

1.

THE BIRTH OF MOSES

Planning the Session

Session Goals

As a result of conversations and activities connected with this session, group members should begin to:

- explore fear, courage, and trust in stories of Moses' birth;
- examine examples of courageous and unexpected responses;
- encounter examples of how God works in the world through people;
- reflect on ways in which they might respond to God's word as revealed in the stories of Moses' birth.

Scriptural Foundation

The two midwives respected God so they didn't obey the Egyptian king's order. Instead, they let the baby boys live.

(Exodus 1:17)

When she couldn't hide him any longer, she took a reed basket and sealed it up with black tar. She put the child in the basket and set the basket among the reeds at the riverbank.

(Exodus 2:3)

Special Preparation

- For the opening activity, print the following at the top of four columns on a large sheet of paper or a board: who, when, where, and how.
- Have available a notebook or paper and pen or pencil for anyone who did not bring a notebook or an electronic device for journaling.
- Participants who have attended Sunday school and church since childhood are likely quite familiar with the story of Joseph that is the foundation for the story of Moses. Others who are new to the church may only have a sketchy familiarity with stories such as Joseph's famous coat. As you do a quick review of the Joseph narrative, be alert to those who may have a less extensive understanding, expanding on the highlights as necessary. The synopsis of the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* on Wikipedia can also give a quick overview.
- Decide if you will do any of the optional activities. For the activity in which participants place themselves in the biblical stories, print the following names on index cards: Pharaoh, Shiphrah, Puah, Moses' father, Moses' mother, Moses' sister, Pharaoh's daughter. Make enough cards that each participant can have one.
- For the activity about walking in the footsteps of Moses, a map of ancient Egypt will be helpful. If one is not available, use the maps in the chapter to sketch a simple outline map on a large sheet of paper. You will also need self-stick notes (or index cards and tape) and pens.
- For the activity on unexpected ways to stand against evil, arrange to show the short YouTube video *White Flour*, based on David LaMotte's book (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05etFVZasyg>). If participants will be generating

a list of ways to support vulnerable children, check with your pastor or a member of your mission or outreach committee to find out if there are already initiatives underway by your congregation to support children and families.

Getting Started

Opening Activity

As participants arrive, welcome them to the study. Gather together. If participants are not familiar with one another, provide nametags and make introductions.

Call attention to the words on the posted sheet or board. Point out that these words are shorthand for some of the questions journalists seek to answer in their stories, and flesh out what each question is asking in terms of the biblical character, Moses:

- *Who* was Moses? Was he a real historical figure?
- *When* did he live?
- *Where* did the narrative about Moses take place?
- *How* do scholars believe the stories of Moses came to be recorded?

Depending on the size of your group, form pairs or small groups, and assign one of the question words to each. Invite participants to review the material in the introduction (or read it, if they have not yet had the opportunity to do so) and be prepared to report on differing views of scholars, as well as what view Adam Hamilton suggests on each question.

After allowing a few minutes for pairs or groups to work, ask each to report back to the large group. Invite any comments, observations, or questions about what the answers to the questions reveal about Moses. Point out that placing Moses and his story in context will help participants engage more fully in the study to come.

To the question of *why*, point out that Hamilton's intention in writing this book about Moses was not merely to summarize Moses' story, but to see what the story teaches us about ourselves, about humankind, and about God.

Opening Prayer

Pray together, using the following prayer or one of your own choosing.

We come, O Holy One of Israel, to explore Moses, the most significant figure of the Old Testament. Guide us as together we experience the power of ancient tales shared by firelight and later recorded and preserved. Most of all, grant that we may encounter you and your story in the story of Moses, that we may gain new insights about ourselves and about our place in that story. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Learning Together

Video Study and Discussion

In this series, Adam Hamilton travels to Egypt and shows us the sites where Moses' story took place. In Session 1 we view awe-inspiring pyramids at Giza and temples at Thebes that show vividly the power of the Egyptian state that Moses would have to overcome. At the Nile River we learn how as a baby of slaves, Moses was found by Pharaoh's daughter and adopted.

- Learning about the pyramids and temples, what was as you had expected? What, if anything, was different or surprising?
- Why do you think Hamilton spends so much time talking about pyramids and temples?
- How does the information in today's video relate to Moses' story? to God's story?

Book and Bible Study and Discussion

Review Joseph's Story

Point out that the backdrop for the story of Moses is the story of Joseph. On a board or large sheet of paper, print the names Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca. Point out that Jacob was one of two sons of Isaac and Rebecca and that Joseph was one of his sons. To review the story, say that Joseph was his father's favorite, and he gave Joseph a special coat. Ask a volunteer to tell what happened next. Continue having volunteers add brief details to complete Joseph's story. Avoid getting bogged down in the finer

incidents of the story; Joseph's narrative serves only as a foundation for what is to come.

Explore the Role of Fear

Tell participants that beginning in Exodus 1:8, we read that a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. Invite a volunteer to read aloud Exodus 1:8-14. Ask participants to review quickly the information in the chapter about Pharaoh's response to the increase in the Israelite population. Invite them to consider the author's question about what the oppression of the Israelites can tell us about ourselves. Discuss the following:

- What are some examples from history in which fear of minority populations has led the United States and other nations to oppress, dehumanize, and at times even kill them?
- When faced with such situations, how are Christians to respond?

Explore Courage in the Face of Fear

Ask someone to read aloud verses Exodus 1:15-22, and call the group's attention to the material about the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Note that this is one of the first recorded instances of civil disobedience. Discuss some of the following:

- How does the author define "fear of the Lord"? How would you distinguish that fear from the kind of fear that motivated Pharaoh?
- Have you ever been faced with two competing moral claims? What did you do, and how did you decide which claim should take precedence?
- What risks did Shiphrah and Puah take? What might have been the personal cost to the two women of resisting evil, and how might the outcome have been different?
- The author poses a question: Are you willing to stand against the authorities if what they call you to do is immoral or unjust? Have you ever taken a stand that put you in some jeopardy? What was the result?

Explore Unexpected Responses to Fear

Ask for a show of hands for those in the group who remember the story of Moses in the basket. Point out that for many people the story is a familiar and beloved one that they remember from childhood. Invite the group to set aside their previous impressions of the story and to listen with new ears as a volunteer reads Exodus 2:1-9. Encourage them to focus on the following:

- the danger to the infant;
- the risks that Moses' mother, sister, and Pharaoh's daughter were taking;
- the unexpected way in which all three women were able to ensure the baby's safety.

Following the reading, invite participants to offer observations on the three points.

Examine the Ways God Works

Invite participants to quickly scan Exodus 1 and 2. Point out that God is not explicitly mentioned anywhere in these verses, yet it is clear that God was working in this story. Discuss:

- How does the author suggest that God usually works in our world? Has this been your experience? Why or why not?
- What would you say is the role of Christians in God's actions in the world? What might be some ways of making ourselves more sensitive and attentive to the nudging of the Holy Spirit?
- When heartbreaking circumstances occur, the response of some is to say, "Everything happens for a reason" or to suggest that God never gives us more than we can handle. How would you respond to these statements?

Reflect on Fear, Courage, and Trust

The story of Moses involves themes of fear, courage, and trust. Invite the group to give examples of each. Encourage them to reflect on those themes in writing in their journals, responding to one or more of the following:

- In my own life, I am fearful about _____.
- Despite my fear, I will seek to respond with courage to _____.
- A difficult or heartbreaking situation with which I am dealing is _____.
- I will seek to put my trust in God and in God's working through myself and others. I will commit to listening more fully for the Spirit's word by engaging in practices such as _____.

More Activities (Optional)

Place Yourself in the Story

Distribute the prepared index cards, one per participant. Review the stories of Shiphrah and Puah and then the story of Moses in the basket, then ask participants to imagine themselves to be the character on their assigned card. Following each story, invite volunteers to describe what emotions and thoughts they imagined their character experiencing. Did they feel fearful? What response did that fear evoke? Then discuss:

- What do you imagine determined how each character responded to a fearful or threatening situation?
- How do you think God was working? What do you think made some characters receptive and others resistant to the movement of the Spirit?
- Where do you see creative, unexpected solutions to threats being employed?

Walking in the Footsteps of Moses: Part 1

Review with participants the information in the introduction and chapter 1 in which the author refers to his travels in Egypt as he sought to walk in Moses' footsteps. Ask the group to identify significant landmarks or locations described in the introduction and chapter 1, and record each on a self-stick note. These locations might include the Nile River, the Nile River Delta, the Land of Goshen, Memphis, Giza, the Valley of the Kings, Ramesses, and Thebes. Place the notes at the appropriate location on the map or map sketch that you prepared before the session. Discuss:

- What do the pyramids and other monuments suggest to you about the power of the pharaoh?
- Why do you imagine that such a powerful ruler was so fearful of the Hebrews?

White Flour: *Creative Civil Disobedience*

Remind the group that in Moses' story, individuals responded to a serious threat by resisting it, even in the face of fear. The midwives, Moses' family, and Pharaoh's daughter all responded in creative and unexpected ways.

Show the YouTube clip *White Flour*, the story of another creative act of civil disobedience, this one at a KKK rally. Discuss together the effectiveness of this response to racism. Ask:

- What risks were involved for the protestors?
- What was the response to their actions? How effective were they?

Explore Ways to Support Vulnerable Children

In reflecting on the story of Moses' adoption by Pharaoh's daughter, participants might consider whether God may be calling them to a ministry of adoption or offering foster care for a child in need of parents. Encourage them to give some thought and prayer to this possibility, but also suggest that there are many other ways to provide support and affirmation to vulnerable children. For example, if you have identified congregational initiatives in which to participate, point participants to contact persons. Then have them form pairs to brainstorm ways to support children, such as through mentoring or tutoring programs or big and little sister or brother programs. In the large group, compile a list of suggested programs and activities. Encourage participants to bring these ideas before God in their devotional times.

Wrapping Up

Point out that throughout Scripture, the words *fear not* or *be not afraid* are a continuing thread occurring many times. Read aloud Isaiah 43:1-3a, 4:

But now, says the LORD—
the one who created you, Jacob,
 the one who formed you, Israel:
Don't fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched
 and flame won't burn you.
I am the LORD your God,
 the holy one of Israel, your savior. . . .
Because you are precious in my eyes,
 you are honored, and I love you.
I give people in your place,
 and nations in exchange for your life.

Invite participants to reflect on this passage in the coming week, considering what risks and challenges they may be called to.

Remind the group to read chapter 2 before the next session.

Closing Activity

Invite participants to respond to the following:

- If it hadn't been for Shiphrah and Puah, _____.
- If it hadn't been for the actions of Moses' mother and sister, _____.
- If not for the action of Pharaoh's daughter, _____.

Encourage participants to reflect in the coming days on what creative acts of resistance, regardless of risk, they may be called to engage in.

Closing Prayer

O God, you call us to find ourselves in your story. Grant us the courage not to give in to fear and to find creative ways to resist what is wrong. Help us to trust that you can work in and through us to accomplish your purposes. Move us to compassion for those in need, and stir our will to be a part of your saving story. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.