

Early Exodus



SESSION 1: Focusing mostly on Exodus 1, Proverbs 8–9, and Ephesians 5

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage...

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:1–7

[p. 48]

Comment 1

The latter chapters of Genesis tell about a time of famine and economic hardship. According to these opening verses from Exodus, it was during this time that Jacob and his family moved to Egypt.

They were foreigners. They spoke a different language. They embodied a different culture. They were there to take advantage of the resources that could be found in this much wealthier land. Before long, thanks to those resources, they multiplied. There were more and more of them. In fact, to the Egyptians, it seemed like “the land was filled with them.”

For Discussion

Do you think that the vast lands of Egypt could really have been “filled” with the descendants of Jacob? Or might it just have *seemed* that way to those who had lived in the land for a longer time?

How is this similar or different from situations today? And what does it tell us about today’s patterns of cultural and ethnic perception?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:8–10

[p. 48]

Comment 2

According to the book of Genesis, Jacob and his family were initially welcomed to Egypt because

Joseph, one of the Jacob’s sons, had the deep and abiding respect of Egypt’s ruler.

But in the world of politics, people change. Power shifts. Alliances crumble. So according to Exodus, a new ruler arose. It was someone who “did not know Joseph.” It was someone who felt no connection—or obligation—to the “resident aliens” who had descended from Jacob.

For Discussion

What do you make of the words that the ruler speaks to “his people”? What do the words tell us about this ruler’s perspective and goals?

How are these words similar or different in their social strategy and in their social impact from the words used by some people today concerning those who are perceived as “different”?

Comment 3

According to Exodus, the ruler of Egypt deliberately used lies to foment a spirit of fear. He portrayed the people of Israel as “more numerous and more powerful than we.” His claim couldn’t possibly have been true, but it would have been an effective way of rallying certain people to his side.

Egypt’s ruler then added to the spirit of fear by portraying the Israelites as potential terrorists. He suggested that “in the event of war,” they will “join our enemies and fight against us.” He used lies to divide. He used lies to pave the way for the outrageous atrocities that he wanted to commit against those whom he had decided to despise.

Scripture to Read

Ephesians 5:6–9

[p. 1337]

Comment 4

The letter to the Ephesians urges God’s people not to be deceived by those who use false but compelling words—words that foment fear and hate and human division.

Ephesians says that when we shape our lives by lies that are spoken around us, we end up behaving like those who are “disobedient” rather than living each day like “children of light.”

For Discussion

Why do you suppose Ephesians describes those words that deceive as “empty” words? In what sense are they “empty”?

Why do you suppose the people of Egypt believed the “empty words” that were spoken about the children of Israel?

How can we help each other more quickly recognize those deceitful words that are being spoken today, words that seek to keep us from living as “children of light”?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:8–12

[p. 48]

Comment 5

The rulers of Egypt spoke “empty words.” They mouthed hateful words, fear-inducing words. Others undoubtedly repeated the slogans. Soon many Egyptians had been deceived.

Responding in fear, they willingly joined in their rulers’ cruel plan. They enslaved the people of Israel, oppressing them with hard labor. They forced them to build great cities. An “empty” fear had paved the way for discrimination, brutality, and enslavement.

Comment 6

The atrocities undertaken by those who had been deceived undoubtedly did great harm. The children of Israel endured great suffering. But Exodus likewise makes clear that from the Egyptian perspective, the brutality of those who allowed their lives to be

shaped by “empty words” profited nothing.

The more the people of Israel were oppressed, says the text, “the more they multiplied and spread.” In other words, the fear and dread that the nation’s lying rulers had fomented—it did not diminish. Instead, it grew.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:13–14

[p. 48]

Comment 7

Deceitful words—words that were “empty” of God’s light—set loose a vicious cycle of events. Not only did fear multiply itself, but so did the ruthless brutality that is so often fomented by fear.

We’re told that the lives of the people of Israel were made bitter through “hard service” and “every kind of field labor.” Yet none of this brutality did any good. None of it subdued the fear. None of it diminished the hate. It’s as if “empty words” had set loose a reign of terror, and it inflicted a price—though in different ways—on Egyptians and Israelites alike.

For Discussion

In what ways, if any, can we see a similar dynamic at work today?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:22

[p. 48]

Comment 8

Perhaps Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, isn’t getting enough of a reaction to his lies and deceptions. The fear that he has tried to incite isn’t working well enough. So he issues a firm order. The order is directed to “all his people.” They are to drown every male child that is born to the Hebrews.

The language in this verse reflects a divisive mentality. It’s a mentality that categorizes and divides. Pharaoh gives the order to “his” people, meaning that he sees “his” people as fundamentally different from “those” people. The order further suggests that he sees the male children who are “born to the Hebrews” as fundamentally lacking in worth. They

are dangerous in the extreme. From his perspective, they are fit only to be killed.

Genocide is his plan. Genocide is his dream.

For Discussion

Why might Pharaoh have called for the killing of only male babies?

In what other ways, besides a literal extermination, are people today sometimes ordered—or perhaps tempted—to undermine and destroy others?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:15–16

[p. 48]

Comment 9

The king of Egypt is becoming desperate. He has uttered “empty words.” He has done his best to foment fear and division. He has given clear orders, suggesting that Hebrew children are unworthy to live. But it’s beginning to appear that he has been tricked by his own trick. He has been deceived by his own deceit.

The problem, which he himself has created, isn’t getting better. It’s getting worse. So according to the story, he now speaks with utter desperation to two midwives who regularly help with pregnancies among the Hebrew people.

Comment 10

The book of Exodus never names the Pharaoh. Although he clearly thinks of himself as the mighty ruler of Egypt, from the viewpoint of scripture, he is just another sad, misguided individual.

It’s Shiphrah and Puah who are named. It’s Shiphrah and Puah who stand head and shoulders above the Pharaoh. It’s Shiphrah and Puah whose lives are worth celebrating, whose deeds are worth remembering.

Frantically, the self-deceived Pharaoh orders Shiphrah and Puah to kill any male child who is born to these resident aliens, these “foreigners” who simply “don’t belong” in “his” land. “I’ll get rid of them,” he schemes. “I’ll get rid of them at last!”

Scripture to Read

Proverbs 9:1–6

[p. 583]

Comment 11

In this dramatic scene from the book of Proverbs, a woman named “Wisdom” has built herself a house. It’s a grand home with seven pillars. The fullness of true strength is there to uphold it.

We’re told that inside the house, Wisdom has slaughtered some animals. She has mixed some wine. She has set a table. There’s a feast to be had. There’s a dinner to be enjoyed.

Comment 12

Before long, an invitation is issued. Wisdom sends out her “servant-girls.” From the highest hills in the town, they issue a welcoming word: “You that are simple, turn in here!”

To all who lack sense, Wisdom cries, “Come! Eat of my bread! Drink of my wine! Lay aside immaturity! Set aside those ‘empty words’ to which you have been listening. Walk instead in the way of insight. Behave instead in keeping with the God of light.”

For Discussion

Based on this little scene from the book of Proverbs, do you think that we are to understand true wisdom as being manifested more in *what we know*—or in *how we live*?

What else, if anything, can we learn from this passage?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:17

[p. 48]

Comment 13

Somehow or other, Shiphrah and Puah recognized that they had a choice. It was a choice that others might not have even seen.

Shiphrah and Puah realized that they could be “good citizens” and wallow in the “empty words” uttered by a self-exalted, self-deceiving ruler, becoming destructive agents of his festering brutality. Or instead they could feast at Wisdom’s table, letting

their behavior be shaped by a rich truth—a truth that was ready to empower them, a truth that was already calling them to live as courageous “children of light.”

Comment 14

Because of the Wisdom that ran strong through their veins, Shiphrah and Puah made the right choice, the hard choice. It was the “children of light” choice.

They chose rightly, for they were apparently in touch with a Wisdom that far exceeded any “wisdom” that could be found in the pompous, headstrong ruler of the mighty nation in which they were living. Because of that Wisdom, they willfully disobeyed the law of the land. They willfully set aside clear orders they had been given, and they willfully allowed every male child they saw to live.

Scripture to Read

Ephesians 5:15–17

[p. 1337]

Comment 15

According to Ephesians, true wisdom is not something that we store in our heads. It’s something that manifests itself in our lives.

According to Ephesians, the days in which we live are evil. In other words, there are still Pharaohs fomenting fear and division. There are still Pharaohs promoting brutality and destruction.

Like Shiphrah and Puah, we have a choice. We can join in the foolish, self-defeating ways of evil or we can “understand what the will of the Lord is”—and do it.

Comment 16

A contemporary gospel song talks about saying “yes, yes, yes” to God’s will and to God’s way.

But according to scripture, we aren’t asked to say “yes, yes, yes” just with our lips. We’re also asked—like Shiphrah and Puah—to say “yes, yes, yes” with our lives. We’re asked—like Shiphrah and Puah—to follow Wisdom’s way, courageously living as “children of light,” even when it means blatantly disobeying those who seek to use us in efforts that are

demeaning or destructive.

Scripture to Read

Proverbs 8:1–6

[p. 582]

Comment 17

Once again, Proverbs offers a scene in which Wisdom can be found calling to all who so badly need to learn “what is right.” She calls on the heights. She calls on the roadways. She calls at the portal of every city and every crossroad. She goes wherever humans gather—and there she earnestly issues her invitation.

It’s an invitation not just to Shiphrah and Puah but an invitation to us all. It’s an invitation to manifest wisdom by living in God’s own “noble” and righteous ways.

Scripture to Read

Proverbs 9:13–18

[p. 584]

Comment 18

Proverbs has already told us that Wisdom is earnestly inviting all who are “simple” to come and feast at her glorious table. But here we learn that there is a competing invitation as well. It’s issued by a “foolish woman,” a teacher of ignorant ways. Her voice is “loud.” She sits in high places, calling to all who pass, “You who are simple, turn in here!”

Earlier, Proverbs portrayed Wisdom’s table as a joyous feast with meat and wine, but according to Proverbs, all that the teacher of foolish ways can offer her guests is stale bread and polluted water. Conversation at this table is solemn and grim, for those who sit here, says Proverbs, are fellowshiping with the dead. They are being trained in death and destruction, schooled in war and hate, earning their degree in brutality and torture.

For Discussion

In what ways, if any, can this portrait of competing invitations enhance our understanding of the communion that we regularly share at what we call “the Lord’s table”?

Scripture to Read

Matthew 10:39 [p. 1157]

Comment 19

In the Gospels, Jesus says something remarkably similar to what we read in Proverbs. He says those who build their life by feasting at the table of foolishness and wickedness will find in the end that they have built their “house,” as it were, on little more than a pile of sand.

On the other hand, those who are willing to “lose their life” by standing up to the Pharaohs of this world—those who are willing to be as wise and courageous as Shiphrah and Puah, pursuing life rather than death, pursuing love rather than hate—they will find that they have not “lost” their life but found it.

Scripture to Read

Proverbs 8:10–11, 32–36 [pp. 582–583]

Comment 20

Wisdom is better than jewels, says Proverbs. Following in God’s ways is better than stuffing your purse with silver or your bank account with dollars. Passionately embracing the endangered—as Shiphrah and Puah did—is better than clutching at gold, for “whoever finds me,” says Wisdom, “finds life and finds favor from the Lord.”

To fail to walk in the ways of Wisdom—to fail to walk in the ways of God’s own Spirit—might put a temporary smile on Pharaoh’s face. It might even foster a gleam of delight in Pharaoh’s eyes. But when we fail to walk in Wisdom’s ways—when we fail to walk with steadfastness in the ways of God’s own Spirit—we are not only injuring ourselves, says Proverbs but we are bringing death and destruction on others as well.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:17–18 [p. 48]

Comment 21

According to the Gospels, Jesus sometimes told his followers that he had come “not to bring peace

but a sword.”

In other words, walking with courage in God’s ways can get us in trouble. Feasting at Wisdom’s table—rather than at Pharaoh’s table—can put us in mighty hot water. Saying no to the brutal ways of death and destruction can even cause others to turn violently against us.

Comment 22

According to Exodus, Shiphrah and Puah chose whom they would “fear.” They chose whose invitation they would accept. They chose whose loving ways they would courageously embody.

We aren’t told why or how they chose as they did. All that we are told is that they chose the Ruler above all rulers, the only Ruler who was ever worthy of their loyalty, the only Ruler who was ever worthy of their obedience, the only Ruler before whom there was any reason to bow.

Comment 23

Maybe they hoped Pharaoh wouldn’t notice that they hadn’t obeyed his orders. Maybe they hoped that if Pharaoh did notice, he wouldn’t care.

But it didn’t turn out that simple. It didn’t turn out that easy. With a sharp sword dangling from his waist and an angry scowl perched on his face, Pharaoh has demanded to know *why* the male children of the Hebrews are still living, *why* they are still thriving. “Didn’t I tell you to put an end to these dangerous people?” he asks.

For Discussion

How do you suppose Shiphrah and Puah were feeling as the Pharaoh stared them down?

How is this situation faced by Shiphrah and Puah similar to what has happened to others at different times in human history?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:19 [p. 48]

Comment 24

Shiphrah and Puah have chosen the way of Wisdom rather than the way of death. To enable

others to live and to ensure that others will escape the brutality that so often grows from “empty words” and “empty thoughts,” they have deliberately disobeyed the law. They have disobeyed a direct order given by the acknowledged ruler of the land.

Now Pharaoh is on to them. He wants to know *why* they’ve done it. But instead of directly answering his question, instead of talking about how their lives have been changed by a feast that was offered at Wisdom’s table, Shiphrah and Puah begin talking about how strong and how “vigorous” the Hebrew women are.

For Discussion

What do you make of the answer that Shiphrah and Puah give? Are they being deceptive—or truthful? What if anything should we learn from their response?

What effect do you think their answer has on the king of Egypt?

Scripture to Read

Proverbs 8:6–8 [p. 582]

Comment 25

According to Proverbs, all the words that come from Wisdom’s mouth are “noble” and “right.” Her mouth utters “truth.” There is no “wickedness” on her lips.

Indeed, according to Proverbs, nothing that Wisdom says is “twisted” or “crooked,” for as Ephesians 5:10 suggests, Wisdom is forever committed to advancing that which is “pleasing to the Lord.”

Comment 26

Through their words, Shiphrah and Puah try their best to avoid a direct answer to the Pharaoh’s question. They try to focus his attention instead on the inner strength on which oppressed people often must call.

From the Pharaoh’s perspective, their answer may have felt “deceptive,” but in reality it was grounded in God’s Truth: a Truth that rises above the world’s truth, a Truth that affirms the value and

dignity of all people, a Truth that digs in its heels against brutality and death, a Truth that is ready to hear even the world’s faintest cry, a Truth that embraces all who are endangered, all who are despised, all who are forsaken. It’s a Truth that says, “Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” It’s a Truth that even in the midst of raging storms longs to declare, “Peace, be still!” It’s a Truth that shatters walls and breaks chains. It’s a Truth that makes a way when there is no way.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:18–20 [p. 48]

Comment 27

We aren’t told what happened to Shiphrah and Puah in terms of their employment. We aren’t told if the ruler of Egypt allowed them to continue serving as midwives or not. But we *are* told that because of their courageous and Truth-inspired actions, “God dealt well with the midwives.” From the world’s perspective, they may have “lost” whatever they had. But God rewarded them. The Wisdom in which they grounded their lives was richer than silver, more precious than jewels.

Because of their actions, blessings abounded, not just for the midwives but for all those who were endangered, for all those whose feeble cry a loving God had heard.

Scripture to Read

Proverbs 8:13a [p. 582]

Exodus 1:21 [p. 48]

Comment 28

In ancient times, midwives were often childless women, sometimes widows, sometimes women who had never married. But we’re told that because “they feared God,” God turned things around for them.

Shiphrah and Puah are a reminder that to “fear the Lord” is not just an attitude in the heart. It’s not just church attendance or the shouting forth of praises. As Proverbs reminds us, “the fear of the Lord is the hatred of evil.” The “fear of the Lord” is

made manifest by taking a stand—even a hard and dangerous stand—against that which is evil, against that which is grounded in “empty words” that foment death and destruction.

Scripture to Read

Ephesians 5:8–9, 1–2 [pp. 1337, 1336]

Comment 29

According to Ephesians, to be “children of light” is to be “children of God.” It means imitating God’s own love, following in Christ’s own ways, being reshaped and reborn at Wisdom’s own table.

The “communion” that we share at the Lord’s Table offers endless layers of rich meaning. But part of it is perhaps a reflection of some of what we have read in Proverbs, Exodus, and Ephesians. Part of it is perhaps a partaking of Wisdom and courage so that we might be authentic “children of light”—even when fear seeks to bind us, even when weak resignation tries to lead us astray, even when “empty words” spoken by the Pharaohs of our day seek to turn us into agents of division and destruction.

Comment 30

When we partake of “the Lord’s supper,” it’s as if we have passed by the stolen bread and stale water being served up in the home of those who pursue brutality and hate. It’s as if we have chosen to sit instead at Wisdom’s table.

By partaking of the life and love of Jesus, we are declaring to all the world—and to ourselves—who it is from whom we are willing to learn. We are declaring to all the world—and to ourselves—whose

life we are seeking to make our own.

Comment 31

As we partake, we are allowed to reflect a little more deeply on the One whose words and whose deeds were empowered by the same Spirit and the same Wisdom that empowered Shiphrah and Puah, the same Spirit and the same Wisdom that even now seeks to graciously empower us all so that God’s blessings might abound, both in our own lives and in all the world.

Proverbs suggests that the fellowship at the table set by the teacher of foolishness is a fellowship with the dead and the dying. The New Testament, on the other hand, suggests that the fellowship that we have around the Lord’s table is not with One who is dead but with One who has been raised.

Comment 32

We sometimes focus so strongly on the individual benefits that we receive at “the Lord table” that we fail to recognize that our collective participation in this life-affirming, love-affirming communion is also a prayer. It’s an expression of our collective desire to be changed. It’s a communal expression of our desire to be remolded by the same Wisdom that flowed with such grace through the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus.

In that sense, the fervent prayer that we collectively express at “the Lord’s table” is perhaps somewhat similar to sentiments found in a hymn written in the fall of 1930 by a New York minister named Harry Emerson Fosdick:

[see next page]

God of Grace and God of Glory

1 God of grace and God of glo - ry, on your peo - ple
 2 Lo! the hosts of e - vil 'round us scorn your Christ, as -
 3 Cure your chil - dren's war - ring mad - ness; bend our pride to
 4 Save us from weak res - ig - na - tion to the e - vils

pour your pow'r; crown your an - cient church's sto - ry, bring her bud to
 sail his ways! From the fears that long have bound us, free our hearts to
 your con - trol; shame our wan - ton, self - ish glad - ness, rich in things and
 we de - plore; let the search for your sal - va - tion be our glo - ry

glo - rious flower. Grant us wis - dom, grant us cour - age,
 faith and praise. Grant us wis - dom, grant us cour - age,
 poor in soul. Grant us wis - dom, grant us cour - age,
 ev - er - more. Grant us wis - dom, grant us cour - age,

for the fac - ing of this hour, for the fac - ing of this hour.
 for the liv - ing of these days, for the liv - ing of these days.
 lest we miss your king - dom's goal, lest we miss your king - dom's goal.
 serv - ing you whom we a - dore, serv - ing you whom we a - dore.

Early Exodus



SESSION 2: *Exodus 2:1–10 (with a brief look at John 3)*

Call us anew to be salt for the earth...

Comment 1

In our last session, we began looking at the early stages of the Exodus story. We saw that the story begins in Egypt, an ancient African nation whose name in Hebrew is *Mitzrayim*. In Hebrew, the word *Mitzrayim* literally means “a tight and narrow place.”

Originally, the Hebrew name may have reflected the fact that Egypt was a long and narrow nation, stretched along the Nile River. But the name came to have a symbolic meaning as well, for Egypt—the nation that had originally welcomed the Hebrew people—later decided to enslave them. They were feared and oppressed. Thus *Mitzrayim* became a place that held them tight, a place from which they had to struggle to be reborn.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 1:22 [p. 48]

Comment 2

Egypt was being ruled by a Pharaoh who despised the Hebrew people. He had used “empty words”—gross lies and deceptions—to portray them as dangerous. He tried to foment brutalities and atrocities against these people whom he portrayed as “other.” He even urged “his people” to seek out male Hebrew babies—and kill them.

In the story as scripture tells it, the Pharaoh was so enslaved by his own deluded fears that he frantically tried to turn “his people” into a lynch mob. But instead of urging “his people” to hang the Hebrew people by a rope, he told them to throw their male

babies into the river—where they would drown. The government of *Mitzrayim*—like so many governments down through the ages—had found a way to justify in its own mind horrors beyond belief.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:1 [p. 48]

Comment 3

All through history, ordinary people have had to struggle to survive and endure in the face of incredible hatreds and dangers. Despite overwhelming sorrow and injustice, despite the clang of uncaring courts and prisons, despite hidden and overt torture, despite government-mandated humiliations directed at those who have never even been convicted of a crime, despite wars and bombs that blow up unsuspecting civilians, despite cancers and infections that no one knows how to stop, despite betrayals and grudges that cause people all over the world to run for their lives, and despite the corruptions and jealousies that can tear apart families, people in whom a spark of life remains struggle to maintain some small semblance of normalcy.

And so we are told that in the midst of a terrifying time in *Mitzrayim*, “a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.”

For Discussion

What lessons, if any, can we take for our own lives and our own world from the actions of this man and this woman?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:2

[p. 48]

Comment 4

Knowing full well that the government of the nation in which they are living has commanded the dominant population to seek out male babies born to the Hebrew people—and to throw them into the river—this young Hebrew couple nevertheless gives birth.

Perhaps the birth was an accident. Perhaps the birth was unintended. Perhaps the birth itself gave rise to a host of trembling fears. But it's also possible that the birth reflected a steadfast clinging to hope, a glimmering of faith that hadn't yet been extinguished, an effort to keep alive the possibility of redemption—even when the odds were stacked so overwhelmingly against them.

Comment 5

In Hebrew, the traditional name for this oppressed people is *Yisrael*. Literally, the name means “the God wrestlers.” It comes from an ancient story told in Genesis about an ancestor named Jacob, a man who “wrestled with God” in the midnight hour, a man who “wrestled with God” when all hope seemed lost, a man who clung to the Holy even when horrors were pressing hard in his way.

Perhaps there's a sense in which none of us can survive in a cruel and uncertain world without ourselves becoming *Yisrael*, a people who fitfully “wrestle with God,” a people who stumble and struggle toward that which we know is Sacred, that which we know is True—even when the Pharaohs of our day endlessly declare that our way is doomed and that our children are worthy only to be thrown into the Nile.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:3

[p. 48]

Comment 6

Demonstrating what today we might call “the audacity of hope,” the young Hebrew woman who gives birth—the young Hebrew woman who stub-

bornly “wrestles with God”—hides her male baby for three months.

Although the rulers of the nation in which she is living have said that her child is fit only to be drowned, she sees through the lie. She sees the Truth. She sees that he is a “fine” child, a child whom God loves, a child for whom she needs to struggle and scheme.

Comment 7

The woman has no guarantee that her plan will work. The plan itself seems almost implausible. But with the Wisdom that comes from feasting at God's own table—and with the prayerful leading that comes from clinging to God's own Spirit—this young mother schemes against the night.

She makes a basket. We're told that she seals it against the waters, using “bitumen and pitch.”

Comment 8

We aren't told where she gets the sticky ingredients with which she seals the basket, but there's always a chance that these were some of the same industrial substances with which she and other enslaved Hebrews had long been forced to work.

If so, it would mean that she had turned the outward evidence of her oppression into an essential expression of her deepest hopes. To paraphrase an old hymn by Charles Tindley, it would be as if this young mother—this determined God-wrestler—had audaciously turned her burden into a basket of fragile and yet precious hope. Then and only then, she had taken it to the Lord—and left it there, left it floating on the shores of that river which the Pharaoh meant for destruction but which she believed could yet become a river of life, a river of healing, a river of divine liberation.

For Discussion

How can we distinguish in our own lives and in our own world between those actions which are wise those which are foolish, between those actions which are grounded in the legitimate “audacity of hope” and those which are merely an arrogant, self-serving effort on our part to “force God's hand”?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:3–4 [p. 48]

Comment 9

The mother places her basket among the reeds at the edge of the river. Her infant is inside.

The child's older sister—a girl named Miriam—stands at a distance. She watches to see what will happen to her deeply endangered baby brother.

For Discussion

If you had been the sister, what do you think would have been going on in your head? Would you have been confident—or terrified? Would you have been proud of your mother's actions—or worried sick that it had been the wrong thing to do? Would you have been "looking for a miracle"—or expecting disaster?

In what kinds of situations today might we sometimes find ourselves watching "from a distance" as a fragile basket crafted with tears floats down a river that is meant for destruction? What should be our role in such situations?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:5a [p. 48]

Comment 10

This woman who comes to the river is a daughter of the ruler of Egypt. She is a daughter of the ruler who has ordered brutality and oppression. She is the daughter of the ruler who has fomented a deep fear and blatant despising of the Hebrew people. She is the daughter of the ruler who has ordered the slaughter of Hebrew children. She is the daughter of a ruler who is pursuing the ways of destruction.

Comment 11

According to Arthur Waskow, a contemporary rabbi, there is a tradition in Jewish scholarship that suggests that the coming of this Pharaoh's daughter to the river is more than a desire for physical cleansing. This tradition sees her coming to the river as a desire for *spiritual* cleansing, an expression of something deep within herself that longed to be washed

clean, a possibly confused and yet determined desire to be set free from the perverse and polluted ways of thinking and acting that were running rampant through the Pharaoh's palace.

Comment 12

From this perspective—to use the language of an old spiritual—it's as if the Pharaoh's daughter has decided to take herself to the waters to be baptized.

Sick of the prevailing brutality, sick of the delusions and destructions that have so often left their decaying debris in her soul, she goes to the river. She goes to bathe not just her body but her soul. She goes to that river where babies are to be killed not as an affirmation of death but as an affirmation of her desire to be reborn.

Scripture to Read

John 3:1–8 [p. 1238]

Comment 13

In this classic passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus and a Jewish leader named Nicodemus discuss what it takes to "do" and act in ways that truly reflect "the presence of God."

Jesus tells the man that living in this way requires our being "born from above." We have to be "born anew," brought to birth not just by human flesh but washed from within—and shaped anew—by God's own Spirit.

Comment 14

When that happens, says Jesus, our lives begin to move in rhythm with "the wind." We go—when the Spirit says to go. We do—what the Spirit says to do.

In other words, we allow ourselves to be directed not by those hope-destroying palaces that are run by our world's most perverted and power-hungry rulers but rather by the unseen and ungraspable "wind," a wind that blows where God and God alone wishes it to blow, the same "wind" that seems to have begun to flow through the weeping heart of Pharaoh's daughter, the same "wind" whose cleansing power can cause even the most stubborn soul to be born anew.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:5 [p. 48]

Comment 15

It's as if the daughter of Egypt's ruler had been born anew. It's as if a Spirit from above had opened her eyes—and opened her heart.

While walking along the river, while cleansing her soul, while throwing aside the false gods that were so thoroughly worshiped at the palace, this daughter of the Pharaoh allowed her eyes to be directed by “the wind.” She saw what the unseen God wanted her to see. It was a basket of reeds, floating among the reeds.

But she didn't just see. She acted. Turning to one of her maids, she said, “Step into the water, child. Step in and fetch me that basket.”

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:6a [p. 48]

Comment 16

The biological daughter of Egypt's ruler had become the spiritual daughter of the One who is holy, the One who is truth, the One whose ways are the ways of love.

Slowly this reborn daughter—this woman made anew—pulls back the reeds that lie atop the basket. Peering inside, she sees a child that is only three months old. It's crying. Hungry and confused, the child raises its voice.

Comment 17

Then, sensing the deep compassion of the One who has brought her to new birth, she too has pity. She has pity on the child.

The scene should perhaps serve as a reminder to us. It's a reminder that on all those on whom God has pity, we who have been born of the Spirit will likewise have pity. If we have been born anew, if “the wind” has reshaped our heart, we can do no less.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:6b [p. 48]

Comment 18

The false gods of this woman's world have ordered the destruction of all male Hebrew children. With the insight that has come through her own encounters at Wisdom's table, this woman from the palace quickly realizes that this child who lies before her must be one of the Hebrew children—one of the children whom the false gods of her day have labeled as “dangerous” and “despicable.” It's one of the children whom they have doomed to destruction.

The woman from the palace has been told to throw all such children into the deepest reaches of the river, but this reborn woman willfully disobeys. She is allowing her life to be directed by a different “wind,” by a different Spirit. With a smile on her face, she takes the child in her arms—and holds him close.

For Discussion

What are some of the ways that we who have been reborn can demonstrate the loving presence of God to those whom the false gods of our day have written off as “dangerous” or “despicable” or worthy only of death?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:7 [p. 48]

Comment 19

Miriam, the child's sister, has been watching from a distance, unsure of why she was there, unsure of how she felt about the whole affair, unsure if her mother had even done the right thing.

But suddenly, on seeing what was happening, the young Miriam felt a “wind” blowing through her soul. She heard a door opening, a door that she hadn't even realized would be there. Without even realizing what she was saying, she rushed forward, eager to do what she could to save the life of her brother. “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” she asked. By allowing God's “wind” to blow through her, she planted a “seed.” She planted it in fertile soil, for she planted it in the mind of the reborn daugh-

ter from the royal palace.

For Discussion

What do you suppose the mother of this baby has been doing—or thinking—while all this is going on?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:8a [p. 48]

Comment 20

While Pharaoh is fuming in his palace, desperately plotting more brutality, and while his unthinking assistants naively advance his agenda, the Pharaoh's reborn daughter is down by the riverside, where she is saying "yes" to God's will and to God's way.

In one of his better known songs, Thomas Dorsey once wrote:

*When the darkness appears,
and the night draws near,
and the day is past and gone,
at the river I stand:
guide my feet, hold my hand.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
lead me home!*

This verse may have originally referred to the "river" of our own death. But there are other "rivers" at which we are called to stand as well.

Comment 21

Throughout our lives, there will be times when "night" seems to draw frightfully near, times when the demeaning ways of denial, discrimination, death, and destruction flood around us like a raging river.

According to the story that we read in Exodus, Pharaoh's daughter once stood at such a river—and boldly took her stand. A unstoppable "wind" blew through her soul. A Spirit from Above began to move her feet. A "precious Lord" gently took her hand. The "home" that she had back at the palace was no longer the home that was setting her agenda. Another home—the gracious home in which she

had been reborn—was now the home whose ways she was embodying.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:8b [p. 48]

Comment 22

Down through the ages, Jewish scholars studying the story have disagreed among themselves about whether the text of Exodus is saying that Miriam herself went to her mother—or that the girl who went was one of the royal maids.

If it was Miriam, then of course she would have known exactly who to ask to serve as a nurse to this crying Hebrew baby who had been found floating in a basket in the river. But if it was one of the maids, then it would be yet another miracle—another sign that God's "wind" was indeed blowing, that God's Spirit was responding in a totally unexpected way to an audacious demonstration of hope by a weeping Hebrew mother.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:9 [p. 48]

Comment 23

Shiphrah and Puah, the two courageous midwives described in chapter 1, have set loose an amazing chain of events. Through their nonviolent resistance to the ways of death—through their civil disobedience and through their passion for Wisdom's ways—they have given birth to hope. It wasn't just any hope. It wasn't just a vain hope. It was a hope born of the Spirit, a hope riding on a "wind" that forever blows where it wills.

Pharaoh's daughter hands the infant child to Yocheved, his mother, whose name is first mentioned in chapter 6, where it is sometimes spelled as "Jochebed."

Comment 24

"Take the baby," says Pharaoh's daughter, "and nurse it. And by the way, I want you to forget that other job—the one with the cruel taskmaster. From now on, I'll pay your wages. You'll be accountable

only to me—and to the wind that blows through each of our souls.”

It’s a remarkable image, for the new birth that is happening in *Mitzrayim* is not a new birth solely for isolated individuals. It’s a new birth that is creating a new community, a new birth that is gathering together a diverse fellowship: Egyptians and Hebrews working together in harmony, a daughter of the royal palace and a mother from among the enslaved, courageous midwives and Spirit-led maidens, a young sister and her crying brother.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:10a

[p. 48]

Comment 25

Through the Spirit’s power, the old enmity between the oppressor and the oppressed is broken. Walls are toppling. Divisions are fading. Yocheved nurses her son—and then, when the time is right, when her role is finished, she joyfully brings him to the reborn daughter of the Pharaoh, who treats him in turn as she would her own son.

Together, a new people is being born. Together, a new door is being opened. Together, a new wind is blowing.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:10b

[p. 48]

Comment 26

We’re told that the reborn daughter of the Pharaoh names the smiling child whom she is holding “Moses.” In Hebrew, the name is “*Moshe*” or “*Mosheb*,” which literally means “drawn forth from.”

In naming her smiling child, the reborn daughter of the Pharaoh recalls how she “drew him forth” from the waters of the Nile. There is a deliberate but unstated hint in her naming of the child. It’s a hint about what is yet to come, for this child who “was drawn forth” will in turn “draw forth” others. When the wind blows and the Spirit calls, he will lead a diverse multitude of those whom God’s own self has gathered, those whom God’s own self has called.

Comment 27

A song written by Marty Haugen expresses a prayer that is perhaps similar to what we all feel. It’s a prayer that we all might be called. It’s a prayer that we all might be gathered. It’s a prayer that we might all be fashioned into a people who—despite the horrors around us—will nevertheless be fully and truly born anew:

*Here in this place, the new light is streaming,
shadows of doubt are vanished away.
See in this space our fears and our dreamings,
brought here to You in the light of this day.
Gather us in, the lost and the forsaken;
gather us in: our spirits inflame.
Call to us now, and we shall awaken;
we shall arise at the sound of our name.*

*We are the young, our lives are a myst’ry;
we are the old, who yearn for Your face.
We have been sung throughout all of hist’ry,
called to be light to the whole human race.
Gather us in, the rich and the haughty;
gather us in, the proud and the strong;
give us a heart so meek and so lowly;
give us the courage to enter the song.*

*Here we receive new life in the waters;
here we receive the bread of new birth;
here you shall call Your sons and Your daughters,
call us anew to be salt for the earth.
Give us to drink the wine of compassion;
give us to eat the bread that is You;
nourish us well, and teach us to fashion
lives that are holy and hearts that are true.*

*Not just in buildings, small and confining,
not in some heaven light years away,
here in this place the new light is shining;
now is God present, and now is the day.
Gather us in, and hold us forever;
gather us in, and make us Your own;
gather us in, all peoples together,
fire of love in our flesh and our bone.*

Early Exodus



SESSION 3: *Exodus 2:11–23*

And pitied every groan...

Comment 1

We have been examining the early chapters of Exodus. These chapters bring together various ancient accounts of a time when the ruling class of Egypt was thriving—and enslaved peasants were groaning under heavy burdens.

Scholars believe these enslaved peasants had come from a variety of surrounding tribes and traditions. They were “foreigners.” Some may have originally come for economic relief in a time of famine, as suggested by the book of Genesis. Others may have originally been hired as fighters by the Egyptian army, who used them as easily expendable soldiers in Egypt’s attacks on other nations.

Comment 2

The general situation described in the opening chapters of Exodus likely reflects a time about 1300 years before the birth of Jesus. The text sometimes refers to the oppressed peasants as “Israelites” and sometimes refers to them as “Hebrews.”

The term “Hebrew” has been found in various languages and dialects throughout the ancient Near East. Originally, the term seems to have had no ethnic meaning. It was widely used as a term for any marginal group of people living in a land dominated by others.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 12:37–38

[p. 58]

Comment 3

The story told in the early chapters of Exodus culminates in a vast “exodus” of poor and impoverished people from the land of Egypt.

According to Exodus 12, those who left Egypt were a “mixed” multitude. There were many “Israelites” among them, as well as a large crowd of other people, people who were “Hebrews” in the generic sense of being treated as outsiders and strangers. Exodus acknowledges that those who left were of many ethnic and religious traditions, but those leaving were united in one important sense: they had all been exploited and abused by the dominant powers of Egypt. Exodus affirms that God cared about them all.

Comment 4

There’s no way to know what the religious understandings and practices of these ancient “Hebrews” might have been like. Yet we’re told that a pair of Hebrew midwives “feared God,” and we’re told that their relationship with God—however they might have understood God—caused them to behave with great wisdom and courage.

According to the story, based on some kind of ancient remembrance, they deliberately disobeyed the mighty ruler of Egypt, a fear-obsessed, self-serving man who had ordered them to assist his efforts to kill and destroy Hebrew babies.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 6:20, 26–27

[p. 52]

Comment 5

The story told in the early chapters of Exodus is full of surprises. Thanks to the wisdom and courage of two Hebrew midwives, one of the male babies who survives is Moses. Moses goes on to play a key role in the great “exodus” from Egypt that is yet to come. Yet in Exodus 6, we’re told that Moses was born to a woman named Jochebed, and at least in terms of our modern sensibilities, his birth appears to be a blatant case of incest, for according to Exodus 6, Moses’ father is Amram, and Amram is Jochebed’s own nephew. In other words, Moses’ mother is his grandfather’s sister.

Comment 6

According to Leviticus 20, which reflects a somewhat later period in Jewish history, such relationships are a violation of God’s holiness. In fact, Leviticus 20 makes it sound as if those involved in such relationships are to be punished. It even suggests that some be put to death.

Leviticus certainly envisions no place for such people or their offspring in religious leadership, and some people still use such texts to justify contemporary forms of discrimination. But as we shall see, in the story of Moses, it appears that God has thrown such thinking out the window.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:10 [p. 48]

Comment 7

In the passage that we discussed last time, Jochebed boldly places her child—the offspring of incest—in a tar-lined basket and hides him in the reeds along the banks of the Nile. It’s an act of faith, an act of hope.

Then the daughter of the Pharaoh—the daughter of Egypt’s cruel ruler—comes to “bathe.” In some Jewish commentaries on the text, she comes not just to bathe her body but to cleanse her soul. It’s as if she realizes that she has been “polluted” too long by her father’s brutal ways, and she wants to begin living in a new way.

Comment 8

As she approaches the river, she sees the basket and immediately recognizes that the child inside is a “Hebrew.” Miriam, the child’s sister, then approaches and asks if the Pharaoh’s daughter would like to have one of the “Hebrew” women nurse the child for her, and the Pharaoh’s daughter agrees. The woman chosen is none other than Jochebed, Moses’ own mother.

Finally, when Jochebed has finished nursing the child, she brings him to the daughter of the Pharaoh, the woman who drew him out of the water. She calls him “Moses.” According to the story’s narrator, it’s a name that means one who is “drawn out” or one who is “drawn forth.”

For Discussion

What does Moses’ background tell us about those whom God will “draw” to religious service or religious leadership?

Some people today talk about being “called” to a particular role or type of religious service. In what ways, if any, is being “called” similar to or different from the idea of being “drawn” to something?

How can we distinguish today between those things to which God may have “drawn” us and those things to which we “drawn” by unholy desires, commercial advertising, or a desire for personal status and glory?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:11a [p. 48]

Comment 9

One day, after Moses had “grown up,” after he’d been taught to speak and write in Egyptian ways, after he’d been exposed to Egyptian culture and dressed in the finest Egyptian clothes, we’re told that he “went out” and witnessed the forced labor of the Hebrews.

It’s as if this young man who once had been so remarkably “drawn out” of the Nile is now “drawn out” of the palace. This latest “drawing out” is also remarkable, for he is not only “drawn out” physically but “drawn out” mentally and spiritually as well.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:11b–12 [p. 49]

Comment 10

Moses has been reared in a place of privilege. Like some people today, he could have adopted the identity of privilege, holding himself aloof from those from whom he had come, forgetting that he had been a major beneficiary of a divinely ordained “affirmative action” plan, forgetting that only when all were free would he be free.

Seeing his people’s forced labor, he could have tried to enhance his own position by sternly urging the Egyptian taskmasters to beat the Hebrews a little harder. Or he could have uttered platitudes about how if these people really wanted, they could lift themselves by their own bootstraps, just as he—supposedly—had done.

Comment 11

This child of incest or rape, this child whom the Pharaoh had wanted to kill, had been “drawn out” of the Nile. Now he had also been “drawn out” of the palace in which he had been raised. He was seeing the truth—and feeling the truth.

But then, just when things were moving so well, just when it seemed as if God’s ways would prevail, something else called. Something else “drew” him. We’re told that it was the kind of underhanded impulse that caused him to look “this way and that.” And then, with an almost devilish delight, the destructive, killer mentality of the Pharaoh himself “drew” forth Moses’ hands, and before anyone seemed to know what was happening, an Egyptian lay dead in the sand.

For Discussion

What are some of the ways in which we can similar dynamics at work today?

Is there any way to keep this sort of thing from undercutting our own best efforts?

Scripture to Read

Wisdom 9:9–11 [p. 928]

Comment 12

The writer of this ancient Jewish book prays for “wisdom,” saying that “wisdom” alone knows “what is pleasing” in God’s sight. “Send her forth,” says the writer, “so that she may labor at my side.” The writer expresses a confidence that “wisdom” will “guide me wisely in my actions and guard me with her glory.”

Scripture to Read

Romans 7:18b–21 [p. 1299]

Comment 13

Paul, the writer of Romans, confesses that in his life, “wisdom” doesn’t always seem to win out. In too many situations, he *knows* what is right. He even *wills* what is right. But at a critical juncture, he doesn’t do it. For all of us, he says, “evil lies close at hand.”

In other words, we’re all a bit like Moses. We need God’s wisdom and God’s Spirit to guide us, to lead us, to “draw” us out of the Nile and “draw” us out of the palace. But like Moses—and like Paul—just when things seem to be going good, we need to be on guard, for “evil lies close at hand,” and at that critical moment, evil will seek to “draw” us into its web, into its ways, into its deeply destructive path. As Paul knew from first-hand experience, if we aren’t careful, before we even realize what’s happening, there can be an “Egyptian” lying dead or groaning in the sand.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:13 [p. 49]

Comment 14

After Moses lashes out and kills an Egyptian, he buries the body in the sand and runs back to the palace, as if everything is normal, as if everything is as it had been.

But the next day, he’s “drawn out” of the palace once again. God hasn’t given up on him. So once again, he makes his way from the place of privilege to enclave of the enslaved. Two Hebrews are fighting. One is beating up on the other. Forgetting his own past failures, Moses expresses his outrage.

“Why are you striking your fellow Hebrew?” he asks.

For Discussion

What might make two abused and oppressed Hebrews engage in a destructive battle with one another? In what ways have similar things happened in our own world?

Does Moses’ question feel to you like an expression of genuine solidarity and concern of a fellow Hebrew—or the arrogant inquiry of someone who enjoys privilege and power? Why?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:14a

[p. 49]

Comment 15

The man who started the fight responds angrily, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?”

In other words, Moses, a well-dressed, lifelong resident of the palace, still reeks of “Egyptianism.” He still reeks of the Pharaoh’s hot-head mentality—and the Pharaoh’s hot-head behavior. “Do you mean to kill me like you killed that other fellow?” the quarrelsome Hebrew asks Moses.

It’s as if Moses has been “drawn” by that which is holy, but like so many of us, he’s not yet where he ought to be. A deeper transformation is needed.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:14b–15a

[p. 49]

Comment 16

Moses realizes that he’s fallen into a devilish trap. By violently lashing out at the Egyptian who was abusing a trembling, tear-stained Hebrew, Moses has undermined his own safety.

His deed is known. The secret is out. It’s only a matter of time until the Pharaoh is after him, out to kill him. It’s a vivid reminder of how badly we all need “wisdom” to guard us, for in Moses’ day as in our day, violence begets violence. Evil begets evil.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:15b

[p. 49]

Comment 17

Moses is forced to flee. The Pharaoh may have thought that it was he who chasing Moses from the palace, but Romans 8 suggests that even in the midst of the most awful evil, God is still at work, seeking to transform that which is evil into that which is good.

Moses runs for his life. But as we will soon see, God turns it into an opportunity to bring the deeper transformation that Moses needs. In that sense, Moses isn’t just running *for* his life. Whether he realizes it or not, he’s also running *to* his life.

Comment 18

The place where Moses runs is another of the story’s surprises. The land of Midian had no fixed boundaries. Scholars debate where its territory began and ended. But one thing is clear: it was nowhere near Egypt. It was a *long* journey to a far place.

The other surprise about all of this is that Midian is portrayed in scripture as a people with whom Israel often quarreled, even often fought. Yet we are told that it is in Midian—a place that Israel often despised—where Moses found refuge. It was in Midian—and through its obscure religious traditions—that God was about to work.

For Discussion

What lessons can we take from this part of the story?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:16

[p. 49]

Comment 19

Here is the first mention of “organized” religion in the book of Exodus. The “priest of Midian” wasn’t Jewish. He probably had never heard of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. His religious rituals and practices were likely very different from our own. But God is about to draw Moses to him.

The fleeing Moses has sat down at a small spring or well. In ancient cultures, these were popular meeting places, gathering places. We’re told that the priest of Midian has seven daughters who care for

their father's flock. They too come to the well, filling the troughs with water for their thirsty animals.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:17 [p. 49]

Comment 20

As Moses watches, some male shepherds come to the well. They see the water that the daughters of the priest of Midian have drawn for their father's animals, and they decide to take it for themselves. As they have apparently done many times before, they selfishly shove the seven daughters aside.

What does it matter, they perhaps reason. They're just women.

Comment 21

But after his long journey through the wilderness, Moses is once again ready to be drawn. He's ready to be drawn toward that which is right, toward that which is good.

We're told that he comes to the aid of the seven daughters. But there's no violence this time. There's no arrogance. There's no angry enactment of the Pharaoh's own brutal ways of behaving. Instead, Moses sets aside the illusions of privilege and the trappings of power. Those are gone now, tossed aside somewhere in the dusty wilderness.

With quiet determination, he humbly helps the seven daughters water their animals.

For Discussion

Can you think of ways in which you—or someone you know or can think of—have been transformed by something like a “journey through the wilderness”?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:18–19 [p. 49]

Comment 22

The seven daughters return to their father. It's far earlier than usual, and he's surprised to see them so soon. They explain that “an Egyptian helped us.” They say that “he even drew water for us and wa-

tered the flock.”

Their father, “the priest of Midian,” is here named Reuel. However, in some other biblical texts, his name is given as “Jethro.” In still other texts, he's called “Hobab.” Scholars aren't sure why different names are used in different places. Various explanations have been offered, but all are speculative and none change the deepest meaning of the story.

For Discussion

Why do you think the daughters describe Moses as “an Egyptian”? What does this suggest, if anything, about human identities and cultural descriptions of who we are?

Scripture to Read

Hebrew 13:2 [p. 1368]
Exodus 2:20 [p. 49]

Comment 23

The priest of Midian, whatever his true name, appears to be someone who understands the ancient importance of extending hospitality to strangers, even strangers who might be the hated “Egyptians.”

We can't know his reasoning, but it's possible that he believed, as the much later book of Hebrews suggests, that by showing hospitality to strangers, “some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Comment 24

“Where is this man?” he asks his daughters. “Why did you leave him? Go and invite him to join us in the breaking of bread!”

In this case, it wasn't that Reuel and his daughters *entertained* angels. Rather, they *became* angels, used by God to “draw” Moses toward a place where he could be further transformed, further strengthened, further enlightened.

For Discussion

Do you think we're active enough today in extending hospitality to strangers?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:21 [p. 49]

Comment 25

According to the story, Reuel doesn't just invite Moses for a meal. The meal is only the beginning.

Perhaps detecting in Moses a soul that was ready to be "drawn" to that which is good, to that which is deep, to that which is holy, Reuel invites him to stay. And before long, Reuel gives his daughter in marriage to this stranger from Egypt, this "Hebrew" who had been reared in the palace but who had finally fled—or been drawn—from Pharaoh and his ways.

Comment 26

The woman whom Moses marries is named Zipporah. In the Hebrew language, her name means "Lady Bird," as in Lady Bird Johnson, the wife of a former U.S. president.

Although Zipporah is here described as a daughter of Reuel, the priest of Midian, we aren't told who her mother is. Elsewhere in scripture, however, Moses' wife is described as a "Cushite" or ethnic Ethiopian. It's possible that the two accounts reflect different traditions, but it's also possible that Zipporah, like many people both then and now, should be understood as a person of mixed heritage.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:22 [p. 49]

Comment 27

Moses and Zipporah have a son. We're told that Moses names him Gershom, because at the time that he is born, Moses is an "alien residing in a foreign land."

The Jewish scriptures often provide "explanations" for names, and this is just another example. The name Gershom is similar to the Hebrew words *ger sham*, which literally means "stranger there." The explanation of the name becomes a way of lifting up an important part of the story: Moses had been "drawn" through the wilderness to a foreign land, a land that gave him refuge, a land that graciously extended its hospitality to a stranger, not knowing what the future might hold.

Scripture to Read

Matthew 25:34–35 [p. 1174]

Comment 28

In a parable told in Matthew 25, a righteous king extends joy and blessings to all those who fed the hungry, relieved the thirsty, and welcomed the stranger. When you were drawn to those who were hungry or to those who were thirsty or to those who were a stranger, you were drawn to me, says the king.

According to the book of Judges, descendants of Gershom—the one whose name means "stranger there"—later served as priests in the land of Israel. Theirs was an ancient priesthood, for they were descended not only from Moses but also from Reuel, the gracious priest of Midian, the one who had readily welcomed a stranger, even a stranger who superficially appeared to be an "Egyptian." Because Reuel and Zipporah had been drawn to welcome a stranger, they were strengthened. They were blessed.

Comment 29

Moses, a child of what we would call incest, a child who barely survived through infancy, was temporarily drawn into the Pharaoh's way of killing, the Pharaoh's way of brutalizing others. But then, through God's grace, he was drawn out of the palace, drawn through a cleansing wilderness, and drawn into the land of Midian—the land where he began to draw closer to God's embrace.

His journey is a reminder that we, too, need to draw closer to the One who has made us and the One who has redeemed us. It's a journey celebrated in a seldom sung hymn by Elisha Hoffman, the Presbyterian minister who also wrote "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," "Down at the Cross," and "I Must Tell Jesus."

*Draw me closer, Lord, to thee,
fold me in thy love's embrace
and unto my soul reveal
all the riches of thy grace!
Draw me closer, closer, closer,
closer, Lord, to thee;
ever purer, purer, purer,*

then my soul shall be.

*Draw me closer, Lord, to thee;
in thy arms thy child enfold,
and this earthly heart of mine
into thine own image mold.
Draw me closer, closer, closer;
closer, Lord, to thee;
ever purer, purer, purer,
then my soul shall be.*

*Draw me closer, Lord, to thee
in communion rich and sweet
till my soul shall be refined—
and in thee be made complete.
Draw me closer, closer, closer;
closer, Lord, to thee;
ever purer, purer, purer,
then my soul shall be.*

*Draw me closer, Lord, to thee,
for my longing soul aspires
to discover in thyself
all it yearns for and desires.
Draw me closer, closer, closer;
closer, Lord, to thee;
ever purer, purer, purer,
then my soul shall be.*

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:23–25

[p. 49]

Comment 30

Although the preceding verses have focused mostly on Moses, Exodus wants us to remember that the story is far broader than that. Even after the Pharaoh who wanted to kill Moses has died, the anguish of those who were still being oppressed and enslaved was deep and strong. They groaned. They cried. They broke the silence.

As chapter 2 of Exodus comes to a close, before we learn of Moses' full transformation, we're told that God *heard*, God *remembered*, God *saw*, and God *knew*.

Comment 31

In some translations, the last line of chapter 2 sounds rather mundane, saying simply, "And God took notice of them." But in Hebrew, it's more dramatic. It says, "God *knew*." It's as if God *knew* them in the deepest, most intimate way, enfolding them, embracing them, even groaning with them.

So perhaps, just as we struggle to draw closer to God, God draws closer to us. As chapter 2 of Exodus comes to a close, the future of the "Hebrews" and all those who were oppressed isn't yet clear, but there's hope in the air, and we can almost hear the whole of the Hebrew people singing with one voice something that perhaps sounds a lot like a recent Richard Smallwood song:

*I love the Lord,
he heard my cry,
and pitied every groan.
Long as I live,
and troubles rise,
I'll hasten to his throne!
I'll hasten to his throne!*

Early Exodus



SESSION 4: Exodus 3:1-6

When I in awesome wonder...

Comment 1

In the first two chapters of Exodus, we encountered an Egyptian ruler who became obsessed with an irrational fear of “the Hebrews,” the foreign peasants whom he had enslaved. He foments a hatred of these “Hebrews” among the Egyptian elite, and seeks to quietly diminish the Hebrews by having all of their male babies killed.

However, the courageous midwives who served the Hebrew people refused to cooperate, and the population of these “foreigners” kept growing. Not only were they enslaved, but they were impoverished. The wealth of the land was in the hands of the few, and the pharaoh feared that the time would come when these “Hebrews” would rise up and demand their rightful share of the nation’s wealth.

Comment 2

But there was a daughter of the pharaoh who thought differently, a daughter who sought to distance herself from her father’s brutal ways. One day she went down to the Nile to bathe her body—and bathe her soul. While bathing, she saw a basket floating in the reeds. Inside was a male baby, a baby born to the Hebrews, that people whom her father so deeply feared.

Her father would have had her throw the child into the deepest portion of the river, where it would surely drown. But instead, she drew the baby out of the river—and brought him home with her to the palace, where she gave him the finest in Egyptian clothes, resources, and education.

Comment 3

The pharaoh’s daughter names the child “Moses,” and although he has been educated in Egyptian ways and influenced to some extent by the pharaoh’s own brutality and arrogance, by the time he has grown up, he has come to understand something of his origins.

He wanders out one day, observing the sweat and toil of the impoverished and enslaved people to whom he was born. Something is beginning to stir with him, and when he sees an Egyptian taskmaster strike and kill a “worthless” Hebrew, Moses explodes with indignation and horror. He looks this way and that. Then, thinking he is alone, he arrogantly slaughters the Egyptian taskmaster and buries him in the sand, hoping his deed will never be known.

Comment 4

Later, however, he goes out again. He’s once again drawn to watch these Hebrews, and as he’s pondering their harsh lives and their deep miseries, he sees two of the Hebrews quarreling. It’s “Hebrew-on-Hebrew” violence, and Moses is appalled.

He calls out to the one who is beating up on the other, but the one to whom Moses speaks responds angrily. “Who are you to speak?” the angry Hebrew asks. “Aren’t you the guy who killed an Egyptian and buried him in the sand?”

Comment 5

Moses panics. People know. The pharaoh will

find out—and this violent and brutal man will see it as the utmost in betrayal. Moses flees for his life.

He heads far from Egypt. He goes to the “land of Midian,” perhaps somewhere on the Arabian peninsula. He stops at a well and finds seven young Midianite women trying to water their father’s sheep—but as soon as they have drawn water and filled the troughs for the animals, a group of male shepherds come by, driving off the young women and their sheep, taking all of the water for themselves.

Comment 6

Moses is offended at the injustice of what he sees, and he begins helping the seven young women in their efforts to water their father’s flock. The women are grateful—and then return to their father.

It’s earlier than usual, for the daughters have apparently often had trouble at the well. Their father, “the priest of Midian,” asks what happened. They explain that a man whom they describe only as “an Egyptian” assisted them.

Comment 7

Most Midianites would have been fearful and suspicious of an “Egyptian,” but “the priest of Midian” immediately tells his daughters to invite this mysterious “Egyptian” to share a meal with them—and the meal results in an invitation to Moses to stay with this Midianite family.

Once again, Moses becomes a “stranger” in an unexpected home. How long his sojourn here lasts, we are not told, but before long, he and one of the daughters of “the priest of Midian” are married, and they begin to have children.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 2:23–25 [p. 49]

Comment 8

Back in Egypt, the pharaoh in whose palace Moses had been raised—the pharaoh who felt betrayed by Moses’ actions and wanted him killed—now dies. Another king takes his place, but this new king is no kinder to the Hebrews. They continue to

groan. They continue to cry out.

We’re told that God hears the cries of this enslaved people. We’re told that God remembers the “covenant” made with “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the ancient ancestors of a broad and diverse group of people, many of whom are now entrapped in a tight and narrow place from which they don’t know how to escape. God “looks upon” them—and as a result, God *knows* the horror of their lives. God *knows* the tears in their hearts. God *knows* the pain in their steps.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:1a [p. 49]

Comment 9

The story now returns to the land of Midian, an ancient land of camel-riding nomads with whom many Israelites would later quarrel. Moses—the well-educated “Egyptian,” the one who had been raised in the palace by the pharaoh’s own daughter and who had known a life of wealth and privilege—he is now “keeping the flock” of his father-in-law, a man whose name was given in the previous chapter as “Reuel” but who is here called “Jethro.”

Scholars suspect that the change in names may reflect different ancient traditions that have been incorporated here in the book of Exodus, but both traditions are clear in describing Moses’ father-in-law as “the priest of Midian.” He is a minister in an ancient religion that had a profound influence on the Jewish understanding of God.

For Discussion

As a solitary refugee living in a strange and foreign land, doing work that in his younger years, he never imagined doing, what kinds of thoughts and feelings might Moses be having?

Who in our modern world might feel like they are in a similar position?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:1b–2a [p. 49]

Comment 10

Whether he's on foot or riding a camel, we aren't told. But Moses leads his father-in-law's flock through the wilderness and on to a place that is here described as "Horeb, the mountain of God."

There seem to be two traditions about what this mountain is called. Here and in some other texts, it's called "Horeb." In still other places, it's called "Sinai." Although there are people who speculate about where the mountain is located, there is nothing in scripture that gives any specific clues. It's simply "beyond the wilderness"—which could be almost anywhere.

Comment 11

As someone raised in an aristocratic Egyptian context and as someone totally unfamiliar with local traditions, Moses simply sees the mountain as a good place to feed the flock. It's only the narrator who shares the secret. It's only the narrator who tells us in advance what is about to happen. The place where Moses has wandered is "the mountain of God," the place where a fiery flame will serve as "the angel" or messenger of the Lord.

To Moses, however, Horeb is nothing special. As he wanders up its slopes, it's just an ordinary place that seems to have some food and water for the animals. For Moses, Horeb is a routine stopping place in the daily tasks that now mark his life.

For Discussion

What do you suppose the text means when it describes Horeb as "the mountain of God"? Isn't the whole earth the Lord's?

In what ways do you think it might have been helpful—or unhelpful—for ancient people to identify a particular place as a place where one might encounter God in a special way?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:2–3 [p. 49]

Comment 12

As Moses wanders around this "ordinary" mountain, something catches his eye, something that he

doesn't understand. A bush appears to be burning. It's covered with flames, but it is not consumed.

Moses still doesn't have a clue about Horeb being a special place or about it being "the mountain of God." "Wow, look at that!" Moses says to himself. "I think I'll go over and see what's going on."

For Discussion

In what ways, if any, do we today still encountering "burning bushes," actions or events that perhaps catch our attention as being a bit "out of the ordinary" but which we don't immediately see as being a sign of God's own remarkable presence?

Comment 13

Some scholars have devoted much time and energy to debating whether the "burning bush" was a "natural" phenomenon or a fully "miraculous" one.

Some have speculated, for example, that this mountain might have been volcanic in nature, with sparks and eruptions coming forth at unpredictable moments. Others have wondered about escaping natural gases or other underground phenomena. Still others have pointed to something known as "St. Elmo's fire," which involves a slow discharge of static electricity.

Comment 14

But other scholars suggest that the Hebrews, like so many other ancient peoples, really made no distinction between that which was wonderfully "natural" and that which was wonderfully "miraculous."

For example, in listing the special "wonders of God," the book of Job includes the earth and the sea, the lightness and the darkness, the rain and the wind, snow and hail, the constellations and arrangements of the stars, the lightning and the clouds, the hippopotamus and the crocodile.

Comment 15

"Among God's works," wrote a biblical scholar named James Plastaras, the ancient Jews "saw only different degrees of the *wonderful*."

In other words, in the multitude of those won-

ders that we see as “natural,” they saw God’s hand. In the midst of that which we think of as “ordinary,” they could sense the approach of the divine.

For Discussion

In what ways, if any, have our modern understandings caused us to *gain* something, and in what ways, if any, have they caused us to *lose* something?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:4a

[p. 49]

Comment 16

Moses could have caught a glimpse of the “burning bush”—and simply continued on his way.

“Well, there’s another one of those,” he could have said nonchalantly as he hurried past to find more food for the flock. But instead, according to the story, he “turned aside.” He stopped to “look at this great sight.”

For Discussion

What are the things in our world that keep us from stopping to look deeply at the world around us? What can we do to break free from the pressures that sometimes constrain us?

Comment 17

Regardless of how modern scientists might have explained—or not explained—what was happening, Moses stopped what he was doing to take it in. He paused in where he was going to explore and appreciate the “wonder” that was before him.

In a sense, through his actions on that distant mountain, Moses was embodying the spirit that is expressed in a well-known hymn that begins with these words:

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,
consider all the worlds thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
thy power throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee,
“How great thou art, how great thou art!”
Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee,*

“How great thou art, how great thou art!”

*When through the woods, and forest glades I
wander,
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
and see the brook and feel the gentle breeze,
then sings my soul, my savior God to thee,
“How great thou art, how great thou art!”
Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee,
“How great thou art, how great thou art!”*

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:4

[p. 49]

Comment 18

After Moses *pauses*—after Moses *stops* what he’s doing so that in the resulting hush he can consider in awesome wonder one small part of the many worlds that God’s hands have made—Moses hears a voice. If he hadn’t paused, he might not have heard it. If he hadn’t stopped, he might have missed it.

Somebody’s calling his name.

Still not knowing who is speaking to him, Moses responds with utter simplicity. In Hebrew, it’s a single word that he speaks, a word that invites further conversation. At the simplest level, it means, “Here I am!” But the word conveys openness. Although it’s only a few letters long, the implication is, “Here I am—at your service! What can I do for you?”

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:5

[p. 49]

Comment 19

There’s still nothing in front of Moses except this marvellous “wonder,” this bush that burns but is not consumed. But the voice that has quietly spoken his name now instructs Moses to come no closer and to take off his sandals—for the place to which he has come is “holy ground.”

Without realizing what he was doing—and without being consciously “called” to it—Moses has stumbled into an ancient sacred place, a place of worship for ancient peoples, a place of prayer, a

place for listening to the Holy One. “Take off your shoes—and come no closer—for this is the kind of place to which you have come, this is the kind of place to which you have been drawn.”

For Discussion

What value might there have been, if any, in the ancient tradition that arose among some people, a tradition that believed that neither shoes nor sandals should be worn when one enters a “holy place,” a special place where one might meet in the presence of God?

Comment 20

Traditional translations of Exodus 3:5 have Moses being told to take off his sandals for place on which he is standing is “holy ground.” The Hebrew word that is translated here as “holy ground” is *maqōm*, which is a technical word for a place that has been set aside as a sanctuary or as a place of worship or a place where people could go to fulfill their religious duties or make religious offerings.

The same Hebrew word is used in many other accounts, where it is often translated in a more generic way, even though it still actually has this more technical sense.

Scripture to Read

Genesis 22:3 [p. 17]

Comment 21

In this classic story, Abraham sets out with his son Isaac, some servants, and a donkey loaded down with firewood. They go to prepare a “burnt offering” to God.

According to most translations, Abraham heads to “the place in the distance that God had shown him.” But the Hebrew word that is mundanely translated here as “place” is actually *maqōm*. It wasn’t just any place to which they were headed. It was to a specially designated “holy place,” a sacred place in the mountains where one expected to meet God, where one might need to remove one’s sandals for God was there.

Scripture to Read

Genesis 28:10–11, 16 [p. 24]

Comment 22

In yet another classic story, Jacob travels to a “certain place.” It’s late, and he stretches out on the ground to sleep “in that place.” While he sleeps, he has an encounter with God—and receives an incredible blessing from the Holy One. In the morning, he awakes and says, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.”

As it turns out, every use of the word “place” in this story reflects the Hebrew word *maqōm*. If we had been reading the story in its original language, we would have understood that Jacob had unknowingly made his bed in a place that was actually a holy sanctuary, a place to which people went to meet with God.

Comment 23

Images from the Jacob story, along with other biblical accounts, were reworked into a contemporary context for a song written in recent times by Geron Davis. Its words include:

*When I walked through the doors, I sensed his
presence,
and I knew this was a place where love abounds,
for this is a temple; the God we love abides here,
and we are standing in his presence—
on holy ground.*

*We are standing on holy ground,
and I know there are angels all around.
Let us praise, praise God now, praise him anyhow,
for we are standing in his sweet presence—
on holy ground.*

*In his presence, I know there is joy beyond all
measure,
and at his feet, sweet peace of mind can still be
found,
for when we have a need, he is still the answer.
Reach out, and claim it, for we are standing—
on holy ground.*

*We are standing on holy ground,
and I know there are angels all around.
Let us praise, praise God now, praise him anyhow,
for we are standing in his sweet presence—
on holy ground.*

Comment 24

Although this song offers many appealing lines, there's one way in which it's completely at odds with biblical texts. The song suggests that as soon as one walks "through the doors" of a temple or other holy place, one senses that God is there. Yet according to Genesis, it wasn't until Jacob's middle-of-the-night encounter with a ladder full of angels that Jacob finally realized where he was. And in Exodus, Moses approached the burning bush with no awareness at all that he was in fact "standing on holy ground."

So contrary to the song, scripture would perhaps want us remember that "holy ground" can appear by surprise. "Holy ground" can emerge when we least expect it. While we're feeding a flock or sleeping on a rock, while we're wrestling with that which we don't understand or staring in wonder at the marvels of God's creation, we can discover a "sweet presence" that goes beyond anything we have experienced before.

For Discussion

Isn't God everywhere? In our modern world, should we consider this notion of special "sanctuaries" and "holy places" outmoded? Why or why not?

As part of their effort to appeal to certain kinds of modern individuals, some religious groups these days try to appear as un-religious as possible, avoiding any hint of anything that might be interpreted as "sacred" or "holy" or distinctly different from ordinary culture. Do you think that this is this a good thing or a bad thing? Why?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:6a [p. 49]

Comment 25

The voice finally introduces itself, and for centuries, the opening words of the introduction have

captivated students of scripture. The first word of the introduction is perhaps the most profound of all: "I am," says the voice, hinting at what will later become an even fuller elaboration on God's name.

And then the "Great I Am" tells Moses something rather surprising: "I am the God of your father"—singular. Elsewhere in scripture, we find references to "the God of your fathers"—plural—meaning in a general way, "the God of your ancestors." But here the words addressed to Moses are distinctly singular: "I am the God of your father."

For Discussion

What are some of the ways in which this singular reference to "father" might be significant or meaningful in the story as it is recorded here?

Comment 26

In some ways, the Moses whom we meet in Exodus has had multiple fathers—and no father—all at the same time.

In Exodus 6, we're told that Moses' biological father was a Hebrew peasant named Amram, who fathered him in what the modern world would consider a blatantly incestuous relationship, for Amram's wife was his own father's sister. But his parents couldn't keep him, and as very young child, he was set afloat in a basket on the Nile.

Comment 27

Moses was drawn forth from the Nile by a daughter of the pharaoh—who then raised him in the royal palace. Egypt's brutal pharaoh served as a kind of step father to him. But that brutal man later felt threatened by his daughter's Hebrew step son—and tried to have Moses put to death.

After fleeing from Egypt, Moses was taken in by "the priest of Midian," who became his father-in-law. This priest, named in some texts as Reuel and in other texts as Jethro, perhaps became the first compassionate father figure in Moses' life, even though he was of a different ethnic tradition.

Comment 28

So the question naturally arises, when the voice

declares unto Moses, “I am the God of your father,” is the voice speaking about one of these men in Moses’ life? Or is it speaking metaphorically about someone else entirely?

Even to scholars, the answer is not entirely clear. What is clear, however, is that this “Great I Am” begins by announcing a deep and personal connection—a connection rooted in who Moses is and who he has become. In other words, this is no “outsider” God, no “untested” God, no “first-time” God. The words that Moses hears are words of reassurance, words that inevitably draw one in: “I am the God of your father.”

Comment 29

Besides saying, “I am the God of your father,” the voice goes on to make a more sweeping pronouncement: “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

The individuals named in this sweeping pronouncement are the very distant but highly revered ancestors of many of those Hebrews who are suffering extreme poverty and oppression under the pharaoh.

Comment 30

Some scholars believe that certain tribes and clans identified most closely with just one of these legendary figures. They had a favored ancestor that they claimed as their own, a favored ancestor to which they looked for status and glory.

For example, there’s reason to believe that most of those ten tribes that came to be known as “Israel” identified most strongly with Jacob. He was their “special” guy. On the other hand, the people who eventually began living in the territory known as Judah seem to have identified most strongly with Abraham. They felt they were descended from “the best.”

Comment 31

But in the text of Exodus as it has come down to us, the voice that speaks to Moses insists that it is the God of them all. It’s a voice that unites rather than divides, a voice that plays no favorites, a voice

that advances no narrow religious agenda.

With a boldness that surpasses both ancient and modern ways of thinking, Exodus presents the “Great I Am” as the single God of a diverse people, a people like ourselves, too often at war with one another over religious issues.

Scripture to Read

Isaiah 6:1, 5

[p. 625]

Exodus 3:6b

[p. 49]

Comment 32

In the book of Isaiah, the prophet has a vision in which he sees “the Lord sitting on a throne.” Creatures with wings are singing, “Holy, holy, holy!” And immediately the prophet cries, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips. My eyes have seen the Lord of hosts, yet I fall short of God’s holiness. Woe is me!”

There’s something similar in Exodus. When Moses first heard his name, before he realized who was calling to him, before he knew what kind of ground he was standing on, he eagerly answered, “Here I am—at your service!” But now that he’s discovered that he’s talking with the “Great I Am,” he rushes to cover his face.

Comment 33

Moses hides his eyes, for like Adam and Eve, who nervously hid themselves from God in the great garden, Moses knows that he’s fallen short. He knows that he has too often gone his own way, too often let the brutal ways of Egypt’s ruler creep into his own words and deeds.

Because we can perhaps each see a bit of ourselves in Moses, it’s not hard to imagine his hands trembling, his knees buckling. Exodus 3:6 tells us that Moses “was afraid to look at God.” But that wasn’t a character flaw. It was a character strength. By hiding his face, Moses wasn’t running from God. He was rather using his actions as a way of declaring with the deepest respect, “How great—how great—thou art!”

Early Exodus



SESSION 5: *Exodus 4:24–26 and 3:7–22*

Surely God is able...

Comment 1

The early chapters of Exodus bring together a variety of ancient traditions that have long played a critical role in the history of the Jewish people.

These ancient traditions go back to a hard and difficult time in which a diverse collection of poor and economically oppressed tribal peoples had become enslaved in a rich and prosperous land known as Egypt. This diverse group of suffering peasants was collectively known as “the Hebrews.”

Comment 2

The exact understanding of God held by these “Hebrews” is never explained. There is no description within these stories of their worship practices or religious insights.

The setting for these stories is more than thirty-two hundred years ago. None of what we call “the Bible” would have existed at that time. Yet we are told that because some courageous women “feared God” more than they feared the brutal ruler of Egypt, the efforts of the pharaoh to exterminate all male Hebrew children did not succeed.

Comment 3

According to these ancient stories, one of those male children who survived was adopted by the daughter of the pharaoh, who named him “Moses.” His rescue by the pharaoh’s daughter caused Moses to be raised among the Egyptian elite. He received the advantages of Egypt’s privileged class. He was raised and educated in Egyptian ways.

Culturally, then, Moses becomes an Egyptian. It’s how others see him. Yet somehow, after he’s grown, he discovers the people to whom he had been born. He sees their suffering. He sees their sorrow. He witnesses the cruelty they endure.

Comment 4

In one such incident, Moses lashes out in anger. Thinking he is alone, he murders a cruel Egyptian, a taskmaster who had violently struck and killed a Hebrew who apparently not been performing up to the taskmaster’s expectations.

It turns out, however, that Moses’ actions have been seen. Before long, the pharaoh hears the news—and is furious at what he interprets as Moses’ betrayal of his Egyptian upbringing. Moses flees for his life, crossing the wilderness to the distant land of Midian.

Comment 5

Although Midianites would have most likely been deeply suspicious of Egyptians, Moses is welcomed by someone who is described in the text as “the priest of Midian.”

What this man’s religious practices or understandings were, we are not told—but everything that is said about him is positive. This seems to reflect an ancient situation in which it was not only the Jews who had a relationship with the one true God. Others did as well—even people with whom the Jews would later quarrel, would later battle.

Comment 6

Moses—born to Hebrew peasants, raised by Egyptian royalty—now takes on yet another cultural identity. We're told that he marries Zipporah, a daughter of the Midianite priest.

Together Moses and Zipporah begin a family. It's a family that must have struggled to bring together an incredibly rich diversity of cultural and religious understandings.

For Discussion

In today's world, what are some of the ways in which we can help people of diverse cultural or religious traditions come together in a constructive way? What are some of the things that make such a coming together more difficult?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 4:24–26 [p. 51]

Comment 7

This strange fragment of a story about Zipporah and Moses and Zipporah's firstborn son appears in the midst of a summary overview of what will happen when Moses later returns to Egypt. This very puzzling and ancient tale seems to reflect some of the cultural and religious struggles that this multi-cultural couple might have faced.

The story seems to recount Zipporah's struggle in understanding and accepting what later became a common Jewish practice of male circumcision.

Comment 8

The reference to "feet" in this brief account reflects a widespread biblical euphemism for male genitals.

Although many translations insert Moses' name at one point in these verses, his name does not appear in the original Hebrew. Moses' name is inserted because some scholars think that the person being referred to is Moses, but other scholars think it's not Moses who is being referred to but rather the first son born to Moses and Zipporah.

Comment 9

The opening reference in this account to the Lord coming in the night to "kill him" is equally difficult. There's no way of knowing exactly what circumstances gave rise to this primitive way of putting things, but the wording perhaps reflects an ancient understanding that even in the midst of the most mortal of struggles, we can learn and grow—if in the midst of such a time, we honestly feast at Wisdom's table—and allow ourselves to be taught by God.

In this case, it's possible to imagine that the story reflects a difficult night in which Moses and Zipporah's son, deeply ill, was on the verge of death. Perhaps it was in the midst of such a night that Zipporah first took a sharpened flint stone and, in an effort to convey honor to God, circumcised her son, who later recovered, thus confirming for her the religious importance of circumcision.

For Discussion

Why is it that during times of mortal danger or other struggles and conflicts, some people gain strength through a heightened spiritual sensitivity or perhaps a deeper listening to God—while others are weakened by bitterness and resentment?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:1–6 [p. 49]

Comment 10

In the scene that we examined last time, Moses inadvertently wanders onto "the mountain of God."

While trying to care for the flock of his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, Moses stumbles onto an ancient "holy place," a shrine of sorts, where a bush is blazing, a bush whose fire never goes out, a bush that burns but is never consumed.

Comment 11

It's clear that Moses could have walked on by, but instead he stops. He stops to consider in awe some wonder "the remarkable sight" that lies before him. And then, as he pauses there, hushed and silent, he hears a voice. Somebody's calling his name.

The voice that swirls in and around the bush not only introduces itself as God but introduces itself rather specifically as One who is the God of Moses' own father. This is the God from whom Moses himself has been drawn, the God who is ready to draw him again, ready to draw him to a task that lies heavy on God's own heart.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:6b–7

[p. 49]

Comment 12

Moses hides his face, afraid to look at God. But the God at whom Moses is afraid to look is a God who has been doing a whole lot of looking. This God has been *observing* the misery of the enslaved Hebrews. This God has been *hearing* the cries of impoverished peasants, struggling under the whip of cruel taskmasters.

Moses looks away—but the God whom Moses fears to see is a God who has already seen it all.

Comment 13

According to Exodus 3:7, the “misery” that this God has seen is the misery “of my people.” A prepositional phrase such as this can imply possession or belonging. In such a case, the words would suggest that the misery was being endured by a people that “belongs” to God.

But it's equally possible—and perhaps even more plausible—to understand the words as a declaration of oneness, a kind of divine identification with those who are suffering.

Comment 14

When understood in this second way, the text can be seen as suggesting that when *any* people is enslaved and when *any* people endures violence and injustice, God suffers.

The voice coming from the burning bush on a holy mountain in the land of Midian is a voice that has seen the misery of a people hungering and thirsting in the far-off land of Egypt, and because that people is in misery, God is in misery—for all who suffer and all who struggle, they are “my peo-

ple,” says the Lord. “They are me.”

Comment 15

In a similar vein, many hundreds of years after Exodus was written, the Gospel of Matthew conveyed a parable in which a “great king” speaks about those many people all over the globe who have ever been hungry, ever been thirsty, ever been imprisoned.

When you relieved the misery of any such as these, says the mighty ruler, you relieved *my* misery. And whenever you turned away from any such as these, says this same ruler, you turned away from me.

Comment 16

Exodus 2:7 ends with haunting words: “I know their sufferings.” Yes, I *know* those sufferings, says God. I know those sufferings not in some abstract sense but rather in the most personal of ways.

Surprising as it may seem, from the viewpoint of God, *all* those who suffer and *all* those who struggle, they are “my people,” the people with whom God's own self is intimately united. Or, as the gracious ruler in Matthew puts it, whatever you have done to “the least of these,” you have done unto me.

For Discussion

What are some of the ways in which we as individuals in today's world might cause God to know misery? How might communities caused God misery? How might nation nations?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:7–8

[p. 49]

Comment 17

The song, “Kumbayah, My Lord, Kumbayah,” originally took form in poor Gullah communities off the coast of South Carolina. The words served as a reminder that “someone's crying, Lord,” and then the words went on to issue a plea:

“Come by here, my Lord, come by here!”

In Exodus, as Moses stands at the burning bush, he not only learns that God is in misery because “my people” are in misery but also learns that God

has already “come down” to deliver these suffering ones from the hands of the Egyptians. The God of the burning bush is a God who “comes by here” when we cry. The “coming” mentioned in Exodus is not just for a casual visit. It’s not just so that God can offer a shoulder for an enslaved people to cry on. Rather, this liberating God “comes down to deliver.” This liberating God comes to rip apart the chains—and fling open the doors.

Comment 18

In addition, we’re told that this God is ready to lead all who will follow to “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” The language provides a figurative contrast to the Hebrew word for Egypt, which is *Mitzrayim*, a word that means a tight and narrow place.

In contrast to “a tight and narrow place,” God offers a vision of “a good and broad land,” a land flowing, as it were, with milk and honey.

For Discussion

The Bible portrays the Hebrews as having lived in Egypt for hundreds of years. If you were one of those Hebrews, a member of a tribe and a family that had lived in Egypt for many generations, you might be excited about being “delivered” from oppression. But how do you think you’d feel about setting your sights and setting your heart on a whole different land, a land that somehow sounded too good to be true? Would it be easy or hard? Why?

Can you think of any ways in which we go through similar struggles today?

Scripture to Read

Matthew 6:25, 32–33 [p. 1152]

Comment 19

In his commentary on Exodus, George Pixley, a Baptist minister born in Chicago and raised in Nicaragua, suggests that the call to the Hebrews to set out in search of “a good and broad land” is a bit like the sayings in the Gospels in which Jesus’ disciples are told to “strive first for the kingdom of God.”

In both cases, he suggests, the seeking is a jour-

ney—a journey to a world that is figuratively “flowing with milk and honey,” a good and righteous realm in which God’s ways prevail, a realm in which God’s gracious provision of all that we need is abundant and free.

Comment 20

For all of us—as was true for both Jesus’ disciples and the ancient Hebrews—setting off on such a journey is the hard part.

Sometimes we get stuck, worrying about “what we will eat or what we will drink.” Sometimes we get stuck, wanting deliverance from that which has made us miserable but not really ready to anchor our hearts in a different reality.

Comment 21

Now and then, if it’s convenient, we might choose to “send up” an occasional “timber,” as we sometimes put it, particularly if we can find one of those smaller logs that’s easier to “send.”

But all too often, our hearts are where our “treasure” is—which is to say, stuck in a “tight and narrow” place, stuck in a “kingdom” that is anything but God’s. We might talk wistfully at times about that “good and broad land” that is “the kingdom of God,” but all too often, we aren’t yet ready to take on a new identity, a new loyalty, a new way of living.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:8 [p. 49]

Comment 22

The spiritual land flowing with milk and honey—the land on which God wants the Hebrews to set their hearts—is not a land for their exclusive possession. It’s a “good and broad land,” ready to accommodate “whosoever will.”

This reality is communicated through an allusion to the actual geographic destination of those who would be leaving Egypt. We’re told that they would not be heading to a private domain but rather to hills and valleys that they would share with “the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” It’s not a

“tight and narrow” kingdom to which we have been called—but rather a “good and broad” one.

For Discussion

What are some of the ways that we and others in today’s world still manifest the mentality of “tight and narrow” rather than “good and broad”?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:9–10 [p. 49]

Comment 23

The God who has “come down to deliver” now invites Moses to “come along” as well. At that burning bush—at that holy mountain—Moses discovers that the God who “comes” among us is not a God who likes to work alone. At that burning bush—at that holy mountain—Moses is commissioned. He’s commissioned to be a part of God’s action in liberating an oppressed people from a “tight and narrow place.”

An old spiritual celebrates the kind of calling that comes to us all:

*When Israel was in Egypt’s land—
let my people go—
oppress’d so hard they could not stand—
let my people go!
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land;
tell ol’ pharaoh, “Let my people go!”*

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:11 [p. 49]

Comment 24

“You have to be kidding!” says Moses.

“I had to journey across a vast wilderness with great hardship to get *away* from Egypt, to get *away* from the pharaoh. You drew me here to Midian. Now you want me to go back? No way!”

“And how would I ever bring the Israelites out of Egypt, anyway? Don’t you realize how many there are? Don’t you realize how suspicious they are of me? There’s just no way. This is mission impossible!”

For Discussion

To which of God’s actions—or causes—do we find it hardest to “join up with” today? What would it take to overcome our resistance?

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:12 [p. 49]

Comment 25

Moses asks, “Who am I for such a task?” But God’s answer focuses not so much on Moses as on God. “I will be *with* you,” says God. “I will be ‘Emmanuel,’ God with you.”

Instead of asking “Who am I for such a task?” Moses should have asked, “Who are *we*?” for the holy tasks to which we are called are not tasks that we undertake alone.

Comment 26

“And here’s the sign that I will be with you,” God adds. “Many long years from now, after you’ve confronted the pharaoh, after you’ve fled with a great company of people from Egypt, after you and many thousands have been chased across a muddy sea bed, after you’ve thought your lives were doomed, after you’ve trudged together for long miles through a blistering wilderness, after a discouraged people has complained and threatened you with insurrection—after all of that—you will worship God once again on this mountain. Once again, you’ll be here on holy ground. Once again, this bush will burn in your memory. That’s the sign. That’s the evidence. Now make the journey!”

For Discussion

In what ways is this “sign” similar or different from the “signs” that God offers us today?

Scripture to Read

Luke 2:8–12 [p. 1203]

Comment 27

In Luke’s portrayal of the birth of Jesus, some shepherds who had been watching their flock—much as Moses had been watching Jethro’s flock—

suddenly find themselves standing on holy ground. An angel of the Lord stands before them and invites them to make a journey, a journey to the city of David, a journey that may not be easy but a journey to which they have been called.

“And this will be the sign for you,” says the angel in words almost identical to those in Exodus. “After you’ve struggled to find a place for your sheep, after you’ve gathered together your courage, after you’ve set off for a place where you may be viewed with great suspicion, after you’ve come a mighty long way, bearing your burdens in the heat of the night, after you’ve searched in the most unlikely places for a mother with newborn child—after all of that—you will worship a child lying in a manger. Once again, you’ll be on holy ground. Once again, the singing you heard this night will burn in your memory. That’s the sign. That’s the evidence. Now make the journey!”

Scripture to Read

Hebrews 11:1 [p. 1366]

Comment 28

Hebrews 11 serves a reminder that the journeys to which we are called are not easy, and—most alarmingly—the “sign” that we’ve been on the right path and the “evidence” for which we long hoped is to be found not at the beginning of the journey but at its end.

Like Moses at the burning bush—and like the shepherds on that starry night so early in the Gospel of Luke—we too are often called to go. We go not alone but with God at our side, following holy footsteps, moving in holy directions, working on holy causes, confident of things not seen, yet ever moving from that which is “tight and narrow” toward that which is “good and broad.”

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:13 [p. 49]

Comment 29

Moses is still worried. He’s wondering what the Israelites are going to say when he announces to

them that their God has sent him to them on a mission of deliverance. They’re going to doubt that he knows their God. They’re going to think that he’s just putting them on. To test Moses, they may ask Moses to reveal the remarkable name that they have used for God. “If they test me by asking your name,” says Moses, “what will I tell them?”

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:14 [p. 49]

Comment 30

“If they want to know my name,” says God, “just tell them that ‘I am who I am.’”

The Hebrew words normally translated as “I am who I am” are actually rather ambiguous, as revealed in a marginal note in many Bibles. For example, they can just as easily be translated as “I will be who I will be.” The “Great I Am” is equally the “Great I Will,” which rather fits with the earlier declaration by the Holy Voice that “*I will* deliver my people” and the earlier assurance given to Moses, “*I will* be with you.”

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:15 [p. 49]

Comment 31

Scripture conveys multiple traditions about God’s name, and another of these appears here. It’s the name that is written in Hebrew as “YHWH,” sometimes conveyed in English as “Yahweh” (mistakenly rendered in the past as “Jehovah”).

For centuries, as Jews read scripture and came to the holy name “YHWH,” they refused to pronounce it, substituting instead the Hebrew word “*adonai*,” which means “lord.” Thus in most English translations of scripture, the Hebrew “YHWH” is likewise rendered as “LORD,” and to distinguish it for other more common uses of the same word, it is generally printed in caps: “LORD.” Whenever you see the word “LORD” in caps, it’s actually the sacred name “YHWH,” a name that Exodus declares is God’s name “forever.”

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:16–17

[p. 50]

Comment 32

Moses is to go to the elders of an oppressed people and declare to them that YHWH, the LORD, is determined to bring them out of the misery of a “tight and narrow place.” YHWH, the LORD, is determined to reshape their identity, to make them citizens of “a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:18–20

[p. 50]

Comment 33

The instructions given to Moses are filled with realism. He’s told that when he shows that he knows God’s name, the leaders of the people will “listen” to his voice—but these same leaders will be deeply nervous about making so dramatic a break from the world to which they’ve become accustomed.

Instead of leaving for a new land, says the LORD, they’ll first want to try for some kind of “partial” improvement, some modest “reform” that still leaves them in slavery, such as asking to be allowed to go on a short retreat, during which time they could get a brief break from their labors—disguised as an opportunity to engage in religious worship.

Comment 34

But don’t be fooled, says God. A dramatic change is needed, a new direction—not some half-hearted illusion of “modest progress” in the right direction.

We’re going all the way, says God to Moses, for when the “Great I Am” and the “Great I Will” is walking with you, there’s a “mighty hand” at your side. When YHWH is walking with you, “wonders” are about to be unleashed, and if the first “wonder” doesn’t open the door, hang on, for I’ve got more.

Scripture to Read

Exodus 3:21–22

[p. 50]

Comment 35

In the Gospels, Jesus often talks about “the kingdom of God” as a realm of radical reversals, a realm in which the first shall be last and the last first. And the message that comes to Moses on the holy “mountain of God” is equally grounded in such a vision.

My wonders won’t stop, says the LORD, until the richest Egyptians manifest a new spirit. Those who have used the hard labor of the Hebrews to enrich their lives with silver and gold and fancy clothes—those who cruelly looked down their noses at what they thought was a “worthless” peasant people—they will one day be in awe of you. In fact, on that day, they will esteem you so greatly that if you ask them to give you their silver and gold, they will eagerly do it.

Comment 36

The journey to which Moses had been called was a journey of radical reversals, a journey that would face many obstacles, a journey that would often leave him not knowing exactly which way to turn.

Yet, like Moses, many of God’s people down through the ages have felt “a heavy load” lifted from their backs, felt “a heavy load” being carried on holy shoulders, “a heavy load” being carried by a God who is able, a God whose “wonders” never cease.

Comment 37

Rev. William H. Brewster was born in 1897 to sharecroppers in Tennessee. After excelling in education, he tried to open an African American seminary in Memphis, but a Memphis mayor named “Boss” Crump frantically tried to crush the effort, fearing that it would bring “the wrong kind” of people to the city. But the God of wonders allowed Brewster to persevere, and before long he had established a “theological clinic” with branches in twenty-five cities.

In addition to pastoring, starting a “theological clinic,” editing a newspaper, founding the first radio station with an all-black format, and serving as a civil rights activist, he began writing gospel music. More than some other gospel music compos-

ers, he tried to ground his music in a rich biblical base. As a result, some of the songs for which he is most widely remembered resonate deeply with themes found in the Moses story, as conveyed in the early chapters of Exodus. These include “I’m Leaning and Depending on the Lord” (written in 1939), “Move on Up a Little Higher” (written in 1941), and “Surely God Is Able” (written in 1947), which includes a brief allusion to the God of “the burning bush.”

Note: We’ll be concluding our session by listening to a version of “Surely God Is Able” from a recent recording by an award-winning vocal group called Chanticleer. In the early 1950s, this song (in a slightly different rendition) was a favorite of the Clara Ward Singers, who often used Marion Williams, then a member of the group, to sing the lead.