

Out of the Waters

RESISTING the POWER of FEAR

A FAITH on the MOVE BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Session 6: Now You Shall See What I Will Do – Exodus 5:1-6:7 (selected)

“... ‘Now you shall see what I will do...’” Exodus 6:1*

Introduction

In Session 1 we discussed the importance the act of remembering plays in the Exodus story and to the biblical story as a whole. We noted that the book begins with a genealogy, connecting its story to those of the ancestors. This remembering is contrasted with forgetful Pharaohs—an earlier one who did not know Joseph and now one who derisively states he does not know Moses’ God. Central to today’s story is Walter Brueggeman’s argument in *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* that Exodus tells of two competing “Lords”—Pharaoh and God—and their corresponding views of reality. Brueggeman writes:

The early Hebrews had settled for a slave narrative as their proper self-presentation [a narrative supplied to them by Pharaoh through his brutal policies]. That narrative is disrupted by another narrative that has Yahweh the liberator as the key and decisive agent. The decision to stay in Egypt or leave for the promise is a decision about which narrative to follow, whether to understand the “plot of life” according to the character Pharaoh or according to a different plot featuring Yahweh. (Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, p. 35)

This final session of the study focuses on a large portion 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 with images of the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea from art, children’s Bibles, etc. Also, consider displaying fliers from the labor movement, especially those that portray the work of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union.

Before reading today’s text, you may choose to read Exodus 5:18-23 (which is not included in the “Out of the Waters” booklet), or you may read the following summary: “After his encounter with God at the burning bush, Moses makes arrangements to return to Egypt. His wife Zipporah is instrumental in saving Moses’ life from peril as they travel. Once in Egypt, Moses and Aaron gather the Israelites and tell of God’s plans for them. Chapter 5 concludes with the words, “The people believed; and when they heard that the LORD had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped” (5:31). So far, so good... until Moses and Aaron go before Pharaoh!

Opening Prayer

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

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In Exodus 1:17 we are told that Shiphra and Puah feared God more than Pharaoh—they chose to believe God’s narrative or version of reality rather than that of Pharaoh. Now it’s Moses’ turn to confront Pharaoh. He, too, like the midwives, is taking this risk because of his relationship with the God of his ancestors. Unlike the midwives, however, Moses has personal experience to draw from (the stories of his own miraculous survival in childhood and his recent encounter with God) as well as some degree of status. Pointing to Moses’ identity as a hyphenated Egyptian, a Bible study participant in Iowa stated: “*Moises tiene papeles. Tiene esa ventaja sobre las comadronas. [Moses has his papers (he’s “documented”); he’s got an edge on the midwives].*”

EXTRA: Divide into two groups and talk about how you would stage Moses’ encounter with Pharaoh for a play or a movie—one group from Moses’ perspective and one from Pharaoh’s. How would the statements of the characters be heard from the perspective of your group? How is God viewed differently by each? Return together and compare the groups’ perspectives and insight.

Is Moses lying when he asks Pharaoh to give the Hebrew people a three-day pass to go into the desert? Were the midwives lying when they were confronted by Pharaoh for not following his commands (1:18-19)? Were Moses’ mother and sister lying when they figured out a way to make sure the child survived (2:3-9)? As we discussed in Session 3 while focusing on non-violent civil disobedience, people throughout history have had to make difficult ethical decisions when faced with what they believe to be unjust laws.

Because we read the story with the full knowledge of how things turn out, it is quite easy to side with Shiphrah, Puah, Moses, and the others who chose to go against the law of the land. Such a choice is often only clear in retrospect, however. Harriet Tubman, Ghandi, and Martin Luther King Jr. were seldom viewed as heroes in their own time, especially by those in authority. Their choices were complex. Reading this text with groups of undocumented workers who, out of desperation, have chosen to go against a law they believe to be unjust, allows no such easy reading. This is also the case for those who work closely with undocumented workers, like a grower in Yakima, Washington, who stated, “The current immigration system doesn’t provide for the legal means to supply our nations’ labor needs. When people say that undocumented workers need to be willing to take their turn in line [to obtain a proper visa to work in the United States], they don’t realize there is no line to stand in if you

Who Is the Lord?

READ Exodus 5:1-5.

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

When “Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh” (5:1), they followed in the steps of Shiphra and Puah, the Hebrew midwives (1:15 and 18). How might these “meetings” have been similar or different?

Moses likely grew up hearing the stories of the midwives’ encounter with Pharaoh. How might the memory of that earlier encounter have shaped Moses’ approach to Pharaoh?

“Who is the Lord...? ... I do not know the Lord...,” says Pharaoh (5:2). In the first two sessions we discussed the importance of memory and of knowing, pointing out the significance of the fact that “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (1:8). What’s the significance of the knowledge or memory of God in this scene?

Moses and Aaron only request a temporary reprieve from Pharaoh (“a three days’ journey,” 5:3). That wasn’t exactly God’s plan. God actually said, “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...” (3:8). What’s going on here? Is Moses being careful? Is he being tricky?

Is God—who promised Moses, “I will be your mouth and teach you what you are to speak” (4:12)—being careful and/or tricky?

What are the difficult choices made by those who come to the realization that they must confront laws they believe to be unjust?

are willing to come all the way from Mexico or Guatemala to pick apples in Washington [see note in Session 2 about the imbalance between labor needs and available work permits]. The system is broken, leading otherwise decent, law-abiding employers and workers to find ways around the law just so that they can make a living... It's like what happened with prohibition—eventually the law had to be changed.”

The word “broken” is the most common adjective used by people on all sides of the immigration debate to refer to the current immigration system in the United States. Yet there are strong disagreements on how to fix the system, as well as a lack of political will to take the risks necessary to go about changing it. How might the reading of this text invite us to engage the conversation about immigration with a level of complexity that does not reduce it to the often quoted slogan of “What part of ‘illegal’ don’t you understand?”?

Pharaoh wastes no time dealing with the threat of a revolt among his workers. “That same day,” he commands action from both his Egyptian taskmasters and the Israelite supervisors. In Bible Studies conducted with migrant workers, particularly those who work without proper documentation, deep silence usually followed the reading of this portion of the text. Pharaoh’s oppressive tactics echoed those they often experienced at the hands of abusive employers. Sworn testimony about working conditions from workers at a meatpacking plant in Iowa provides chilling parallels to the story (names have been changed as indicated):

- They treated workers very poorly there. Women were abused. Work was very hard and hours long... They constantly were pushing [Amanda] to work faster. They would yell and at times use obscenities and very strong language. When [Amanda] was sick, they would tell her that she still had to work or they would fire her. Because of her desperate need, [Amanda] had no choice but to accept it in order to provide for her children. I saw her exhausted. That’s what life is like for Hispanics. We are not treated well. But there is a God of justice, and I hope that no one will suffer like [Amanda] suffered in that company.
- They yelled at them if they didn’t work fast enough. They would tell them that they had had too much sex with their husbands, and that’s why they couldn’t work faster.
- Sometimes [Gabriel] would get sick because he was working so many hours and they would run the [processing] line so fast. Often they wouldn’t give them breaks, and only 15 minutes for lunch. On top of that, the supervisors demanded more work from them and would speed up the line, and no matter how hard he tried and how much he worked, the supervisors would yell at him and humiliate him in front of others.
- Sometimes she would be running a fever and ask permission to go home, but they would not let her. If her stomach hurt and she asked to go home, they wouldn’t let her either. They didn’t care what happened to her.
- I saw the fear he had that they would yell at him. He would take off his work equipment as fast as he could, eat as fast as possible, and then get back to work as quickly as he could so that they wouldn’t yell at him or threaten him with the loss of his job. He worked like a slave to try to give life to his children, living like all the rest under the fear of losing his job.

Work to Live or Live to Work?

READ Exodus 5:6-18

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

If you imagine Pharaoh as a corporate CEO and Moses a union organizer, how might this scene play out?

EXTRA: How do the dynamics change if we imagine Moses as an advocate for the rights of undocumented workers?

What tactics does Pharaoh use to squelch the “revolt” brewing among his workers? How do these compare with tactics often used in labor disputes?

- You couldn't be late even a little bit, because the supervisors would tell you, "If you don't want to work, you know where the door is [that] you came in through, and you can go out of that door as well."

Sadly, these abuses were often buttressed by the threat of calling the authorities—particularly immigration enforcement—if workers dared to complain or tried to organize. The workers' fear spread, affecting even those with proper work documentation. This fear and the poor enforcement of labor laws—rather than the immigration status of the workers—are often identified by labor experts as the biggest contributors to low wages in a number of industries.

EXTRA: Bible Study participants who worked in agriculture as farm laborers also saw their work experience reflected in the Pharaoh's use of taskmasters and supervisors. Increasingly, farm labor depends on a complex system of contractors and subcontractors. The Pharaoh today is the combination of market forces that drive the price of products down, leading farmers to put pressure on their contractors, who in turn press the workers even further. In this view, how are we as consumers part of Pharaoh's oppressive system?

"Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!" says Pharaoh. What to Pharaoh seems like a luxury, even a waste of time, is in fact a central part of being human. Moses is asking for the opportunity—denied to those who live in slavery—to have time for rest and to celebrate the traditions that are important to his people's culture, faith, and identity. Additionally, deliverance is tied to the regular practice of rest as the story of Exodus unfolds.

Following the example of his predecessor, Pharaoh sees work not as a life-giving gift of God, but as a tool for control. "Work to live, not live to work," goes a saying that tries to mark the difference. For many immigrants, the idea of "working to live" rather than "living to work" seems like a luxury. For many, the decision to migrate—even without documentation in some cases—is motivated by the hope that they may one day be able to "work to live." If they are not able to do so themselves, they hope their sacrifices translate into their children being able to do so.

The Exodus passage equates Pharaoh's refusal to recognize the Hebrew people's basic need for freedom with his refusal to recognize God. By doing so it invites a question: How does the exploitation of workers—then and now—reveal not only a lack of recognition of their humanity, but also a refusal to recognize God's sovereignty over creation and over people?

In a moment of courage, the Israelite supervisors actually try to plead with Pharaoh for their own situation and that of the workers (6:15-16). Having failed at getting any positive resolution, they confront Moses and Aaron (6:21). Like thousands of labor organizers since, Moses cries out to God in despair: "Why did you ever send me?"

Pharaoh's labor empire is portrayed as a complex hierarchy of middle managers that includes supervisors from within the Israelite ranks (5:14-15). What do you think about the role of these "Israelite supervisors"? Compare their participation in Pharaoh's system to Shiphra and Puah's earlier refusal to be co-opted by Pharaoh.

Repeatedly, Pharaoh derides the Israelites as lazy (5:8, 17). Contrast this to God's command, built right into the Ten Commandments: "But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work..." (See Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:15.)

How do we deal with the struggle to balance "working to live" with "living to work"? What is the role of the law (labor protections) in striking that balance?

By a Mighty Hand

READ Exodus 5:19-6:1

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

"Better the devil you know (than the devil you don't)" goes the saying. How is this kind of thinking at play in the Israelites' reaction to Moses?

Moses and Aaron's experience of rejection has been the experience of countless people throughout generations who have tried to advocate for significant social change. We ourselves may at times feel that change is not really possible even in areas of our lives or our society that we care deeply about.

The people are disheartened and, therefore, unable to listen to God's proposal for liberation. They, like Pharaoh, cannot imagine an alternative to the complex oppressive system already in place. Many Bible Study participants expressed surprise, even shock, at the honesty of the biblical account. They hear their own despair echoed in Moses' words. The task of addressing injustice is quite overwhelming, and the forces in place to maintain the status quo are quite overwhelming. It is only by "a mighty hand" (used twice in verse 6:1) that change will come about. Pointing out that God's deliverance in Exodus was not dependent on what may have seemed possible or realistic, Walter Brueggemann writes, "We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical or viable but whether it is imaginable.... The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined.... We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination have been so assaulted and co-opted by the royal consciousness that we have been robbed of the courage or power to think an alternative thought..." (Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 39)

There are many excellent resources for studying the remainder of the Exodus story, including Terence Fretheim's *Exodus* from the series, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*.

Share a time when you felt like Moses did when asking God, "Why did you ever send me?" (5:22).

How does the tone of the narrative change in verse 6:1?

In the Bible, God's alternative vision for the world is articulated as God doing something new (Isaiah 43:19 and Revelation 21:1). Moses is called to articulate God's alternative vision to the Israelites, and even to Pharaoh. Who provides that alternative vision when it comes to the challenges faced by your church or community?

What would it be like to read Exodus 6:6-7 in the company of those whose testimonies of abuse in the workplace we heard earlier, especially if we read it as if God was speaking directly to them?

Whose role is it to provide an alternative vision in our national debate around immigration? What do you think the church's role is to be in that regard?

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.