Cross Cultural Bible Study for use in the NYAC

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 Board of Church and Society will be piloting this study in the fall of 2017 and hopes to publicize more widely in 2018. Any comments or suggestions are welcome and can be sent to churchandsociety@nyac-umc.com.

The study was developed by the CBCS Asst. Coordinator, Jennifer Berry, who currently serves as Pastor at the Ellenville, NY UMC.

In the fourth chapter of Exodus, Moses is told to 'go back.' Back to Egypt, back to oppression, to power and privilege. But was Moses the same man who left? Was he going back as a Hebrew slave, an Egyptian prince, or someone else entirely? In a three part 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 rules the day.

Exodus 1-4: Reading as a mixed multitude to create a new wilderness space for a new Israel

The first four chapters of Exodus tell the story of two peoples, entwined, and an individual 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 over and against seeking to escape from it, what can the story of Exodus offer in our churches in terms of discussion, study, and modeling? Are there ways in which communities can be drawn closer together through the Exodus narrative, or ultimately will the examination serve only to highlight the divide, the wilderness that lies between them?

More specifically, the bible study will seek to disrupt the we-they dichotomy of groups by challenging participants to experiment with social location in the context of the story; explore issues of group motivation given understood identity; to create a space of biblical cross cultural experience, bringing very different communities outside of their comfort zone and using the metaphor of the wilderness to create a new space re-creating community and community identity.
To explore these questions, I am organizing a Bible study with two very different communities using this text and the notion of reading in reverse, of following God’s injunction to Moses to “go back.” The first community that I am working with, Serenity House, is, in and of itself a mixed multitude associated with a fledgling intentional community in an economically depressed, almost exclusively African-American neighborhood and on what is, statistically, one of the most dangerous blocks of North Philadelphia. Members of this neighborhood have been systemically marginalized by racism and economics in profound and personal ways.

The second group of readers, Solebury, is white, suburban to rural, largely affluent and educated. They perceive themselves as liberal and inclusive, but this perception goes unchallenged by having no one in their immediate vicinity who is ‘other’ to include. Having little personal experience of anything outside of privilege, they lack a framework for contextualization of the real world problems that face those who have not been handed the advantages of their circumstance.

The framework of the study will require each group to read the first four chapters of Exodus three times in total. The readings will be similar but nuanced. For the first two readings, each group will read in the ‘safety’ of their own community. 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, Solebury will be asked to read as 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 will read as Hebrews and Moses. The goal this time is to do the opposite. Having acknowledged the dominant role that the Solebury community plays in society, 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.

Meanwhile, the Serenity House Community 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. Further, given the place of hurt that is a part of the community of readers, it will be an important goal to quickly 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, the Serenity House community will also 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? One possible difference between the Serenity House and Solebury Egyptian
reading might be to explore whether or not understanding Egyptians as African changes or nuances the group understanding of how to understand the group identity of and affinity toward the Egyptians.

To work through these rather overarching issues the study will use a set of guiding questions, which, while not rigid, if held to fairly well, will give the groups enough consistency of discussion points to make the third and final reading as rich as possible. To make room for flexibility and also for depth the list is fairly extensive:

- What do we make of the Israelites being fruitful and prolific? Growing exceedingly strong? How would this strike the Egyptians?
- Who are the Hebrew midwives? How are they deciding in what ways the Hebrew women are and are not like Egyptian women?
- Can we retell the scene of the princess finding Moses? If we had to guess, what would Moses’ childhood be like?
- What would Moses’ mother been thinking/feeling?
- In verse 2:11, where does Moses go out from? To who, and what does he go out?
- Where do we think Moses would have felt at home?
- Do we think Pharaoh’s attempt to kill Moses is personal or political? How much does it have to do with the murder?
- Do people in power give their children up to the law so readily? Is the law fair?
- Does Moses know God? If so, how? As who/what?
- What is God asking of Moses?
- Who does God need Moses to be? What are the qualifications?
- Who does Moses understand himself to be?
• If Egyptians could hear Moses and God talking, what would they think?
• Why the signs? Who is the target audience?
• What’s happening when God tells Moses how the people will leave Egypt?
• Who have the heroes been, and what does that say to us?
• Who is God for?

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, ‘go back,’ reflecting on all of who Moses is and read Exodus chapters four to one.

What cultural sensitivity, if any, has been gained prior to the meeting of these two groups? Has the experience of reading made a new space for these groups to effectively work together to create a true understanding of the hybridity of Moses or built a greater sense of wilderness and distance between groups? Are the readers now prepared to grapple with the reality that “racial and ethnic identities are not a given; they are constantly being constructed and enforced?”¹ To move forward as a mixed multitude in the process of going forward together in the work of going back, a new set of questions will need to be developed, though permission for returning together to the former questions should be allowed. Questions to focus on in this reading, would thus include:

• How does Moses perceive himself in chapter 4?
• What is Moses’ relationship with Jethro? With Zipporah? How are his relationships in Midian formed, from what identity?

• 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?

• Having read from all of these perspectives, how do we understand the plunder of the Egyptians?

• If the trigger for this whole story was an overcrowded Egypt, why does a land of “Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites” sound better?

• Who gets to displace a people?

• Why does God need to explain to the Israelites who God is?

• In Egypt, was Moses Hebrew or Egyptian?

• Why was Pharaoh so quick to kill Moses? Was it quick?

• Now how do we read the scene when the princess finds Moses?

• Does Moses think he can draw these people together?

• What would Moses biggest fears be in going back?

Reading across cultural dividing lines and in mixed multitudes is important work. And work fraught with tensions and fears. Bob Ekblad took on a similar reading of Exodus in a prison bible study. As a white pastor in a prison with almost exclusively Hispanic men, immigrants of various degrees of legality, Ekblad found himself wondering “how can inmates and immigrants move from identifying themselves with subjected Israelite slaves to hearing the call of Moses to advocate for their people before the powers?” Ekblad sought to give participants new ways to shift their location within the story, partly through modelling this and articulating the ways he himself did not occupy the expected place in the narrative. “Salvaging the story includes

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broadening the possibilities of Bible study participants actual identification with appropriate characters in the story…a shift in said locations up or down the hierarchical power ladder in the text and the group can transpire that makes room for people to take on new roles.”³ While Ekblad saw the role of Moses exclusively as outside liberator, his point remains, and the ensuing dialogue born of the spiritual and emotional response to new perspectives within the mixed multitude is, in effect, creating a new Israel. To do this work, “there is an important, if veiled resonance with the role of the Egyptian princess who, in contrast to Pharaoh, did not just rescue Moses out of compassion but also collaborated with Moses’ ethnic subgroup to ensure the child’s nurture.”⁴

The ‘new Israel’ will be created in the here and now, however, and as such needs resources to link it to both the biblical and the modern world. “The narrator (of Exodus) repeatedly uses verbs of motion to describe the characters, creating not just the impression of a highly active story world, but also reflecting the larger socio-cultural and political shifts that frame the story and result from the characters interactions.”⁵ Some will undoubtedly want to see the study experiment as interesting but isolated, and for them, it will take a slower movement from biblical to contemporary significance. Others will make the leap almost immediately. In all cases, the widest range of materials possible should be made available, with time created beyond the initial study for the group to develop next steps for growth and action.

Resources to consider include James Cone’s *God of the Oppressed*, which has been a lightning rod in many communities of faith. It may be so here as well, but the notion that “this message of liberation cannot appeal to those who profit from the imprisonment of others but only

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³ Ekblad, 90.
⁴ Ngwa, 182.
⁵ Ngwa, 167.
to slaves who strive against unauthorized power. This gospel of liberation is *bad news* to all oppressors, because they have defined their ‘freedom’ in terms of slavery to others,"⁶ is one that has been to strongly circled in the study thus far, and as a study of a Christian community, to not acknowledge the need of the people to think about these issues in relationship to Jesus would be irresponsible, even if the main task at hand was housed in the Hebrew Bible. As such, Douglas Oakman’s *The Political Aims of Jesus* offers another tool for moving forward. Oakman articulates a theory that Jesus worked as a broker between those with power and those who had been stripped of power, serving to rebalance the community through mediation at table fellowship.⁷ Is this, overall, what the group assembled for this study has set the groundwork for? Might they now formalize that work in some way? If so, what might that look like? To begin to determine models, especially in a Methodist context, I would offer up the work of Rudy Rasmus and Elaine Heath. Rasmus, in his book *Touch*, talks about the church he built from nothing in Houston, Texas.⁸ He was himself on the margins, and his ministry began in the same places, and in many ways has remained there, but has come to welcome people from all walks of life. What draws so many? Why do all feel welcome, and why do all feel that they have a role to serve? Finally, Heath is a designer of intentional Christian communities and professor at Perkins School of Theology. In *Longing for Spring*, coauthored with Scott Kisker, Heath outlines ways to build new intentional/neo-monastic communities within Methodism to become living examples of alternative ways of being in community and engaging issues of socio-political power and

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domination.\textsuperscript{9} Especially since one of the two groups involved in the Exodus study is based in an intentional community, this seems to be a key component to explore in the conversation.

In the action of returning to himself and his hybrid being and in taking up that mantle and leading the mixed multitude into the wilderness of a new space, Moses embodies the concept that we must create what we want to be from the ground of what we are. To do so requires the honest examination of the tools of our existence and the willingness to lay them out for the shared use of the expanding community. It remains to be seen what the results of the experiment will be, but it is certain that in determining we will, again and again, find ourselves called to “go back” to go forward.

\footnote{Elaine Heath and Scott Kisker, \textit{Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community}, (Eugene: Cascade, 2010).}