

ABRAHAM

Session One Gracious Opportunity

Opening Prayer

Song: “Leave your country and your people”
(John Ylvisaker)

Pray together:

Loving God,
we thank you for gathering us here today,
and for your presence among us.
You showered Abram with generosity
promising him a land, a people, and a legacy.
Awaken us to your abundant generosity
in our lives
... to the gifts of the earth that sustain us
... to communities who support and
challenge us
... to situations which prompt us to
recognize you in unexpected places
... to challenges which become
opportunities to know ourselves and you.
Inspire us
to be instruments of your generosity
in all of the situations of our lives,
to lovingly give of ourselves
for your people.

Background

Around four thousand years ago, a nomadic herder named Abram lived with his father, brothers, and their families in the Middle East.

Scripture

Genesis 12:1-5; 13:5-18 [NRSV]

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five

years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

...

Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, and there was strife between the herders of Abram’s livestock and the herders of Lot’s livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land. Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.” Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.” So Abram moved his tent, and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the Lord.

Reflection

At seventy-five, God directs Abram into a new situation of opportunity and challenge—trading the familiar for the uncertain, with the promise of future blessing. This blessing is not just *for* Abram, but *through* Abram for all the communities of earth. How does he (and how can we) become a blessing for others?

One approach emerges in Abram's treatment of his nephew, Lot. Faced with the conflict between the two sets of shepherds and flocks, Abram might have ordered Lot home to Haran, where Lot's grandfather still resided; after all, God had called *Abram* specifically to this land, not Lot. Being the senior family leader and a successful businessman who had grown his flocks into a fortune, Abram might have shrewdly chosen the superior land for himself, leaving Lot to make his own way. Instead, Abram graciously allows Lot to choose his own portion, to pursue his success in peace, and Abram accepts what remains without complaint. Through Abram's choice, Lot receives a blessing of land, his own opportunity.

Abram has indeed been generous. But notice what the biblical text does. We are immediately invited to understand the generosity of God, in naming Abram the father of many nations. Abram's action towards Lot is like a pale shadow of the well of God's bounty and love, which overflows for the benefit of the world and never runs dry.

Just twelve chapters earlier in Genesis, we find the account of God making human beings in *God's own likeness*. How could we possibly live up to that standard? Abram's example suggests that if you want to be like God, do the sorts of things God does. But to know what God is doing, we must attend closely to how God is guiding in our own lives; we must recall and consider how God has acted in the past. If, like Abram, we can act in accordance with the promptings of the Spirit, the blessings may fall not just upon us, but upon those we encounter and serve, and perhaps upon all the communities of earth.

Questions

- When in my life have I traded the familiar for the uncertain? Who or what helped me in that transition? Who or what held me back?
- What are other ways that we, as group, have acted "in God's likeness"? What are other ways that we, as group, could act "in God's likeness"?
- When I am in a position of leadership, am I able to invite others to share in that leadership and the decisions which must be made? If so, how? If not, why not? When I am invited to participate in decision-making, do I embrace that role or back off? Why?

Closing Prayer

Lead the group in appropriate prayer.

For example, Thomas Merton's prayer "The Road Ahead" from "The Love of Solitude" in Thoughts in Solitude by Thomas Merton.

You will find the text of this prayer on page 10 of the Campus RENEW Leadership Manual: PRAYER.

ABRAHAM

Session Two

The Mark of Trust

Opening Prayer

As you established a covenant
with Abraham and Sarah
you call us into relationship with you,
a relationship of love and trust.
Help us to model right relationship
in the small community
you have called together.
May our words reflect the Word,
spoken through endless ages
and revealed through your Son.
May our lives may be a witness to the Spirit
who flows throughout, within, and among us
that our time together may remind us
that you are ever present,
the Creator and Sustainer of all.

Background

God promised to make a great nation of Abram, but he and Sarai were both in their eighties and had never conceived. According to a custom of the time and culture, Sarai directed Abram to conceive a child with her Egyptian slave, Hagar. The resulting son, Ishmael (“God hears”), would then be treated as Abram and Sarai’s child.

Scripture

Genesis 17:1-22 [NRSV]

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from

you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this

season next year.” And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Reflection

Picture a close friend, someone you trust deeply who also trusts in you. Try to remember a moment or an event when you recognized that trust, when you realized this person was not just an acquaintance or a buddy, but someone who really cared for you, and vice versa. Think about how this friendship has influenced your life and decisions, through a gentle nudge or a forceful challenge, and how your friend has been changed in turn. Deep friendships leave a mark on us, sometimes short-term, sometimes long-lasting.

This covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah formalizes a relationship of deep trust which has already lasted for twenty-five years. God had invited the couple to move to a new land and to live according to God’s ways. So they had done, and God blessed them with prosperity. Now in the covenant, both God and Abraham promise to continue to act as they have been, to continue their relationship both now and, importantly, into the future with Abraham and Sarah’s descendents yet to be born. In a way, the covenant jump-starts the relationship with God for Abraham’s children, grandchildren, and so on: from the beginning, they can trust God to care for them, and God can trust that they will live according to God’s command as best as they can. Through the covenant, they all participate not only in relationship with God, but with each other in community. Through community, they will be better able to live the covenant, learning together about God’s command and God’s love, encouraging each other towards good decisions.

As Christians, we believe that a close relationship with God based on mutual trust is available not only to Jews (who bear the mark of circumcision), and not only to Christians (who see Jesus as establishing a new covenant), but to all people who desire to walk in God’s ways. The visible signs or marks of our bond with God may vary, but the opportunity for friendship, for community, and for change in our lives is universal.

Questions

- Consider your relationship with God. How is it both personal (between you and God), and communal (something you experience with God as a part of a larger community)? What kind of trust do you have in God’s care for you and your future? What kind of trust might God have in you and your actions?
- How has your relationship with God and/or your faith affected a decision you have made in your life? Can you point to anything in your life which is a “mark” of your relationship with God (something you do, or wear, or say, etc)?
- How do you cultivate trust in your relationships, in general and with the members of your small group? How does trust (or distrust) affect the conversations you have, and how you are able to share faith? What can you do to build trust with friends and small group members?

Closing Prayer

Song: "Yahweh, I know you are near"
(Words, based on Psalm 139, and music: Dan Schutte © 1971 Dan Schutte. Published by OCP Publications)

God,
can we trust
that your covenant
is a promise that you are there
in the darkest moments
at 3 a.m.
when the paper is not finished
and the body aches for bed
when it feels like the world hates us
and emotions are raw with roommates
when we're sick
and far from home
when life hurts ...
Can we trust
that you sustain, guide and care for us,
soothing the bruised places
offering us peace in the chaos.

ABRAHAM

Session Three Degees of Affection

Opening Prayer

Generous God,
you continuously offer us
a place to rest and refresh.
Be with us as we take this time
to find you in the stories of our lives.
Aid us in becoming a shelter for others,
a place of safety and serenity
in a painful world.
May others experience
your eternal welcome in us. Amen.

Background

At God's request, Abraham moved to a new country, bringing along his wife and flocks and shepherds, as well as his nephew Lot and all of Lot's family, flocks and shepherds. Initially there had been friction between the two sets of animals trying to graze in such close quarters, so Abraham allowed Lot to take his choice of the grazing land, and moved a little bit further away. Later on, God formalized his relationship with Abraham through a covenant, a contract based on mutual trust.

Scripture

Genesis 18:1-15 [NRSV]

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water

be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."



Reflection

Quick quiz: Imagine that you are walking to lunch after class and a stranger is hanging around the student center.

Are you more likely to:

- (a) Not notice her amidst the craziness of the day?
- (b) See her, but leave her alone to take care of her own business?
- (c) Walk up to her and insist on buying her lunch?

How would your response to the stranger change if you recognized her as:

- (a) a relative?
- (b) a professor whose class you wanted to pass?
- (c) a homeless person?
- (d) a lost-looking freshman?

In Abraham's time and place, it was a matter of life and death to find shade, water, and rest during a journey through the desert, and people offered hospitality to others knowing that when they themselves made a journey they would require the same. At the same time, Abraham was living in a foreign land, away from his extended family's connection and protection. As for us today, opening his home and sharing the best that he had carried risks; would his "guests" try to rob him or hurt him? In this case, Abraham's generous nature clearly outweighs his caution, and the generosity we already saw in how he treated his nephew Lot (Session One) here is extended towards three "strangers". The years and experience which have brought Abraham to this point seem to have developed in him an openness to others, so much so that his immediate and instinctive reaction is to be concerned first for their well-being, sometimes before, or over, his own.

How well you know someone can affect how you treat that person—for good, or for ill. Maybe you would loan money to a friend, but not a sibling. When your patience has been stretched to the limit, you may manage to control yourself while at class or work, but blow up at your roommate when you finally get home. Abraham has learned to see God in family and strangers. How far have we managed to grow into that kind of vision and outlook?

Questions

- Who has reached out to me with gratuitous generosity? How did I respond?
- How do I nourish my relationship with God? Do I offer God the best that I have, stopping in the middle of my day to share my time?
- Why is hospitality such an important characteristic of good leadership? Have you as a leader cultivated an environment of hospitality in your communities? How can this be accomplished in your small groups?

Closing Prayer

God
over and over again
you tell us that
"whatsoever you do to the least
you do to me."
Loving God,
we beg forgiveness
... for walking by the least of your people
... for turning a blind eye
to a roommate in pain
... for being too busy to comfort a friend
... for ignoring a stranger in the dining hall
... for supporting causes that oppress
our brothers and sisters
... for having too much to do
to care about suffering in another country
Inspire us to reach out
to the least we encounter every day,
to be your hands and your feet in the world.
We ask this in the name of the one
who continuously reaches out
in and through us. Amen.

ABRAHAM

Session Four Rejection and Selection

Background

God's guidance and generosity have brought Abraham success in a new land; he also now has two sons whom God has promise to bless in turn. But human anxiety and jealousy stand between this complex family and a peaceful future.

Opening Prayer

God of justice,
we believe that you offer another way.
Instead of jealousy and revenge—
a world where
enemies speak to one another.
Instead of violence and hatred—
a world where
people beat their swords into plowshares.
Instead of malice and spite—
a world where
love is the greatest commandment.
Help us to challenge those around us
to live this reality of peace and justice.

Scripture

Genesis 21:1-21 [NRSV]

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that

Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Reflection

Two mothers, two children: one of laughter and one of tears. In Abraham's culture (and in many others before and since), a woman's fertility determined her value to her family and in the larger society, and infertility implied divine censure. For almost a century, Sarah had suffered not only the sorrow and frustration of

her barrenness, but also the critical judgement of her neighbors and kinfolk at her “disgraced” condition. After Isaac’s birth redeemed her in society’s eyes, Sarah swiftly acted to eliminate the threat she perceived against her pride and joy: the potential claims of his half-brother. In contrast to Abraham’s previous examples of gracious generosity for the sake of others’ well-being, Sarah exhibited protective selfishness on behalf of her infant son, apparently indifferent to the harm she would cause. Although God had reversed the curse she had endured, Sarah’s heart could not so quickly recover from the anguish of her earlier life.

Injustices pile up in this tale, from the culture’s standards and customs regarding human worth and family life, to Sarah’s cruelty and Abraham’s acquiescence. But God hears the cry of the oppressed, and intervenes to bring healing and new possibility into circumstances such as these. Our response to the reality of injustice may sometimes strike at the root causes of a problem, and other times may do no more than address the symptoms which result.

What this story of Sarah also reminds us is that people who act heartlessly often suffer from a broken heart. Consideration of what has brought such people to this point may help us treat them gently, although they still may not reciprocate. Furthermore, a patient and compassionate response interrupts the progression of hostility breeding hostility, so that a new way forward becomes possible. Scripture does not share how the rest of Hagar’s life unfolded, but let us hope that the blessing which God brought to Ishmael and herself effected such healing in her heart that she was able later to pass on that blessing to others.

Questions

- How have you experienced or witnessed God’s healing in a situation of harm? How did the other people involved mediate God’s compassion and peace for that situation?

- Has your group ever discussed situations of injury and/or injustice? If so, what was the nature of that discussion? What was your role as leader of that discussion? In what ways does this reading and reflection shed light on that discussion?
- Think of an example of cultural injustice or bias, and examples of individual acts of cruelty which follow from it. Then consider a way you could address both the structural and the individual harm.

Closing Prayer

O God of Love and Justice,
our Creator and Liberator,
you created the universe
full of so much beauty and harmony.
But in these days in which we live,
justice and equality between your people
no longer exist.

We pray and struggle
to restore your dream
of true justice and freedom for all.
We recognize that
we are co-creators and
co-liberators with you.

And so, we, your people, ask you
for the grace and strength
of your Holy Spirit,
so that we may continue working
for a more just and peaceful world,
full of love and happiness.

We ask this
in the name of Jesus Christ,
our companion on the journey. Amen!

by Father Dennis Moorman, M.M.,
João Pessoa, Brazil,
from a prayer by leaders
of the base Christian communities
in northeastern Brazil,
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MOSES

Introduction

The descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob (a.k.a. Israel) had moved during a time of drought from Canaan (the Promised Land) to Egypt, where they lived in peace with the local Egyptian population. Several generations later, the Egyptian king feared the Israelites would overrun his country and ally with his enemies, so he forced them into subjugation and hard labor (Exodus 1:1-15). At this time of desperation, God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and back to their Promised Land.

MOSES

Session One Chance and Character

Background

When it became clear to Pharaoh (the Egyptian king) that slavery was not enough to keep the Israelites from multiplying, he ordered that all newborn Hebrew boys be killed (Exodus 1:15-22). To avoid this death sentence Moses' family hid him, first in their home, and later in a basket among the reeds at the edge of the Nile River. Pharaoh's daughter noticed the basket while bathing in the river, and adopted the child inside as her own (Exodus 2:1-10).

Scripture

Exodus 2:11-22 [NRSV]

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you

killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" They said, "An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." He said to his daughters, "Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread." Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land."

Reflection

No one can change where he is born or how she is raised. For good or for ill, random chance and the choices of those around us shape our lives in ways far beyond our control. Consider Moses: his contemporaries were slaughtered as infants, those who survived suffered as slaves, yet he resided in the royal court, an adopted grandson of the Pharaoh. As he aged and grew in awareness of the misery of the Hebrews, did he question the luck that delivered him from their hard life? Did he consider speaking to the Pharaoh on behalf of his original people, pleading for more fair and humane treatment? Did he fear that Pharaoh would respond to his intervention by casting him out of court and into that life of slavery? It seems that Moses was troubled, because it took just one more example of the abuse of his kinsfolk for him to snap and exact blood vengeance against the unsuspecting Egyptian soldier. But this visceral and violent reaction did nothing to alleviate the overall suffering of the Hebrews, and even they recognized it as a futile response. In fact, it led to a worst case scenario: the Hebrews' distress continued unabated, and Moses fled his

privileged life, exiled by his fear of punishment.

Who is this Moses, beyond good and bad luck, beyond insecurity and impulsivity, beyond two competing identities and loyalties? In Midian, Moses has the opportunity to decide for himself who he is and whom he will support—the tormentor or the persecuted.

Perhaps living outside overcrowded Egypt gave Moses room to reflect on his own life, his roots, and so to find again within himself the impulse for justice, and this time to channel it into effective action. This is a characteristic we often find in great leaders in the Bible; they take time away, usually alone, to reflect and to tune themselves to God's voice. For Moses, this seems to be the time when—having lost the two identities he received through chance—he decides to create his life anew, this time through intention, not accident.

Questions

- Before Moses could become a true leader for his people, he needed to decide who he wanted to be. Before he could determine that, he needed some distance from his everyday circumstance, his crowd, his status. How do you discover who you are, and choose who you will be? What helps and what inhibits you in those determinations?

- Like Moses, we enjoy many advantages and opportunities that other people do not. Some of this is the luck of where we were born, some of it is the hard work of how we were raised. How do we respond to situations of injustice in our local community and throughout the world? What actions could we take to address those circumstances which could in turn affect our own privilege and comfort? What aids us or prevents us from that action?
- What situations have you experienced that have put you outside of or far from your home and your family, friends, etc. What were the fruits of this experience (negative and/or positive)?

Closing Prayer

Just as Moses needed some time away
to discover who he was,
spend some time in quiet
to end this session,
perhaps in centering prayer.
Notice what emerges in the silence.

MOSES

Session Two Fire on the Mountain

Opening Prayer

God of revelation,
we seek you in this life
to challenge us with your word
especially when we are comfortable.
Help us
to be open to your revelation in all its forms,
to seek the guidance of the Spirit
when we are confused,
and to rest in the comfort of your being.
We pray all these things
in the name of Jesus, the Revealer.
Amen.

Background

Moses, son of a Hebrew woman, adopted grandson of the king of Egypt, has fled to Midian to avoid responsibility for the Egyptian soldier he killed. While there, he assists some sisters in watering their family flock, defending them against the harassment of other shepherds. Grateful for his assistance, their father invited Moses to join the family, and to marry one of the sisters.

Scripture

Shorter form: Exodus 3:1-14, 4:10-17 [NRSV]

Longer form: Exodus 3:1—4:17 [NRSV]

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer!

Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

The following section could be omitted

[God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt. I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of

the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ They will listen to your voice; and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.’ I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go. I will bring this people into such favor with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; each woman shall ask her neighbor and any woman living in the neighbor’s house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

Then Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail” —so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— “so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” Again, the Lord said to him, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. Then God said, “Put your hand back into your cloak” —so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body— “If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign. If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”]

Shorter reading resumes here

But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.”

Reflection

Each summer in the western United States, people anxiously monitor the reports of wildfires burning the dry forests around their neighborhoods. In a balanced forest environment, occasional fire serves the overall health of the forest, clearing choking ground cover and testing trees, the strongest of which survive the fire and grow higher and healthier than ever. But under imbalanced conditions, the fire burns too hot, too fierce, and can destroy much of the forest life and also the human communities nearby. How thin the line between a cleansing fire and one which completely destroys!

Faced with the presence of God in the burning bush, Moses receives a task which sounds like the testing by a fire likely to destroy him. Unsurprisingly, he protests: “Who am *I* that I should go to Pharaoh, who wants me dead by the way, and lead the Israelites out of Egypt? You know the last time I tried to give advice to an Israelite, he blew me off! I’m not even a good speaker, and you want me to talk Pharaoh into relinquishing his free labor? I don’t have the

ability *or* the credibility to do this! And who are *you* to ask me to leave my happy quiet shepherd life and my new loving family?"

Scholars and rabbis struggle to translate God's response: *YHWH*. It is clear that it is derived from the verb *hayah* "to be." The New Revised Standard Bible footnote offers I AM WHAT I AM or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL as alternative possible translations; the New American Bible adds a note that YHWH is usually explained "in reference to God as the absolute and necessary Being. It may be understood of God as the Source of all created beings." If we bear in mind the ancient notion that to know a deity's name was to gain power over it, then with this reply, God avoids that trap! Scripture scholar W.F. Albright has suggested the interpretation: "He who causes to be." This translation connects with God's later declaration: "Who gives one person speech and makes another deaf and dumb? ... Is it not I, the Lord?"

Of course God calls Moses for this task, because God *created* Moses and knows what Moses' passions and talents are, knows what help Moses will require, knows that he is the right person for this job at this moment. Moses can respond to the call trusting in God's knowledge of the mission and of Moses himself, trusting this is a fire that will test him, but not consume him.

Questions

- Have I had the experience of "standing on sacred ground"? Describe the experience for the group, and share in particular: how did that experience affected my faith?
- Have I ever found myself in a situation that I thought was 'beyond me,' only to discover that God provided the gifts I needed? Do I experience being drawn toward certain places or situations that seem to stretch and challenge me?
- In what way have I experienced God's self-revelation in my life? Did I have a "burning bush" experience, or has my discovery of God been more gradual, more subtle?

Closing Prayer

Ever-present God,
you have entrusted us with the task
of living and leading our small communities
as the Gospel reveals.
Sometimes we are weary of your call
because we lack the confidence
in our abilities.
In those times of uncertainty,
make your presence known
so that we may go forth and proclaim
the good news of your existence.
Stir up in us a courageous faith
in your loving presence
so that with you
we can accomplish
whatever you put before us.

MOSES

Session Three Led to Freedom

Opening Prayer

Choose an appropriate familiar song which celebrates the great Exodus event. For example:

“Wade in the Water”
“Lead Me, Guide Me”
“Pharaoh, Pharaoh”
“Let My People Go”
“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”
“Horse and Rider (Have Been Thrown Into the Sea)”
“Let Us Sing to the Lord (He Covered in Wondrous Glory)”

Background

Moses and his brother Aaron, speaking on God’s behalf, charge Pharaoh to release the Hebrew people from slavery. Pharaoh resists, plagues ensue: frogs, boils, blood, etc. Only after the death of all the firstborn of Egypt does Pharaoh relent. No sooner had the Israelites packed up their families and possessions and left, did Pharaoh regret his decision and chase them with his horses, chariots, and charioteers all the way to the edge of the Sea.

Scripture

Exodus 14:15-27, 15:19-21 [NRSV]

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.”

The angel of God who was going before the

Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:

“I will sing to the LORD,
for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”
...

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women

went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

Reflection

Throughout history, God works for human liberation. The passage we have just read, though, marks a defining moment for the history of the Israelites as the people of God. This delivery from slavery and death was celebrated annually in the Passover supper, a celebration which Jesus uses to announce a new and greater deliverance, from sin and from eternal death.

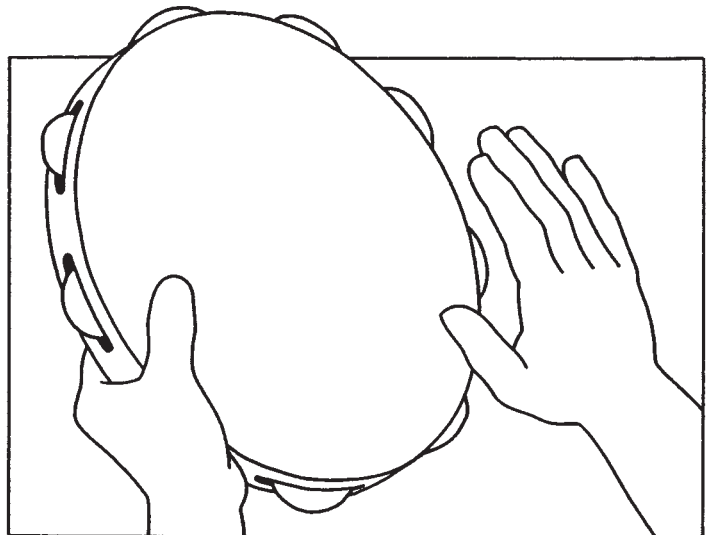
In the passage, Moses certainly seems to occupy center stage. But Miriam is there, too, and plays a role which, though different is no less important. Moses and Miriam show us two ways of working in concert with the liberating Spirit of God.

Moses hears the call of God prompting him to assist the people of Israel in their transition from oppression to liberation. The trust which Moses had placed in God from the time of that call at the burning bush, the trust which gave Moses the courage to stand with his brother Aaron before Pharaoh and demand the release of the Hebrews, might have felt a little thin as they all stared at the unbridged expanse of water before them, and heard the thunder of the approaching army behind them. But at the water's edge, as at all those points before, God gives the direction, Moses follows God, the people follow Moses, and a miracle occurs. Moses stands at the intersection of God's command and the Hebrew's belief, helping to bridge the gap between here and the far side, a distance which seemed as wide as heaven and earth.

In the midst of the miracle and the flush of victory, Miriam helps the people to recognize the action of the liberating God in their midst. She leads them in a song which is no less an act of faith, because through it the people proclaim that this is no random act of nature which accidentally freed the Hebrews from their captors! As at the beginning when the world was created, God has spoken over the waters, and the waters have obeyed.

Did you notice how the song occurs twice? Scholars consider this not only the oldest example of Israelite song, but probably the oldest part of the Bible itself. Why twice? Miriam's taking up of the song led by Moses earlier serves as a tool of remembrance and praise, so that the people never forget how God acted to free them from their chains. Miriam was only the first of countless generations to sing it; 3000 years later, this song still has pride of place in our annual celebration of the Easter Vigil, the night on which we celebrate our liberation from our greatest enemy, sin and eternal death, thanks to the loving intervention of God.

Moses leads the people to freedom; Miriam leads the people in singing their freedom. (Scholars say the song was originally Miriam's, and it was only later that it was edited in a second time, earlier, being led by Moses). Christ leads the new people to freedom; Mary leads us in singing that freedom in the *Magnificat*. Of course today, we still need our Moses and our Christ figures; but so, too, do we need our Miriams and Marys to help us thank God for the liberation he offers us and perpetuate it in celebration. Might this be *your* role?



Questions

- Think of a moment in your life when you became free from something. What had held you bound, and what helped you to escape it? Or is there an area in your life right now where God is inviting to leave something behind and enjoy a new freedom?
- What kind of leadership is God calling you to? Are you like Moses, helping others to hear and respond to God's direction? Are you like Miriam, helping others to recognize what God is doing in their lives? There are countless other ways in which to exercise Christian leadership—which are you practicing in your life?
- What kind of leadership does our group offer to our small community members in celebrating our faith?

Closing Prayer

God, granter of freedom,
you freed the Israelites
from slavery in Egypt;
you stood with Gandhi in India
and King in the United States.
Help us to loose the chains that bind us,
help us to loose the chains that bind others.
Give us eyes to recognize
the bondage of those around us
and throughout the world,
Give us the courage
to stand for freedom for ourselves,
but more importantly, the courage to stand
for those who have no one to stand for them.
Amen.

MOSES

Session Four Quarreling and a Test

Opening Prayer

Gracious God,
we all too easily forget the gifts you give us.
We gather here together,
leaving behind our lives
with their worries and tribulations
so that your Word may remind us
of your many graces.
Let that revealing Word be with us now.

Background

The Lord, the God of Abraham and Sarah, heard the cries of their descendents (the Israelites) caught in slavery in Egypt. So God called Moses to lead the Israelites into freedom and back to the promised land. Ten plagues and one miraculous crossing of the sea later, a huge band of Israelites with families, flocks and possessions are walking through the desert. But the memory of the pain of slavery and the exhilaration of freedom does not last very long.

Scripture

Numbers 20:1-13 [NRSV]

The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there.

Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had died when our kindred died before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink." Then Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their

faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.

So Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he had commanded him. Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff; water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and by which he showed his holiness.

Reflection

Who knows what is best for us? Can you imagine yourself as a child asking the doctor for a shot? But our parents, trusting it will keep us healthy and protect us against disease, request it for us. How many of us as adolescents longed to skip school? How many of us did skip school? But our parents, trusting in the importance of a good educational foundation, enforced our attendance. Now that we are grown up, no one will force them to see the doctor or show up to work or class; we must make their own decisions and live with the consequences. Yet even as adults none of us make choices in a vacuum, completely free of guidance and influence. Our families, our friends, our church, our teachers and employers often have suggestions about how we should live; add to that the input of society, including a vast conglomeration of media voices, the government, medical professionals, etc. Inundated by all this external advice, one wonders, who knows what is best for me? Whom should I trust?

The Hebrews, or Israelites, had put their trust in God and in Moses, whom they believed to be

carrying out God's plan of life-restoring liberation among them. Yet what if that plan never came to fruition? It was a long way from slavery to the place where they could build a new life for their families, and they felt abandoned in the enormous sandy wasteland in between. Agitated and frustrated, they raged at Moses, who turned to God, who of course provided for the people's needs. But the grumbling pushed Moses a little too far. Perhaps he was annoyed that the people could still doubt, after all those plagues and miracles; perhaps he was hurt that they did not trust him, after all he had done and given up to help them; perhaps his own trust in God's providence was faltering. Either way, when Moses returned to the people, he spoke with anger that was his own, not God's, and acted as if the power to save them was his own, not God's. Because of this, God's leadership of the people into the promised land would be exercised by another, not Moses.

As leaders we have to get to be Careful to measure our promptings against what God wants, and not dress up our words and ideas as being from God. As Bob Dylan sings, it is less about asserting "God is on my side" and more about asking "Am I on the side of God?"

Questions

- Who and what influences the big and small decisions you make about your life? Consider the obvious influences and the subtle ones you might not normally recognize. Who do you want to receive your guidance from?
- Think of a time when you lost trust in someone, or someone lost trust in you. How did you feel? How did you react? How was trust restored, or if it was not, how could it have been restored?
- Think of a time when you have challenged a leader or mentor, or when someone has challenged your leadership. What precipitated the challenge, and what deeper issues lay beneath it? How was it handled? What are strategies that can help you remain cool when someone challenges you, so that you are able to hear their needs and continue to help them?

Closing Prayer

Pray together in the words of Psalm 95, which includes a poetic reflection on the experience at Meribah.

O come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of
our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with
thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with
songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have
formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the
wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had
seen my work.

For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts
go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
Therefore in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest."