Cross Cultural Bible Study

The Racial Justice Team of the Conference Board of Church and Society is offering this Bible study as one means of exploring attitudes towards race and culture. The study was developed by the CBCS Asst. Coordinator, Jennifer Berry, who currently serves as Pastor at the Ellenville, NY UMC, with revisions and additions made for general church use.

Moses is a familiar Biblical character, but how well do we really know him? In the fourth chapter of Exodus, Moses is told by God to 'go back.' Back to Egypt, back to oppression, to power and privilege. But was the Moses who returned the same man who left? Was he going back as a Hebrew slave, an Egyptian prince, or someone else entirely? In a four session study of the first four chapters of Exodus we will explore how identity is formed and how all of us, in some measure, are beings of multiple identities in a world where identity politics create challenges for each of us, regardless of our race or culture.

Materials needed: Chapters 1-4 of Exodus; question sheets for discussion sessions

Prayer to open sessions:

God of all peoples, cultures and times,
Be with us as we undertake this Bible study.
Awaken in us the eagerness to know your Word better.
Touch us with sensitivity and grace to respond to the Spirit that will be with us.
Guide our search for new Truth;
Help us hunger for compassion and understanding;
Open us to be vulnerable to each other and the wisdom of scripture.
May our reflections help us grow into the fully human people you created us to be.
We ask all this through the love we share with You and with each other. Amen.

Hymn (optional): “Lead on O Cloud of Presence” #2234 in The Faith We Sing

Session 1: Introduction to the theory and practice of the Study

The first session of this study would include all participants together, with all reading this Introduction, discussing the process and reaching an understanding about what is expected going forward. Following this general introduction there are some questions to guide discussion, but it will be important for the group leader to encourage dialogue about the upcoming expectations and process.
The first four chapters of Exodus tell the story of two peoples, the Israelites and the Egyptians, whose stories are entwined, and an individual, Moses, who embodies that interconnectedness. While neither community has learned how to navigate the truth of their shared existence, it is no less a reality. Given the hybridity of our own communities and our professed desire to find new ways to live into interconnectedness rather than seeking to escape from it, what can the story of Exodus offer in our churches in terms of discussion, study, and modeling? How can our communities be drawn closer together through the Exodus narrative? And how can we develop empathy and enhance our appreciation of diversity through this seminal narrative from scripture?

This Bible study will seek to disrupt the we-they dichotomy of communities by challenging participants to experiment with social location in the context of the story; to explore issues of group motivation based on identity; to create a space of biblical cross cultural experience, bringing communities outside of their comfort zone and using the metaphor of the wilderness to create a new space where these identities are explored.

The process of this study suggests that it be done either with two different church communities who come together for discussion and reflection OR by one community that arbitrarily splits into two groups for the readings and dialogue. Each group will read the first four chapters of Exodus three times in total. The readings will be similar but nuanced. Each group will be asked to read, beginning with chapter one, with a designated identity of either the Hebrews and Moses or the Egyptians and Moses. The roles will reverse for the second reading.

So, for the first reading, Group A will be asked to read from the viewpoint of being Egyptians and Moses. Challenged to accept the Egyptian position of power over the Hebrews, we will question how and why groups act in their own self-interest, develop narratives around those actions, and determine what that interest entails. One of the goals of this reading is to acknowledge that people as groups with a collective sense of identity do act from a place of self-interest, and further, that we have to question where we are in our own understanding of
narrative and how we are perceived by others. Having been, as Christians, acculturated to read as the Hebrews, what does it do to our perceptions of the story and of self to read as the Egyptians?

Reading a second time, the same Group A will read as Hebrews and Moses. The goal this time is to do the opposite. Having acknowledged the dominant role that the Egyptians hold in the story, reading as Hebrews offers an opportunity to begin examining the impact of that domination on others. In the process, we move more overtly from reading the text to layering text and current socio-political implications of the text together. This creates a space to start a dialogue about both our impact on society, but also society’s impact upon us. Both our empathic ability and creative imagination will be stretched and developed as the Group takes on these different identities, with all that these roles imply and entail.

Meanwhile, Group B will be reading in reverse: they will do their first reading as Hebrews and Moses. As such, they will be invited to explore issues of domination in the text, to question the ways subjugation leads to subjugation and whether or not this explains the way the Hebrews respond to Moses or how we so easily gloss over the role of the women in these stories. It will be an important goal to explore ways in which the text shows Moses’ strength coming from his Hebrew understanding of his world and how that influences the choices he makes.

Having explored the story from a Hebrew perspective, Group B will next read from the perspective of the Egyptians and Moses. Are there ways in which it is possible to comprehend the fear that comes as a byproduct of power? In what ways can communities of solidarity be formed with those in power? Can they, and if so, to what ends? How do we understand people who are of multiple ethnicities? Do they play a particular role in our cultural work? Does understanding the Egyptians as African change or nuance interpretation?

Session I discussion questions:

1. Having heard that one of the purposes of this study is to develop empathy, how do you envision this occurring with you personally and with the group overall? How can this
quality enhance your personal spiritual life? And the spiritual quality of your church community?

2. Do you anticipate that it will be difficult or easy to place yourself “in persona” of Egyptians or Hebrews? Can you see yourself as Moses?

3. What role do you think the concept of “wilderness” plays in the overall story? What do you think of when you reflect on “wilderness”?

4. Although we have not started the actual reading yet, do you envision that you will see correlations between this part of the Exodus story and today’s society? Where do you see oppression in today’s world? Where do you see the exercise of power? What kind of intersections happen today that might mirror this biblical setting?

**Session II**

Group A will have read Exodus 1-4 from the viewpoint of being Egyptians and Moses. Group B will have read Exodus 1-4 from the viewpoint of being the Hebrews and Moses.

**Session III**

Group A will have read Exodus 1-4 from the viewpoint of being the Hebrews and Moses. Group B will have read Exodus 1-4 from the viewpoint of being Egyptians and Moses.

**Questions to use for the Egyptians and Moses viewpoint:**

_We remember that we are looking at the story from the viewpoint of the group in power_

- What do we make of the Israelites being fruitful and prolific? Growing exceedingly strong? How would this strike the Egyptians?

- Can we retell the scene of the princess finding Moses? If we had to guess, what would Moses’ childhood be like?

- In Ex 2:11-14, how does this short passage illustrate Moses’ position? Where does he identify himself?

- Do we think Pharaoh’s attempt to kill Moses is personal or political? How much does it have to do with the murder? As an Egyptian, how do you feel about this?

- If Egyptians could hear Moses and God talking, what would they think?

- Who does Moses understand himself to be? Consider this from his “Egyptian” side!

- Why the signs? Who is the target audience?
**Questions to use for the Hebrews and Moses viewpoint:**

*We remember that we are looking at the story from the viewpoint of people being oppressed*

- Who are the Hebrew midwives? How are they deciding in what ways the Hebrew women are and are not like Egyptian women?
- What would Moses’ mother been thinking/feeling?
- Would people who are in power give up their children in this way? How does fear for one’s children affect a community? Can you think of contemporary analogies?
- In Ex 2:11-14, how does this short passage illustrate Moses’ position? Where does he identify himself? Who does Moses understand himself to be?
- Who does God need Moses to be? What are the qualifications? What is God asking of Moses?
- What does Moses know of or about God?
- Why the signs? Who is the target audience?

**Session IV**

Having read the text twice from the different perspectives of Hebrew and Egyptian, beginning to understand the dual identity of Moses and the complexity of identity in general, and our complicity in the creating of it, the two study groups will come together, to, as Moses did, ‘go back,’ reflecting on who Moses is and reading these Exodus chapters again.

At the beginning of this joint session, the group leader will ask:
- What cultural sensitivity, if any, has been gained through the prior sessions?
- Has the experience of reading from different viewpoints made a new space for understanding the complexity of Moses?
• Are the participants now prepared to grapple with the reality that “racial and ethnic identities are not a given; they are constantly being constructed and enforced?”¹

After this preliminary reflection, the following questions can direct a group discussion. If the groups are large, the leader may want to put people in small enough groups to allow for full participation. Here are some issues to discuss:

• How does Moses perceive himself in chapter 4? What kind of “journey” has he been on? How does this personal journey of Moses connect to a larger vision of the spiritual development or “journey” of Christians?

• What is Moses’ relationship with Jethro? With Zipporah? How are his relationships in Midian formed, from what identity? Will this identity change again?

• In Midian, is Moses Hebrew, Egyptian, foreign, alien, minority, son-in-law…?

• Why is God going to harden Pharaoh’s heart? What does it accomplish? Anything?

• Does Moses think he can draw these people together?

• What would Moses biggest fears be in going back? Can we feel empathy with Moses? Does understanding more about how his character develops and faces challenges help us have insight into ourselves and others?

• Does this study suggest any “next steps” for your church or community?

If this last question triggers an enthusiastic response from your participants, you may want to schedule one more session to follow up on the ideas that are generated or to discuss continuing more Bible studies that lead to reflection about diversity and culture.