

# Out of the Waters

## RESISTING the POWER of FEAR

A FAITH on the MOVE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

### Session 5: What Is That in Your Hand? – Exodus 3:9-4:17

“...‘What is that in your hand?’” Exodus 4:2\*

#### Introduction

We’ve all had those moments of clarity when we realize the magnitude of the challenges and opportunities faced by our world. At those times, it is easy to become overwhelmed. Today’s text names this reality directly, and at points quite comically. At the same time, it reminds us, as the saying goes, that God doesn’t always call the equipped, but God always equips the called. The remaining sessions of this study will focus on larger portions of text. You will want to plan the session in a way that allows you to cover the material in the time allotted for your Bible study. This may require you as facilitator to take a more active role in keeping the conversation focused and moving.

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 of materials that tell the story of your congregation’s ministry—newsletters, bulletins, event fliers, pictures, etc. Try to reflect the congregation’s various ministries, including outreach and social advocacy beyond the congregation.

**TIP:** As in earlier sections of Exodus, humor is central to this session’s Scripture portion. Depending on your group’s dynamics, you may read the statement about the phony visit to your representative and encourage participants to have fun coming up with excuses, or you could move directly to inviting them to share their experience of trying to recruit volunteers for a project. List responses on a board or chart paper, and if you find it helpful, return to them throughout the session by comparing them to the excuses offered by Moses.

#### Opening Prayer

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

#### Excuses, Excuses

*Feigning seriousness, tell the group: “We’re forming a delegation to go to the state capitol this Tuesday to meet with our representative [include the name of your local representative if you know it]. You have 30 seconds to come up with an excuse why you can’t go.”*

Let’s try to come up with a list of the best—or at least the most common—excuses we have heard when trying to recruit volunteers.

In spite of his protestations about not being good with words, Moses proves adept at coming up with excuses when God calls him to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go!”

\* 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.

**TIP:** In today's text we return to Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. Take a moment to reconnect with participants, and invite them to offer things that stayed with them from the last session or reflections the conversation sparked for them through the week.

Verses 9-10 offer a "summary" of last week's reading. Encourage those who volunteer to read to have fun with the text. For example, the person reading God's part in verse 3:10 could point his or her finger to the person playing the part of Moses when he/she says: "I will send YOU to Pharaoh." Similarly, some exaggeration can help bring the point home in reading Moses' astonished response in verse 11.

Moses proves quite adept at coming up with excuses and, in the process, reveals our fears and insecurities as humans when it comes to "doing the right thing." At the same time, the passage models a different approach to prayer. You might find it helpful in advance of the session to identify Moses' various excuses and God's responses to them (see chart below). Additionally, you could write these on the board or chart paper as you discuss them with the group.

	<b>Text</b>	<b>Moses</b>	<b>God</b>
A	3:11-12	Who am I?	I will be with you
B	3:13-14	What is his name?	I Am Who I Am
C	4:1-9	What if...?	What's in your hand?
D	4:10-11	I am slow of speech	Who gives speech?
E	4:13-17	Send someone else	Aaron shall speak for you

### Who am I?

In response to God's eloquent acknowledgment of the Hebrews' suffering and to God's monumental plans, Moses offers the first of his long series of "buts." In many respects, his hesitation reveals that he fully understands the implications of what he's being asked to do. Moses' first concern is familiar to anyone who has felt a calling to advocate for justice and change. Moses asks simply, "Who am I...?"

Reflecting on his experience addressing the working conditions for tomato pickers in south Florida, a Bible study participant said, "A *uno siempre le dicen: y tú, ¿quién te crees?* [Whenever you start asking questions], people always say, who do you think you are?"

Moses' identity question, "who am I," points both to his own insecurities and to his hesitation about taking on such a challenging task. God answers Moses' concern with the unequivocal promise, "I will be with you," and by making a reference to the covenant God will make with him and the Israelites when they return to that very mountain (i.e., the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Horeb/Sinai, see Exodus 19:20 ff).

### What is God's name?

Moses isn't buying. Even though he may have grown up hearing the stories about how the God of his ancestors had a hand in his miraculous survival as a child, Moses just isn't so sure he knows enough about this God to go off to deliver his people from the hands of the mighty Pharaoh. Besides, he has settled his life just fine

## Who?

READ Exodus 3:9-12.

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

Drawing from your own experience—perhaps particularly experiences with children!—discuss the power of the word "but." What do you think of Moses' persistent use of the word in his conversation with God?

What does Moses' first excuse reveal about him?

What does God's response reveal about God?

READ Exodus 3:13-14

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

In asking to know God's name, Moses is interested in more than the formalities of a personal introduction. He is really asking God, "Who are you? What are your 'credentials'?" What does Moses already know about God?

in Midian, making it his new home, setting up his family, securing work, etc. "He's made it in the suburbs," said a Bible study participant wryly. Moses' hesitation is understandable. The one and only attempt he made to help "his people" didn't end well. And now, even though the previous Pharaoh who was seeking to kill him has passed on, there is likely still an outstanding warrant for Moses' arrest. With all this mounting evidence, Moses moves from questioning himself to questioning God—"Who should I say sent me?"

Although God eventually grows weary of Moses' excuses (v. 4:14), at first God does entertain his doubts and questions. In fact, Moses' questioning leads to the revelation of God's very name. Moses accomplishes through verbal jousting what Jacob failed to do by the use of force when wrestling with the angel of God in Genesis 32:29. What does this say about the power of prayer?

**EXTRA:** In an earlier session we pointed to the parallels between Moses' story and the birth narratives of Jesus. This connection is further established in the language of this passage when it refers to the death of Pharaoh. In almost identical language, Joseph is told in a dream that he, Jesus, and Mary may return home from their time in Egypt, for "those who sought the life of the child have died" (Matthew 2:20). Compare this phrasing with Exodus 2:23 and 4:18.

Even having been assured about God's presence with him and given God's very name, Moses is still not convinced. Perhaps Moses was more of a veteran of community organizing than what we are told in the Bible, and he already knew how difficult it can be to organize people on behalf of a meaningful cause! "What if they don't believe me?" he wonders out loud. One of the Bible study groups at Holden Village in Washington included several individuals who had been active in their communities setting up business cooperatives and advocacy groups among new immigrants. Many of them heard echoes of their own struggle in Moses' doubts. With a laugh, one participant said, "I've shared Moses' doubts... I just often have wished I also had a burning bush, a magic stick, and a couple of those other tricks!"

In v. 4:2 God directs a question to Moses: "What do you have in your hand?" This shifts the dynamics of the dialogue—until now it has been Moses asking all the questions. This shift highlights the importance of this portion of the text. A Bible study participant in Iowa said, "Moses needs to look no further than his own hands to find what he needs for the task that is being given to him. God has deliberately chosen Moses for who Moses was, and God would use what Moses had on hand for God's purposes."

Things turn funny in the verses that follow (vv. 4:3-4). As instructed, Moses throws his staff on the ground and in amazement watches it turn into a snake! We've heard this story so many times, we might miss how extraordinary—and how funny—this scene really is. Seeing the snake, Moses takes off running—a feeling not quite captured by the NRSV's "[Moses] drew back from it." That's when God—showing some significant

What does God's name, "I AM WHO I AM," reveal about God?

What does the fact that God entertains Moses' doubts and questions teach us about prayer (talking with God)? What does it say about the role of questions in our life of faith?

## What if...?

READ Exodus 4:1-9

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

Moses has expressed reservations about himself and about who God is. Now he voices concern about the community he is called to serve (v. 4:1). Can you relate to his concern? If so, how?

Don't you just love it when people answer a question with a question? What do you think of God doing this to Moses in verse 4:2? How does God's question change the dynamic of the conversation?

What do we, as the church, have "on hand" in order to advocate on behalf of others?

God turns Moses' staff into a snake and then asks him to grab it by the tail! Do you think the phrase "he drew back from it" captures how you would react if a stick you had just been holding turned into a snake? What words might better describe your feelings?

sense of humor—commands Moses to grab the snake by the tail. Bible study participants loved this great image of a call to action: “*Como dicen en mi pueblo, agarrar al toro por los cachos* [It takes courage to grab the problem by the tail—or, as the saying goes, take the bull by the horns].”

**EXTRA:** Being asked to grab a snake was demanding. Having his hand turn leprous—something that would spell both physical and social doom to an individual—was devastating. These physical signs give Moses a clear indication of how demanding this calling would be.

Verse 4:10 gives Moses a chance to try his hand at comedy. “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent,” he begins, and then points out that the burning bush and the other miracles have done little to improve his eloquence. This is quite the sentence for someone who claims to be “slow of speech and slow of tongue,” especially coming after such an elaborate list of excuses! The comedy of this verse is perhaps better captured when explored in a variety of translations of the Bible:

- Moses, however, said to the LORD, “If you please, LORD, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor recently, nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue.” (New American Bible)
- But Moses pleaded with the LORD, “O Lord, I’m just not a good speaker. I never have been, and I’m not now, even after you have spoken to me. I’m clumsy with words.” (New Living Translation)

One of the participants in the Bible study put it this way: “It is as if Moses is saying to God, ‘All these tricks are great, but what I really need is some practical tools—like being able to talk, which you have yet to do anything about.’”

God’s response reveals a growing impatience with Moses: “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go...” Imagine God addressing your questions, fears, and hesitations about taking on a challenging call. Can you hear God saying to Moses, and to you, “C’mon already! Get on with it!”

Just when you think God’s tone with Moses would have settled the matter, Moses still has his reservations—and the courage to articulate them! In what has to be the most classic response to the daunting call of addressing injustice, Moses says to God: “O my Lord, please send someone else” (note the polite tone!). In Bible studies across the country, this last retort from Moses evoked the greatest laughter—both because of its boldness and because of its familiarity.

Have there been times when you have felt God has asked you to “grab a stick-turned-snake by the tail”?

### How About...?

READ Exodus 4:9b-12

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

What do you think about the eloquence of verse 4:10 (especially coming from someone claiming to be “slow of speech”)?

According to Moses, what impact has his encounter with God had thus far?

Re-read verses 4:9b-12, imagining yourself in God’s place. Rewrite God’s response to Moses in your own words, and then share it with the group.

READ Exodus 4:13-17

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

Having run out of excuses, Moses says to God, “Send someone else.” Have you ever felt this way...perhaps even said it out loud?

However, in the end, God has the final retort. "What of your brother Aaron?" God says, his anger "kindled." Or in the more direct language of The New Living Translation, "Then the LORD became angry with Moses. 'All right,' he said. 'What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? He is a good speaker.'"

"Even now," God continues, "[Aaron] is coming out to meet you." In not-too-subtle terms, God basically says to Moses that while Moses was busy coming up with one excuse after another, God had already recruited Aaron to help with the job. From the beginning, God knew this was not a "one-person job." Like the women in chapter 2, who worked together to rescue the infant Moses, Moses and Aaron would now work together to free the Hebrews from Pharaoh's oppression.

**TIP:** Moses provides us with a model for prayer that, while respectful, is honest and even demanding. How might the example of Moses' conversation with God provide us a model for our own prayer and the prayer of our communities? Consider taking a set of prayers used in your congregation's worship and "revising" them to reflect Moses' more audacious style of prayer. If your congregation uses pre-written prayers, you could distribute one petition to each participant. If the prayers offered in your worship are more extemporaneous, you could try to create a "transcript" from a recording of a recent worship service.

**TIP:** Consider using the following prayer as the closing prayer for this session:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 317.)

What do you think of God's response to Moses?

God provided Aaron as a partner for Moses' mission. Who are your partners in ministry—both for you individually and for your congregation?

### How About Me?

Which of Moses' excuses do you most relate to? How do God's responses challenge and encourage you?

What does this text teach us about prayer?

According to a 2008 study by the Pew Forum on Religious Life, the vast majority of new immigrants to the United States are Christian (an estimated 74 percent of them). What does the church have "on hand" to contribute to the challenges and opportunities brought about by this influx of new people into the American Christian tradition?

### 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.*