

Lenten Small Group Study 2021

grounded in the living word chapter 07 covenant care community

read

Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.
(Psalm 1)

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.
(Genesis 11.1-9)

share

Hopkins and Koppel note that the very first psalm, appropriately enough, establishes as a baseline our rootedness in God as covenant care communities. When we seek after God and follow God's will, we become like trees planted near water—the living stream which gives us life and enables us to bear fruit.

The people of Babel, however, lose sight of that. They have a common language, common culture, and common history as a migratory people, yet, in their desire to establish a permanent city, they forget in whom they reside. They decide to build to the sky, to make themselves greater than others, to bring fame to their name. The city becomes fortified, indicating their desire to isolate themselves, preserve their community, and rely on themselves their own protection. They fear the future, they fear change, they fear what God may require of them. They decide to do something about it.

So God decides to do something about Babel. In the scattering, God ensures the preservation of creation by fostering diversity, while encouraging we care for one another even in our differences. In this new community, we find true unity—with God, and with one another. (Hopkins and Koppel 202-203)

Some questions to ponder:

- What do you look for in community?
 - What do you fear about community?
 - In what ways do you live in a fortified city? In what ways does this congregation live in a fortified city?
 - What would scattering look like in your life? In the life of this congregation?
- (Hopkins and Koppel 204)

As part of God's diverse family, we are created to live and serve and worship in a covenant community. A united family of faith whose foundation is based in God's loving promise to be our God—a vow which will never be broken, which continues even as God gives us the gift of choosing, every day, to commit to God, to accept God's covenantal overture to enter into a committed relationship with God and one another.

If we choose to enter into this covenantal relationship, we encounter two parts to our obligation. Hopkins and Koppel note, "Covenant as living relationship-in-community entails a commitment to *listening* for God's call and *responding* to God in action...For Christians, listening to Jesus means choosing to keep covenant with God by living relationship in community and following wherever the path of life may lead." (Hopkins and Koppel 206-207) Living in relationship with God and one another means living into the commands of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, summarized by Jesus as two: love and serve God, love and serve one another.

Some questions to ponder:

- Has this congregation chosen to be part of God’s covenant community? How so?
- How well does our faith community live into Jesus’ great command, especially in the midst of diversity? How would anyone outside our congregation recognize the ways we love God? Or each other?
- Can you list the Ten Commandments? Why do you think God gave us just ten? Within the context of a covenant community, has God left anything out? What might you add?

When we follow the path together which God has set before us, much like the Exodus people, Hopkins and Koppel remind us we will be transformed during the communal journey: “Covenant community strengthens the bonds between people and reaches beyond itself to include the transformative well-being of the whole creation...Covenant community...works with the nitty-gritty of daily life and responsibilities in order to forge a workable and sustainable harmony. Covenant community remembers even as it reshapes its past to live fully in the present. It opens itself to the possibilities and claims of future generations.” (Hopkins and Koppel 213)

In the midst of such transformation, we encounter both positive and negative remembrances, events, and circumstances. We are not to avoid either. For, as Hopkins and Koppel note, in the wake of immense pain and sorrow and grief and change, “Israel does not hide these negative memories. They remain in the tradition to remind Israel that wilderness is transformed by God’s presence into a place of no lack, of surprise, transformation, choice, and dependence upon God.” (Hopkins and Koppel 214)

These memories remain in our tradition through sharing our stories, especially around scripture, so we may “remember what God has done, and to hear again what God is doing in our midst. We remember and tell these stories to each other, within communities and across generations, to remind ourselves of what we may have forgotten and to stir us to new possibilities in the future.” (Hopkins and Koppel 215)

Some questions to ponder:

- Reflect upon both the positive and the negative memories in our faith community’s life. Which experiences were the most transforming and energizing?
 - How has our faith community dealt with its negative memories? How could it deal more positively with these memories?
 - What role does trust play in our ability to share our stories and to heal? How may we foster such trust here? Can we have a covenant community without it?
 - How may our covenant community strengthen its bonds?
 - How might you live more faithfully within our covenant with God and each other?
- (Hopkins and Koppel 215, 220)

meditate

We share our stories so we may remember, as did the Exodus people on their long trek to the promised land, that God will take our deep woundedness and transform it. God will mend our divisions and heal our hurts. God will restore our trust and create within us *shalom*, wholeness. God will do all of these things and more, if we only lean into the community of care, the covenantal relationships God has gifted us, with God and one another. So let us do so. Let us continue this journey of remembering, and sharing our stories, and listening to one another. The work is not done. But, fear not, for God is with us.

pray

O God of Covenant, in a world fragmented by fear, hostility, and pain, you call us into covenant care community. Mindful of memories, grievances, and histories that all too easily separate us from one another, we commit ourselves to remember and author a new future story for the human family, grounded in the old story of your abiding promise and presence. Inspire us to live into true selfhood as partners with your creation, healers in your community, and stewards of your radically inclusive love. Amen.
(Hopkins and Koppel 233)

based upon and adapted from *Grounded in the Living Word: The Old Testament and Pastoral Care Practices* by Denise Dombkowski Hopkins and Michael S. Koppel (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010)