

# Stories of **FAITH**

Aug 6–Sep 3



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

## **Week 1: The Story of Esther – faith that stands up to oppression**

*Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take the time to sit and read the Book of Esther. It will take about 20 minutes.*

1. What are your general impressions from reading the Book of Esther? What did you find most inspiring? Most troubling? What do you think is the main message of the story? What questions do you have about the text?
2. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? Was there anything you found uncomfortable or disagreed with?
3. The speaker on Sunday argued that the story was probably intended to be understood as historical fiction. Do you think it matters whether or not this story is fact or (largely) fiction? Why or why not?
4. Read Esther 4:13-14. These are the verses from the book that are most commonly quoted. What do you think we are supposed to learn from them? How might these verses relate to our quest for racial, economic, and social justice?
5. Esther means “hidden.” How is “hidden” a theme of the book? Meister Eckhart, a thirteenth century theologian, wrote: “God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding, and so gives himself away.” Do you think God hides? Why or why not? How have you experienced this?
6. Think about how this story relates to your own life. Is there an injustice about which you sense a need to take a stand? Is there a situation or relationship where you need to step out in faith, and do the right thing—even though it could be costly?
7. If you are reflecting on these questions in a group, share with one another. Take some time to pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take a few moments to open up your heart to God. Then rest secure in the unconditional love of God.

### **Practice for the week: The Examen**

*“But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family.”*

Esther 4:14 (CSB)

Sit comfortably in silence with your back straight, feet planted on the floor, arms relaxed and hands supported in your lap. Close your eyes and relax your shoulders. To begin, listen to your breath as you breathe. Feel your breath in your nostrils, chest and abdomen, inhaling and then exhaling fully and deeply—hold your exhale a bit longer than usual to completely expel air. Continue with regular rhythmic deep breathing. Allow tension to fade away from your body, and your spirit to be at peace.

Think back over the previous day. Trace the story of your life during this period of time and observe what happened. As you do so, consider the following two questions but remember not to evaluate or judge yourself—just be honest:

- 1) At what times during your story did you experience God's presence? What happened? How was God present? Were you aware of God being present at the time, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it? What did you do that enabled you to experience God? What was the outcome?
- 2) At what times during your story were you resistant to God's presence? What happened? How did you resist? Were you aware of resisting, or is it only now as you look back that you realize it? What were your feelings or beliefs about the situation and any person(s) involved, including yourself and God? What was the outcome? How could you have thought, acted or believed in a way that would have embraced the reality of God's presence, and channeled more love into the situation, with the person or yourself?

When you have finished reflecting on your story, continue with deep breathing for a few more minutes. Consider what these reflections reveal to you about what God is like. Invite God into the story that lies ahead of you, and ask God to reveal more of God's being to you. Ask God to help you be more embracing of God's presence tomorrow.

## Week 2: The Calling of Abraham – faith that steps out and lets go

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. How do you relate to the figure of Abraham in this story? In what ways do you warm to him, and in what ways do you find him troubling? Why do you think Abraham has become such an exemplar of faith in the Christian tradition (both in the Christian Scriptures and in church history)?
3. The speaker on Sunday suggested that these ancient stories are not written as objective history but as a way to communicate perspectives about social, political, moral and existential realities. What do you think and feel about this? How might your own perspective here affect how you interpret these stories?
4. Read Genesis 11:26 – 12:9. What do you think motivated Abram and his family to leave Ur for Canaan? In what ways would such a response require faith? Share a time when you have stepped out on a new initiative in life: what motivated you, what risks were involved and how did it go? In what ways did your actions require faith?
5. In the above passage, Abram's family seem to get "stuck" in Haran before Abram eventually heads out again for Canaan. Are there any areas in your life where you feel stuck? What might a faithful response look like in your situation? What might you need to let go of in order to move forward?
6. Read the following passages about Abraham's interactions with 3 different people who were very close to him: Sarah (his wife), Lot (his nephew), and Hagar (Sarah's servant).
  - Genesis 12:10-20
  - Genesis 13:8-12
  - Genesis 16:1-6

For each story discuss the following:

- What emotions do you see (described, implied, or imagined)?
  - What do you think is motivating Abraham's decision-making?
  - Would you describe his responses and actions as healthy or dysfunctional, and in what way?
  - In what ways are the characters faithful or unfaithful?
7. Take some time to reflect individually on the above stories and discussion from a personal perspective. Are there ways in which you are struggling to let go and trust God for outcomes beyond your control? Are there any ways in which you are trying to gain control through manipulation, competition, or exploitation of others? What emotions do you feel about these situations, and in what way do you need to let go and trust God? In the week ahead, use the prayer practice overleaf to help you let go.
  8. After this personal reflection break into smaller groups of 2 or 3. Take some time to share your personal insights and then pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, take some time to quietly open your heart to God and use the Welcoming Prayer overleaf to help you let go.

## **Practice for the week: The Welcoming Prayer**

The Welcoming Prayer is a prayer practice that helps us let go of unhealthy responses to certain emotions we are experiencing. It can help us embrace more of God's love, and live a more trusting life.

### **Step 1: Awareness**

Sit quietly and notice how you are feeling. Focus and sink into your emotion. Go toward it rather than suppress or resist it. Stay with this step of noticing and sinking in until you really experience a connection to the feeling. You may feel it in your body, and it can help to place your hand there as a way of connecting with the emotion more deeply.

### **Step 2: Welcome**

Welcome this emotion as a friend that is going to help you discover something about yourself, rather than as an enemy to be defeated. Don't judge yourself, but simply accept how you are feeling right now. Name the emotion and say, "Welcome... fear/anger/worry/sorrow, etc." Repeat it, and sit with the feeling until you experience a genuine sense of owning and accepting it in this moment. Then allow yourself to honestly discern where this emotion is coming from. Usually this is from a thwarted desire for one or more normal and basic human needs:

- Safety and security
- Esteem and affection
- Power and control

### **Step 3: Let Go**

When you have allowed yourself to name and accept the feeling, let it go by saying, "God, I give you my fear/anger/worry/sorrow, etc." Consciously let go of

- Your demand for safety and security.
- Your demand for esteem and affection.
- Your demand for power and control.

Sit quietly and invite God's loving, affirming and totally accepting presence.

### **Week 3: The Widow of Zarephath – faith that trusts in God’s provision**

*Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read through 1 Kings 17:1-24.*

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. How do you relate to this story? Who do you most identify with? What emotions and reactions do you have towards Elijah and the woman?
3. The speaker on Sunday suggested that these kinds of narratives in the Hebrew Bible seem to have been written well after the time in which they occurred and have been carefully edited and redacted to present a certain theological perspective. What perspectives do you detect in this story? How might this help or impede your interpretation?
4. Many of these stories seem to highlight the weakness of monarchy and are suspicious of the political establishment. In what way can political power be constructive? In what way can it be destructive? Read Deuteronomy 10:18-19. What does suggest should be a focus for political leadership? How might this influence our voting priorities today?
5. Read 1 Kings 17:1-6. How would you describe Elijah’s faith here? How is he provided for and what might these things symbolize? How do you think he felt about the future?
6. Read 1 Kings 17:7-16. Why do you think God sends Elijah to Phoenicia in this story? In what way does the widow show faith? Why do you think this character is called “a widow” rather than given a name? Elijah and the widow have enough food for only one day at a time – have you ever experienced a time like this? What are the benefits of focusing on the present moment and what are the challenges?
7. Read 1 Kings 17:17-24. What does this story say about the nature of divinity? From a socioeconomic perspective what is the significance of the widow having a living son? Read 1 Kings 21:1-16. How does this compare and contrast with the previous story? What does this say about political power? What does this say about the nature of divinity?
8. Break into smaller groups of 2 or 3 to share about ways you are struggling to trust God in the present moment for things over which you have little control. Then take some time to pray for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, quietly open your heart to God and let go of anxiety.

#### **Practice for the week: Reflection on the words of Jesus**

This week take some time each day to read the passage below about letting go of anxiety. Take a moment to center yourself and quieten your heart. Read the passage slowly and try to listen deeply. Let the words speak to your unresistant-self. After reading, sit for a few moments more and adopt a posture of intentional openness to God. Let your anxieties and worries (about the past or the future) come to mind and surrender each one to God. Just let them go and sink into the present moment. Soak

up this moment of freedom and enjoy it. Throughout your day, as worries arise, center yourself back into the present moment and let them go.

*"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

Matthew 6:25-34 (NIV)

## **Week 4: David and Goliath – faith that faces our demons**

*Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read through the story in 1 Samuel 17:1-58.*

1. What insights did you gain from the message this past Sunday? What was most helpful for you? What did you find uncomfortable?
2. How do you relate to this story as you read it yourself? What emotions and reactions does it evoke? Are there any characters with whom you particularly identify?
3. In what ways does this story read like folkloric allegory and in what ways like literal history? How might this affect the way we interpret and apply it?
4. What differences do you see between Saul and David in this story? What do you think the author is trying to communicate about leadership and faith?
5. This story is typically viewed as the miraculous triumph of an underdog. In what ways is David an underdog? In what ways is he strong, and why? In what ways is Goliath portrayed as strong? In what ways is Goliath portrayed as vulnerable?
6. This story is set in the context of the larger story of the struggle for liberation and overcoming oppression. What insights does this story give us about facing the giants of injustice? How might we gain self-confidence and encouragement from this story? How might this story inspire more creativity in our approach?
7. Take a moment to reflect personally on your own life and areas of intimidation and/or avoidance or denial. These could be fears of people, situations, certain relationships, or dysfunctional habits that seem to control you. Be honest with yourself without judgment and simply identify and acknowledge them. How might this story inspire you to face your own demons and giants? How might this story empower you in surprising ways? How might you invite God into this battle?
8. Break into groups of 2 or 3 and share as you feel appropriate about your reflections in the last question. When everyone who would like to has shared, spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, quietly open your heart to God and received God's love and strength.

### **Practice for the week: Facing our giants**

This week, try to make a brief time each morning to center yourself and be consciously aware of the day ahead. Reflect on the people or circumstances that may intimidate you today. Invite God into this awareness. Take some deep breaths - inhale God's love and let go of fear. Be mindful of God's presence with you and sink into it. As you go about your day, consciously return to this centered presence whenever you feel intimidated. Rather than avoiding or withdrawing, face your giants in the empowering presence of God's love.



## **Week 5: The Woman Who Washed Jesus' Feet – faith that risks being vulnerable**

*Sometime before discussing and reflecting on these questions, take a moment to read through the whole of Luke chapter 7.*

1. Was there anything that resonated with you in the message this past Sunday? Was there anything new to you, or anything with which you disagreed?
2. Read Luke 7:36-50. From the information provided, how do you the three characters in the story (Simon, the woman, and Jesus) view themselves and the other two characters?
3. Who do you identify with most in this story, and why?
4. How might the parable of the two debtors (v. 41-43) be understood in a helpful way? How might it be interpreted in an unhelpful way?
5. What does this story tell us about faith? How does the woman's example of faith compare to that of the centurion (7:1-10)?
6. Read Mark 14:1-10, Matthew 26:6-16, and John 12:1-10. In what ways are the anointing stories in each of these gospel accounts similar? In what ways are they different?
7. In each of the gospel anointing stories, the woman is criticized by some of the men at the table, but she is defended by Jesus. Take a moment to think about situations or relationships in your own life where you find yourself quick to judge and criticize. How might these stories challenge your own responses?
8. Break into groups of 2 or 3 and share as you feel appropriate about your reflections in the last question. When everyone who would like to has shared, spend some time praying for one another. If you are reflecting on these questions alone, quietly open your heart to God and received God's love, forgiveness, and acceptance.

### **Practice for the week: Replacing criticism with love**

*"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you."*

Luke 6:36-38a (NIV)

Each morning this week, read these verses and ask God to help you put them into practice. Throughout the day, make a conscious effort to pause before you criticize or judge another person. Ask yourself how you can believe the best about that person, and consider the most loving response in each situation.