

**Introduction to the Bible Study Series on Sexism
From the Justice for Women Program
Church in Society Program Unit
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

To begin the work of right relationship requires *change*.

Sometimes we resist change. Sometimes we resist change—even when we know that the change required of us and our communities is necessary in order to serve the neighbor—to be in right relationship with God and with others. As this church proclaims through the social statement on racism, “Freed in Christ,” “We of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rejoice in our freedom in Christ Jesus. Be we know we must persevere in *our commitment* to follow Christ and to serve neighbor, and live up to our specific *commitments*” (“Freed in Christ,” 3).

A first step in transforming interlocking systems of oppression, including sexism, is to name the problem.

Katie Day, Associate Professor of church and society at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, points to sociologist Robert Putnam’s research, in which he asserts that social transformation is on the decline in this country because our social capital is in decline. In effect, we do not know how to talk about difficult issues with each other and continue to avoid engagement on matters of urgent importance to us socially. We thereby set ourselves up to avoid social transformation.¹

Day describes the tensions that resulted when a new student at the seminary brought up abortion at a campus convocation with a noted speaker. The room fell into an embarrassed hush because a controversial topic had been named in public. She describes the learned habits of the entire seminary community to avoid painful, controversial topics and problems. In response to the growing realization that the seminary community needed to be able to work through difficult conversations, the faculty developed a course to encourage and engage in difficult conversations. The book of the same name she later wrote is a tool to encourage church members to engage in difficult conversations with each other in order to strengthen social capital and thereby to prompt, encourage, and sustain social transformation.²

The first step in having difficult conversations is to name the concern to be talked about.

Allan Johnson is a sociologist who has studied and written and led workshops on systems of oppression as social systems. Although it can be difficult to feel comfortable with words like “sexism” and “racism,” he thinks that we must “call a thing what it is” (to borrow a paraphrase from a beloved church leader). He writes, “[I]f we dispense with the words[,] we make it impossible to talk about what’s really going on and what it has to do with us.”³

¹ Day, Katie, *Difficult Conversations*, 4-6.

² Day, 10-11.

³ Johnson, Allan G., *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2.

Sometimes naming the problem is difficult: it is painful to see and to acknowledge. Yet difficult conversations are essential to transformation and change. Sexism is a problem. It is the hope of the Justice for Women program that this Bible study on dismantling sexism is a helpful way for various communities, groups, and individuals to engage in thoughtful transformation away from sexism and towards right relationship with God and with one another.

The series is designed to be centered in both familiar and less familiar texts, often visiting them from a new angle, a fresh way of interacting with the text. The series is also designed to be ever expanding, with ongoing session updates.

Most importantly, the Bible study series is designed to be useful for men and women *together*. Just as it takes the commitment and work of white people to understand and transform racism, it takes the commitment and work of men to understand and transform sexism.

You may want to consider working through the highly accessible and easily used book referenced above: *Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity* by Katie Day (The Alban Institute, 2001). Although created for congregational use as a guide to talking about and acting on difficult issues, it is useful for other groups or organizational settings. Working through the readings and guided discussions in the book could very well be done in tandem with or before the Bible study.

Bible Study on Sexism
Session One
Resistance to and Readiness for Change:
Risk, Trust, and Transformation
Israel's Exodus from Egypt

Opening

You may want to begin with a prayer and/or hymn. Suggestions follow.

O God of the wilderness,
draw near to us.
Quench our thirst.
Satisfy our hunger.
Shape us into your people.
Guide us today
so that the words of our mouths
and the meditations of our hearts
may be acceptable to you.
In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship Hymn #326 "Bless Now, O God, the Journey"

Introduction

The focus of the first session is the story of Israel's exodus out of Egypt and into the wilderness with God, where the Israelites learn to respond to God's call to be in right relationship. The call to right relationship requires Israel to change, but as we know, the newly freed slaves of Egypt are not always ready for change and often resist it.

The premise that grounds this study is this:

Changes involved in addressing sexism (and other systems of oppression) are changes towards right relationship with God and with each other.

The goals of this study are:

to think about what change is asked of Israel and of us
to begin to recognize when Israel and we resist change
to understand why they and we resist change
and to identify what it takes to work through resistance to change.

****In other words, the goal is to identify what it takes to look again at sexism as a system that disrupts right relationship with God and with each other and what it takes to move through resistance to change in order to move towards transformation. Talking about, understanding, and acting to subvert sexism is not easy work.**

This session's texts contain perhaps very familiar stories and images. One strong image in these texts is that change is difficult. In the book of Exodus, God calls Israel to right relationship with God's self. In this book, Yahweh claims Israel and works consistently to help the Israelites learn to be in authentic, responsive relationship with God. The focus of this session is on the ways in which God works at schooling Israel in right relationship with God's self, but God is also thereby calling Israel into right relationship among the persons of Israel.

The story of Israel's exodus from Egypt is important in part because it is a communal story of identity. It is a foundational identity text for both Jewish and Christian communities, particularly among African American Christian communities. Stories shape us. Families, for example, are shaped by stories. Think about family gatherings and the stories told when you are together. We repeat family stories, even though we are familiar with them. We tell them to remember our identities in the family individually, to remember our communal family identity, to accept certain patterns or behaviors and to reject others.

Take a moment to remember and share a story of family or communal identity. What does the story and its retelling express about this body of people and their relationships? (The story could involve as few as two persons and as many as you could dream.)

The exodus text, as a communal story, provides a framework for understanding ourselves as a community of God, commentary on our relationship with God, and lessons on God's vision of right relationships.

To summarize, in one respect, the exodus story is a communal story about change: how the Israelites responded to God's call to relationship, the changes this required of them, and how they responded. Try to seek yourselves in the story as you consider it.

Commentary

The book of Exodus holds images of a people moving out of bondage, out of a place of constriction. In fact, in Hebrew, "Egypt" is the word *mitsrayím*, which means "place of constriction."⁴

Beginning especially at the Red Sea, Israel starts to resist the changes necessary to be in right relationship with God, moving out of the place of constriction. This session focuses on the ways they resisted, why they resisted, and what helped them to move through their resistance and into right relationship with God.

The Red Sea passage is for the Israelites a physical passage away from the place of constriction and into new life in the wilderness. In a similar way, Lutherans confess that baptism is the sacramental passage from the constricted space of sin and death into new life in Christ. Sometimes living in our baptism seems like the wilderness. We don't know what will happen next and we do not have control over the ways in which God interacts with us.

⁴ Newsom and Ringe, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, 31.

But the wilderness can also be a place or space to embrace as a people and as individuals. Some theologians interpret the wilderness positively by understanding it as God's school, a place of formation towards right relationship with God and with others.

Allow yourselves to be in the wilderness in this positive sense, trusting that taking another look at sexism through theological education and discussion is one way of seeking right relationship, even though what may come from studying and talking together may not be predictable.

The Reading

God's desire: Read Exodus 6:6-9

- **What does God want?**
- **How does Israel react?**

While the Israelites were still in Egypt after the 10 plagues but before the exodus, we see the specifics of the rite of Passover in Exodus 12. In this next passage, we see one time when it is easy for Israel to do what God asks.

Read Exodus 12:24-28; 50-51

- **Under what circumstances is it easy for the Israelites to follow God?**
- **Under what circumstances is it difficult for the Israelites to follow God?**

Israel exits Egypt and approaches the Red Sea: Read Exodus 14:10-14;30-31

- **How do the Israelites react in the transition from Egypt into the wilderness, from slavery into freedom?**
- **In this circumstance specifically, how do they react once they are saved?**

Tests in the wilderness:

15:22-27	thirst
16:2-18	hunger
16:11-20	greed
17:1-7	thirst

You may want to choose one or more of the tests to study and discuss, individually or as a group.

1. Why do the Israelites resist in this passage?
2. What do they do when they resist?
3. What happens when they resist?
4. What helps them work through their resistance?

5. Who asks the Israelites to change?
6. What are they asked to do? Why?
7. What are the anticipated results of changing in this instance?

Once you have looked at the text of a test, reflect on your answers to the following questions.

- **What stood out to you? What did you hear?**
- **Again, what are the Israelites being asked to do (in the tests)?**
- **What helps them to let go of their resistance to change?**

But the Israelites still falter, even after they “get it”—even after they know what it means to take risks and to trust God.

- **Why do the Israelites falter? What do they want?**

Remember that God considers Israel especially called:

“⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:4-6a)

Israel falters: Read Exodus 32:1

- **Why do the Israelites falter?**
- **How do the Israelites feel?**
- **Of what are they uncertain?**
- **What do they want?**

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Decide if you would like to share your first reactions together, take time for reflection and writing first, or work with a combination of first reactions and writing. If working in a group, choose a style that allows time for all of the voices in your group. If working alone, you may want to write down your reflections for later reference.

1. When has change been demanded or asked of you?
2. Who “asked” for the change?
3. What were you being “asked” to do? [birth, death, a new relationship, natural disasters, etc.]
4. How did you respond?
5. If you resisted the change, why did you?

6. How did you move through your resistance? What supported you to let go of your resistance?
7. What do you notice when you think about your own experiences in relationship to that of Israel?
8. Discuss your own readiness for change and the readiness of your community or group for change. What will it take for you (individually and collectively) to take risks and trust each other in the process of transformation away from sexism and towards right relationship with God and with each other?

Closing

Israel resisted change when they were thirsty, hungry, or greedy. In other words, they resisted change when their future was not in their own hands.

Israel resisted change when they were afraid, when they were uncertain about their leader, when they felt threatened, and when they felt out of control.

Israel learned the hard way that they needed to take risks and to trust God in order to work through their resistance to change. Israel was called to a trusting relationship with God.

We, too, are learning what it feels like to be in right relationship with God, and through trust and risk are able to live in the freedom from oppressing others that God promises.

You may want to close with a prayer and/ or song. Suggestions follow.

Mighty God of smoke and fire,
Lead us.
Soften our resistance.
Nurture in us your fierce love.
By your Holy Spirit,
Transform us into your people
Through the life, death, and resurrection
Of our Lord, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Evangelical Lutheran Worship Hymn #669 "Rise Up, O Saints of God!"

Selected Bibliography and Further Reading

Day, Katie. *Difficult Conversations: Taking Risks, Acting with Integrity*. The Alban Institute, 2001.

Erlander, Daniel. *Manna and Mercy*. Mercer Island, Wash.: The Order of Saints Martin and Teresa, 1992.

Johnson, Allan G. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*. Revised and Updated Edition. 1997. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

--. *Privilege, Power, and Difference*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2001.

Newsome, Carol A. and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Expanded Edition. 1992. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, New York, 1995.

Copyright Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2008.

Prepared by Mary J. Streufert, Director for Justice for Women, Church in Society