



STORIES **AND** RITUALS

LESSON 11

Stories & Rituals: The Bible in Broad Strokes

Text copyright © 2014-2015 by the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania

Writers

Lindsay Barrett-Adler
Jan Berry Schroeder
The Rev. Sarah Hedgis
Victoria Hoppes
Andrew Kellner
Andrew Kuhn

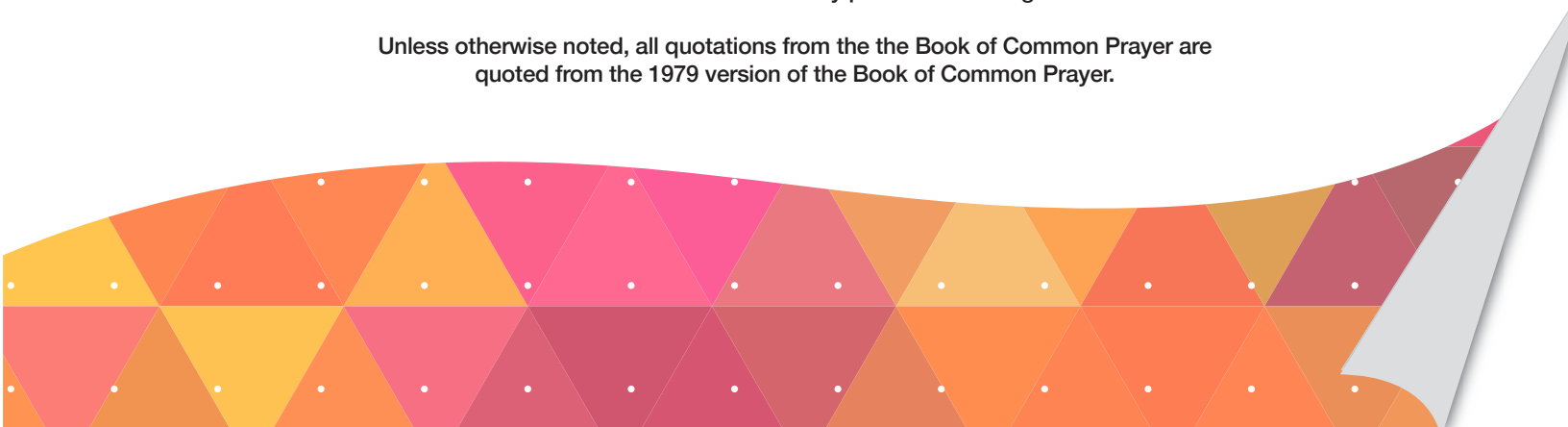
Editor

Victoria Hoppes

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this resource for parish use only. No part of this curriculum may be reproduced in any other manner without written permission from the publisher. For permission information, contact the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania at www.diopayouth.org.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the the Book of Common Prayer are quoted from the 1979 version of the Book of Common Prayer.



Jeremiah Writes a Scroll

Texts: Jeremiah 29:1-23

Big Idea: Distance from God is never very far.

Lesson Objectives

Participants will:

1. Identify a time when they have felt distant from someone by completing a group challenge.
2. Understand God's closeness to humanity by engaging in a re-telling of Jeremiah's prophecy.
3. Illustrate their current relationship with God by participating in a timeline activity.

ACTIVITY (TIME)

Dive In (10 minutes)
Group Check-In

Community Builder (15 minutes)
Reach

The Story (15 minutes)
Jeremiah Writes a Scroll

The Ritual (15 minutes)
Distance from God

Dig Deeper (10 minutes)
The Exile

Wrap it Up (5 minutes)
Closing Prayer

MATERIALS NEEDED

-
- Nothing
-

- Candy or other treat for group
 - Bowl
-

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 11.1
-

- Soft, instrumental music (optional)
 - Method for playing music (optional)
 - Large banner of paper
 - Markers
 - Slips of paper in two different colors
-

- Smartphones, tablets, or other devices that can connect to the Internet
-

- Nothing
-

LESSON OVERVIEW



What's the Story?

Today's story is found in Jeremiah 29:1-23. This passage of Scripture includes many well-known Bible verses, including Jeremiah 29:11. In many translations, today's story is introduced as a letter sent to the people of God who faced a period of exile in Babylon.

In the historical narrative, this story emerges at the time of the Babylonian exile, or the Babylonian captivity. Although there are many ideas on the dates of this captivity, many believe that God's people were exiled from approximately 605 BCE until 539 BCE. During this time, many people were sent from their homes in Judah to Babylon, where they lived in captivity under the Babylonian king. Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles in Babylon, bringing them hope and anticipation of the day that God would bring them home.

During the captivity, the exiles were geographically far from Jerusalem, their homes, and from God. In many ways, the exiles were also probably distant from God emotionally and spiritually, too.



What's the "Big Idea?"

Today's lesson focuses on the big idea that the *distance from God is never very far*. There are times when we face challenges or obstacles that keep us far from God. There are many distractions or things that prevent us from feeling close to God. However, Jeremiah reminds us that even when we feel like God is far away, God is still present and knows that we will search for God's presence.



What's the Symbol?

Today's story comes in the form of a letter, or scroll. Because the exiles were far from their homes in Jerusalem, Jeremiah's message of hope and anticipation was sent by mail. Jeremiah's scroll reminded God's people they would one day return home and live in a peaceful world.



What's the Ritual?

Today's ritual will invite participants to think about how close they are to God at this moment in their lives. They will illustrate these feelings of closeness on a timeline. Then, participants will be invited to think about how close they want to be to God, and add this to the timeline. Finally, participants will consider things that can help them lessen the distance between them and God.



Setting Up Your Space

Set up your "altar" area. Set up a table and cover it with fabric or linen. On the table, place a few candles and a large cross. On the floor or on a wall nearby, hang a large banner of paper to create the timeline for the ritual. Place nearby slips of paper, markers, and tape for the ritual. If you are using the Community Builder activity, set up the challenge.

DIVE IN (10 MINUTES)

Group Check-In

Materials:

- Nothing

During the session:

- Open your session with a quick prayer. Use this one or a prayer of your own:
Holy Lord, open our eyes, ears, and hearts to see your love and faithfulness in the world around us. Help us see your love for us in your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
- Let's start our time together by sharing some of the great and not-so-great things that have happened to us this week. What were the high points and low points of your week? Go around the group and invite everyone to share.

COMMUNITY BUILDER (15 MINUTES)

Reach

Materials:

- Bowl
- Candy or other treat for the group

Before the session:

- Secure a large space in which you can complete this activity (the group will be stretching to complete the challenge).
- Fill a bowl with candy or other treat for the group to share. M&Ms or another similar candy work well.

Special Note: This activity is a great team builder for your group. If you have a large group (10 or more people), it may work best if you split into teams in order to complete this challenge. If you split into teams, each team will need their own bowl of treats.

During the session:

- Split the group into teams, if necessary. Invite them to stand on one side of the room. Show them the bowl of candy. Say: **Today I brought a treat for us to share. Who would like some?**
- Place the bowl on the other side of the room (at least 50 feet away, if possible). **If I put the bowl over here, does that distance to the candy seem far?** [Answers will vary, but it might seem too far away.]
- **Today your challenge is to, as a group, reach the bowl of candy. In order to do this, you must reach the bowl but stay connected to each other and the original starting point.** Mark the starting point for the group to see.
- **There are lots of ways you can do this. Your goal is to figure out what you need to do!**
- Invite the group to begin the activity. If they need guidance, encourage them to hold hands, stand and stretch, lie down on the floor, etc. If the distance is still far, invite the group to think about other out-of-the box ways they can reach the candy.

COMMUNITY BUILDER - CONTINUED

- Invite the group to begin the activity. If they need guidance, encourage them to hold hands, stand and stretch, lie down on the floor, etc. If the distance is still far, invite the group to think about other out-of-the box ways they can reach the candy.
- Once the group has reached the bowl, discuss: **At the start of this activity, did the distance to the candy seem far? How?** *[Answers will vary.]*
- **Once you began reaching for the bowl, did the distance seem far? What changed?** *[Answers will vary.]*
- **Has there ever been a time in your life when you have felt far from a person? What was that experience like?** *[Answers will vary. You may wish to open this discussion by sharing your own story.]*



THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

Jeremiah Writes a Scroll

Materials:

- Copy of Lesson Sheet 11.1

Before the session:

- Make a copy of Lesson Sheet 11.1
- Practice reading through the story several times so you are familiar with it.

During the session:

- Tell the story on Lesson Sheet 11.1.
- **After the story, ask: What is this story telling us about God?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: Even in times of trial, God is always with us; God will always fulfill God's promises; God is never far away from us.]*
- **What is this story telling us about humanity?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: We seek and search for God; we face trials that distance us from God's presence; sometimes we feel distant from God.]*
- **What is this story telling us about the world?** *[Answers will vary, but may include: The world is full of things that pull us away from God; there are many distractions that keep us from God.]*
- **Being in exile was probably difficult for God's people. There were probably many times when they felt far away from God. However, the words of Jeremiah reminded them that God was never very far away from them. There are also times in our lives when we feel close to God, and far away from God, too. It's okay if we feel far away from God, because our faith reminds us that God is still there.**



THE RITUAL

(15 MINUTES)

Distance from God

Materials:

- Soft, instrumental music (optional)
- Method for playing music (optional)
- Tape
- Markers
- Slips of paper in two different colors
- Banner of paper

Before the session:

- Set up a large banner of paper in a location where everyone can see it. This may be hanging on a wall or lying on the floor.
- Use one of the colors of marker to create a timeline on the paper. Draw a long, horizontal line dividing the paper in half. On one side of the timeline, write “YOU” in large letters. On the other side of the timeline, write “GOD” in large letters.

During the session:

- If you are playing music, begin playing it softly.
- **When God's people were in exile, it probably seemed like God was very far away from them. However, the prophets reminded God's people that God never was far away—God would always be there, no matter what happened to them.**
- Invite participants to look at the banner of paper. Pretend that on one side of this timeline is you, and the other side of this timeline is God. How close are you to God right now? Take a moment to think about it.
- **Give participants time to think and reflect.**
- **In a moment, I am going to hand you a slip of paper and a marker. Use your marker to write your name on the paper.**
- **Hand out a slip of paper (only one of the colors) and marker to each person. Invite them to write their name on the paper.**
- **Now, think about where you are on this timeline. Take a piece of tape and stick the paper to where you think you are on the timeline.**
- Invite individuals to come forward and tape their slips to the timeline.
- **Now, think about where you WANT to be on the timeline. Maybe you want to be closer to God, or you feel like you are too close, or you are okay with where you are. Where do you WANT to be on the timeline?**
- Give participants time to think and reflect. Then, hand each person a slip of paper in the second color.
- **You will notice that this new slip of paper I handed you is a different color. On this slip of paper, write your name. Then, come to the banner and tape your paper where you want to be on the timeline.**
- Invite participants forward to tape their slips of paper.
- **Let's take a minute to look at our timeline. Where are we right now? Where do we want to be? Pick one person on the timeline, and say a prayer for them.**
- Pause for a minute to allow for reflection and prayer.
- **We all have times in our lives when we feel close to God, and we all have times when we feel far away. However, our distance from God is never far. How can you grow closer to God?** [Answers will vary, but may include: reading Scripture, worship, prayer, service, etc.]

DIG DEEPER

(10 MINUTES)

The Exile

Materials:

- Smartphones, tablets, or other devices that connect to the Internet.

Before the session:

- Do some of your own research on the Babylonian exile. Take some notes to keep on hand while discussing this activity.

During the session:

- **If you look up today's story in the Bible, you will find that it comes in the form of a letter written to God's people exiled in Babylon. Many of the prophets spoke and gave hope to people during the Babylonian exile. What is the Babylonian exile? Let's find out.**
- Split the group into pairs. Invite participants to use their phones or other devices to research the Babylonian exile. Give the following questions to guide research:

What was the Babylonian exile?

When did the exile take place?

Who was involved in the exile?

What happened during the exile?

- Give pairs the opportunity to research. Then, bring the group back together and invite participants to share their findings.
- **What was the Babylonian exile? What did you learn?** *[Answers will vary.]*
- **Why would Jeremiah want to remind God's people that the distance from God is never very far?** *[Answers will vary.]*

WRAP IT UP

(5 MINUTES)

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to share any prayer concerns or requests they may have for the week. Close your time together in prayer. Use the following or pray your own prayer:

Faithful God, you are never very far from us, even though sometimes you feel far away. Help us remember that even when distance from you seems far away, you are still with us. Help us remember that you will always bring us love, hope, and peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Lesson Sheet 11.1

Jeremiah Writes a Scroll

A letter to the exiles, from the prophet Jeremiah:

Jeremiah first warned God's people that they would face a tough situation. Their unfaithfulness would bring difficult times upon them. At first, people didn't think Jeremiah's prophecy was true. Then, in a time of trial, God's people were sent from their home in Jerusalem to Babylon, where they lived under a new king's rule. When the people were sent far from home, Jeremiah wrote them a letter of hope and anticipation. This letter was sent to God's people exiled in Babylon. The letter said:

The Lord, the God of Israel, says this to all of the people exiled in Babylon: build homes. Grow food. Create families while you are in exile. Continue to grow; don't ever leave. Pray for those who hold you in captivity and pray for your new city, because prosperity in this city is prosperity for you. Only listen to those whom I have sent to speak; don't let other prophets deceive you.

God also says this: For seventy years you will be in Babylon. After these seventy years, I will come to you and bring you home. I know the plans for your life; I know the prosperity and peace that will come, and not just the harm. I know that your future is filled with hope. When you come and pray to me, I listen to you. Even when we are far away from each other, I am there when you search for me. I will let you find me, bring you prosperity and peace, and gather every nation together and bring you home, away from captivity and exile.

At this time in your life, you may feel very far away from me. Even those who stayed at home are going to face famine and violence. Because they did not listen to my word, they will face great suffering. Those who prophesy lies and tell stories that aren't true will find judgment. Only I am the one who knows and gives witness to the things that are going to happen.

All of these words come from the Lord.