' surprise at seeing the burning bush may have paled in comparison to God's statement, recorded in verse 3:10: "I will send YOU to Pharaoh." Explore with the group the connection between being "at home in our own skin" and a willingness and ability to find and follow our calling in life.

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.