FIRST WEEK OF LENT: “A BOW IN THE CLOUDS”

OPENING PRAYER
The leader prays out loud:

Protecting God, throughout the flood you kept Noah’s family and all the critters safe aboard the Ark. Here at the start of our Lenten journey, shelter us with the same promise of safety and love that protected them through forty days and nights. Amen.

GATHERING TIME
Each person responds to one of the following:

- Tell the story of a time you experienced a flood.
- Describe the last place where you saw a rainbow.
- Describe a memory when someone promised to protect you, or vice versa.

BIBLICAL REFLECTION
The leader reads the following:

This passage comes just after the waters of the flood have abated. Noah has finally set foot on dry ground, and God now promises to never again destroy the earth through the waters of a flood. God uses “covenant” language, making a promise to Noah using a formula that resembles a legal contract.

A member of the group reads the passage:

“God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’” (Genesis 9:12-16)

The group discusses the following questions, picking and choosing the ones that work best for them:

- Unpack that covenant formula mentioned above. Figure out:
  o Who are the parties involved in this agreement?
  o What does God promise?
  o What does it require of the second party?
  o What is its sign?
- When has God made us a promise without requiring anything of us first?
- When have you been intimidated by the future? How has God helped you move forward?
- What spiritual practices (if any) have you committed to during this forty-day Lenten journey? How are they going so far? Where do you need God’s help to succeed at them?

CLOSING PRAYER
The leader prays aloud:

Lord of our lives, let your covenant with Noah and all creatures inspire us to pray for the flourishing of your whole creation; to fast from destructive words and actions, and to give freely to those overwhelmed by floods of misfortune. Amen.
SECOND WEEK OF LENT: “ANCESTOR OF NATIONS”

OPENING PRAYER
*The leader prays out loud:*

Eternal God, you sustained Abraham and Sarah through many years of wandering with the promise of a child and a homeland. Uphold us with the promise that one day you will bring to birth an age of perfect justice, mercy, and peace, and bring all of creation into our eternal home with you. Amen.

GATHERING TIME
*Each person responds to one of the following:*

- Tell the story of a time when you had to wait a very long time for something.
- Describe a gift you received as an infant: a blanket or a favorite stuffed animal.
- Tell a little bit about your ancestry; how far back can you trace your family?

BIBLICAL REFLECTION
*The leader reads the following:*

This passage is part of the much longer story of Abraham and Sarah. Following God’s promise, they leave their homeland near Mesopotamia when Abraham is 75 years old and travel south. Over many years and many miles, God keeps promising a homeland and a child. Abraham is 99 when God renews the covenant again.

*A member of the group reads the passage:*

[God said,] “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. 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.” (Genesis 17:4-7, 15-16)

*The group discusses the following questions, picking and choosing the ones that work best for them:*

- God changes both Abraham and Sarah’s name in this passage. “Abram” means “exalted father, while “Abraham” means “father of multitudes”—even though he was childless at the time. Why do people change their names? Why do we honor people’s chosen names, even if they don’t seem to fit?
- This is the first time that God has included Sarah in the covenant as well as Abraham. In the chapter just before this one, Sarah and Abraham try to get the promise to come true more quickly by having Abraham father a son with a slave named Hagar. What are reasons that we try to take shortcuts to God’s promises? Why do you think God sometimes make us wait?
- Who is your “ancestor in faith?” Who helped you learn about God? How might we help others?
- What spiritual practices (if any) have you committed to during this forty-day Lenten journey? How are they going so far? Where do you need God’s help to succeed at them?

CLOSING PRAYER
*The leader prays aloud:*

God of the past and the future: your promises are trustworthy, but we do get impatient waiting for them. Teach us persistent hope as we seek the coming of your kin-dom. Teach us tenacious faith in times when we doubt that your promise will be fulfilled. Teach us to notice where you are answering prayers in our lives already. In the name of our promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. Amen.
THIRD WEEK OF LENT: “THE TEN BEST WAYS”

OPENING PRAYER

The leader prays out loud:

Guiding God, you set before your people the best ways to live: in right relationship with you and one another. Open our ears to hear your wisdom afresh. Amen.

GATHERING TIME

Each person responds to one of the following:

- What are some of the most important rules in your home?
- What was your most treasured possession when you were a child?
- Tell the story of a time you broke the rules.

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

The leader reads the following:

This passage comes shortly before Moses reads the 10 Commandments to the people of Israel when they gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, having just escaped from Egypt. A people who had been enslaved now needed to learn what freedom meant. Through the commandments they’re about to receive, God invites them into the kind of relationship that blesses all peoples.

A member of the group reads the passage:

[God said,] “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now 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, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:4-6)

The group discusses the following questions, picking and choosing the ones that work best for them:

- Pop quiz! Working together, can your group remember all 10 Commandments?
- As you think about the 10 Commandments, notice that the first four are all about how to be in right relationship with God, and the rest are about how to be in right relationship with neighbor. Why are these things tied together? Can you be in right relationship with God if you’re not in right relationship with your neighbor? What about vice versa?
- Sometimes in the story of our faith, people had to break the rules to do the right thing: Jesus healed on the sabbath; Martin Luther condemned the sale of indulgences; Sojourner Truth preached even though women were supposed to be silent. How do we know when/whether God approves of our actions when our actions seem to break God’s law?
- What are some rules of our community? How/do they help us?
- What spiritual practices (if any) have you committed to during this forty-day Lenten journey? How are they going so far? Where do you need God’s help to succeed at them?

CLOSING PRAYER

The leader prays aloud:

God of goodness, we live in a complicated world. Sometimes it’s easy to tell the difference between good and evil, but sometimes we lose ourselves in gray areas. Bear us on eagles’ wings and bring us to yourself. Help us to discern how these ten ancient commandments can still guide us. Shape us day by day, so that we become a blessing to those who meet us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
FOURTH WEEK OF LENT: “FIERY SERPENTS”

OPENING PRAYER
The leader prays out loud:

Healing God, even when troubles seem to overwhelm us, you’re present with us, promising wholeness and abundant life. When doubt and disaster lay us low, give us strength to raise our heads and perceive the vision of salvation you set before us. Amen.

GATHERING TIME
Each person responds to one of the following:

- Snakes: cohabitants of a diverse creation, or terrifying slither-monsters? Please explain your views.
- What are your favorite coping methods in times of stress?
- If you were to point to one period in your life as “the good old days,” when would that be?

BIBLICAL REFLECTION
The leader reads the following:

This passage is from the book of Numbers, which covers the forty-year wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness before they finally enter the promised land. The Israelites sometimes grow nostalgic for the life they had in Egypt, and find it difficult to trust God. In this passage, the Israelites complain, encounter poisonous serpents, and interpret their experience as divine punishment. When they ask Moses to intercede for them, God responds with a solution that gives them hope and a promise of survival.

A member of the group reads the passage:

“The people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.’ Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’” (Numbers 21:5-8)

The group discusses the following questions, picking and choosing the ones that work best for them:

- Much of the book of Numbers is about a new nation learning to trust its God. What are some times that you/this community has had to depend on God? How has God responded?
- In verse 5, the Israelites complain, “There is no food...and we detest this miserable food.” What do you think is going on here? Why?
- The Israelites believe that the poisonous serpents begin plaguing them because they complained, but the text does not say this outright. As people of faith, how do we know whether or when God is behind things that happen in our lives?
- The Israelites sometimes remember their enslavement as the “good old days.” What are times that our community thinks of as our “good old days?” When does nostalgia help us? When does it hurt us?
- What spiritual practices (if any) have you committed to during this forty-day Lenten journey? How are they going so far? Where do you need God’s help to succeed at them?

CLOSING PRAYER
The leader prays aloud:

Protecting God, you were faithful to the Israelites throughout forty years of wandering, even when they weren’t faithful to you. Increase our trust in you day by day, so that we might see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more dearly. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.
FIFTH WEEK OF LENT: “WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS”

OPENING PRAYER
The leader prays out loud:

Compassionate God, you know our wandering hearts. You know how, even though we want to follow your will, we keep falling short or making mistakes. Let your grace tie us more closely to you, so that whenever we wander, we might still depend on your nearness to bring us home. Amen.

GATHERING TIME
Each person responds to one of the following:

- Describe a letter or card from a loved one that you chose to save for a long time.
- Do you have a word tattoo? If so, what does it say, and why did you get it?
- Share a phrase you’ve learned “by heart:” a memory verse, favorite song lyrics, a daily mantra or affirmation, a certain prayer, a favorite poem.

BIBLICAL REFLECTION
The leader reads the following:

The prophet Jeremiah writes these words during a time of crisis. The Babylonian Empire has overrun the kingdom of Judah, exiling many of its inhabitants to Babylon. Jeremiah is one of those left behind. While many of Jeremiah’s prophesies concern the Israelites’ failings and God’s grief, here, he offers words of comfort. A time is coming when the exiles will return, and when the Israelites will no longer fear breaking or forgetting God’s law, because it will be written on their very hearts.

A member of the group reads the passage:

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

(Jeremiah 31:31-33)

The group discusses the following questions, picking and choosing the ones that work best for them:

- As we near the end of a series of Lenten readings about covenants, reflect for a moment on promises that have shaped our lives. Why do we make promises to one another?
- When do you need to hear a promise? What promises have changed your life?
- What is the message that God has written on the hearts of those in our community? What is the message that God is using our community to write on the world’s heart?
- As we approach the end of Lent, reflect on the spiritual practices (if any) you committed to. How did you do at keeping them? What difference did they make in your daily life? Are there any that you’re considering keeping into the future?

CLOSING PRAYER
The leader prays aloud:

God of blessed assurance, we thank you for the promises you have made throughout many generations, and for the ways in which those promises have shaped us as people of faith. As we prepare to enter Holy Week, open us up to walk to road to the cross and the empty tomb. May the Word we encounter there inscribe itself on our hearts, erase the record of our mistakes, and mark us indelibly with your love. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.