



Living in Stories

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PRE-LESSON INFORMATION

SESSION DESCRIPTION

We live by stories. In the middle of God's story, which includes all of creation and the life of Jesus, we live and tell our life stories. Learn how living your story as part of God's story shifts your perspective to search for the good in your neighbor, community, and self.

ELCA FAITH PRACTICE

Encourage

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will . . .

Practice telling stories of their families and selves

Learn the story and context of the popular verse Jeremiah 29:11

Brainstorm ways to contribute to the welfare of their own cities/neighborhoods

BIBLICAL FOCUS

- Jeremiah 29 -- "For I know the plans I have for you ..."

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Computer, projector, and screen for PowerPoint that accompanies this session
- Ability to access and project video/sound that accompanies this session (if utilized). It is highly recommended that you download online videos prior to the presentation.
- Bible
- Large paper for posting
- Markers
- Paper for participants
- Story in Five Frames handout (see Appendix)

LESSON PLAN

OPENING ACTIVITY 1: FRUIT BASKET UPSET WITH A TWIST

(Choose one activity or use both)

- Arrange chairs in a circle. If you have 6 or more people playing, use two or more groups of chairs (at least three each).
- Name people in each group a fruit (limit yourself to 3-4 fruits).
- Have one person stand in the middle and call a fruit.
- Everyone “named” that fruit must change seats with another “named” that fruit. (If you’re using multiple circles they’ll have to travel across the room.)
- Meanwhile, the person in the center of the room tries to occupy a vacated seat.
- Whomever is left in the middle chooses a fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22-23 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control).
- In each circle participants talk about where that fruit is showing up in their community.
- Large group discussion may follow

Debrief: *We all had opportunities to “belong” to one or more circles through hearing our fruit name called. When we found a seat, we talked with each other about our community. Each of us belongs--together and as individuals. And we are better together.*

OPENING ACTIVITY 2: STORY IN FIVE FRAMES

(Choose one activity or use both)

What have your parents, grandparents, siblings said about your arrival to the planet? What stories are told again and again about waiting for you, welcoming you, and wondering about your first actions and words?

Note: Consider using *A Story in Five Frames* (see Appendix) for this exercise. You may use it horizontally or vertically. Arrival to the planet is Frame #3. Frames #1 and #2 are about life before you. #4 is for your unique gifts. #5 is your contribution to community. (Large paper posted on the wall could also be used for this. If you make the frames big enough, the group can share space and show arrival to the planet in #3 simultaneously.)

Debrief: *We are not responsible for our own arrival to the planet. In order to survive as infants someone prepared for each one of us and welcomed us. You are the middle of their story.*

Questions for conversation:

- As you develop your own sense of self--your gifts and what you are good at--how do you and will you contribute to your community?
- How do you take the story you’re learning and telling about yourself and tell a story about life with other people?
- Who listens to you tell your story?
- Which stories do you like to hear?
- What stories do you tell with others?

BIBLE STUDY: IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STORY

This segment utilizes the video that accompanies the session. A script with the video's content is provided in the appendix for leader use in preparing the lesson and for those who do not have access to or do not wish to utilize the video during the session.

Play the video.

You arrive in the middle of a story. You depend on others to fill you in on what has gone on before and you will depend on others to carry forward what you think most important. While you're living you'll be on the journey of figuring that out: Who am I? To whom do I belong? Why do we do the things we do? What is most important to us? What is our moment in history and how do we contribute to it?

Go to Jeremiah 29 and read at least 1-11. (It's OK if there are lots of hard names to pronounce in verses 1-3.)

- Who is Jeremiah 29 directed to? (Take a look at verse 1 and verse 4).

This passage is directed to people in *exile*—God's people who were taken from their land and plopped down in the land of their neighbors.

- Have you ever felt like you are in the wrong place with the wrong people? What were signs of this?

Leaving Israel was not part of the plan for these exiles. Israel was home for them—where they were born and raised, where their families had jobs and histories. It was the place they worshipped God—in the temple and all through the land. When they got to Babylon, the place of their exile, they wondered: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4).

- Are there situations in your life and community right now where it is hard to see God?

Look at the advice to exiles in Jeremiah 29:5-6.

- What are exiles to do while they are living in a foreign land?
- What do these activities have in common, if anything?

These activities—building houses and living in them, planting gardens and eating the produce, giving people in marriage—are all investments in the future. It takes time to do these activities and enjoy the results. And this is what exiles are encouraged to do. In the foreign land. When things had not gone according to plan.

Activity: *Post large paper up on the wall. Write down your activities in the community. How are*

you investing in the future with your neighbors--as individuals and as a group?

Now read verse 7. Some translations say “welfare” while others say “peace.” Both words in English are attempts to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, which is a whole package kind of well-being: health, livelihood, just relationships, good neighbors. The advice in verse 7 is to seek shalom for the city and the neighbors where the exiles find themselves.

- What does it mean to seek shalom in the city where you find yourselves? (Consider brainstorming a list and then writing verses like Jeremiah’s.)

There’s a warning here, too. Read verses 8-9. Jeremiah warns of lies spoken in God’s name.

- Are there lies told about where you live? Why are they lies?

The caution against lies in verses 8-9 leads into a reminder that exile will last a long time (verse 10). Then comes the often-quoted verse 11, which offers a future with hope. Since it will be such a long time in exile, much of that future and that hope will be found in the activities recommended in verses 5-7.

Verse 11 is for God’s people, together, who are living in a foreign land.

CLOSING ACTIVITY 1

(Choose one activity or use both)

Write advice to people of faith who feel like exiles in your congregation or neighborhood (this includes school and other activities). Point them to signs of hope where you live and encourage them to participate in shalom for all.

CLOSING ACTIVITY 2

(Choose one activity or use both)

Design a greeting card, t-shirt, or another item that conveys Jeremiah 29:11 as the middle of a story. Try including one of the following elements:

- life in community
- actions that invest in future
- seeking shalom for others

CLOSING THE CONVERSATION

Thank the group for their participation and make any final remarks or announcements. Then offer this closing prayer (or one of your own):

God, you call to us in every circumstance, confident in our abilities to turn to you. Grant us grace to express our confidence in you and our neighbors by daily actions for shalom in the world you love. Amen.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Ganz, Marshall. "Telling Your Public Story: Self, Us, Now"

<http://www.wholecommunities.org/pdf/Public%20Story%20Worksheet07Ganz.pdf>

Gonzalez, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity* (Vol. 1 and 2), 2nd edition. HarperOne, 2010.

International Society for Urban Mission: <http://newurbanworld.org/seek-the-shalom-of-the-city/>

Salvatierra, Alexia and Peter Heltzel. *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*. IVP Books, 2013.

Winter, Bruce. *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*. Eerdmans, 1994.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Colleen Windham-Hughes teaches in two primary areas at California Lutheran University: Religion and Public Life and Practical Theology. In both areas she leads students in Academic Service Learning, in which students prepare academically, engage in service on and off campus, and reflect on deep connections between thinking and doing. The Rev. Dr. Windham-Hughes also collaborates with faculty, staff, and students on projects related to vocation and interfaith.



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STORY IN FIVE FRAMES

Use horizontally or vertically. You arrive to the planet in frame #3. Prior to that fill the frames with life before you. After that fill frame #4 with your distinct gifts and #5 with your contribution to community. Bonus: Fill 5 Frames about Jesus!

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Video Script – Living in Stories

The following script is, generally speaking, the content contained in the video segment of this lesson, provided as information for those who cannot access or do not wish to utilize the video.

There's a piece of scripture that is really popular today: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29.11). It is on graduation cards and inspirational mugs. It's on t-shirts, umbrellas, bracelets, and tattoos.

Let's talk about why this verse is so popular.

Life is often uncertain. Things change around us and within us, and we can feel unglued from our sense of self and home. To think about a plan...for me...from God provides tremendous hope in the face of uncertainty. We may not be able to see how things fit together now, but we trust God with a larger picture and purpose.

- Do you sense a larger picture or purpose in your life? What does it look like? Who is part of it?

Here's the thing: it is good to trust God with a larger picture and purpose. This larger picture and purpose is God's love for the world. All of us get to be part of God's love for the world, whether or not things go according to plan. And it's usually our plans we're talking about.

We are loved and chosen by God, but we are not living out a script pre-written. To believe in a plan is to deprive ourselves of human freedom and the agency to act on our own, taking risks, developing gifts, and contributing to the world God loves.

As it happens, verse 11 is not about the plan for any individual.

Let's look at the larger picture around this verse. Go to Jeremiah 29 and read at least 1-11. (It's ok if there are lots of hard names to pronounce in verses 1-3.)

- Who is Jeremiah 29 directed to? (Take a look at verse 1 and verse 4).

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- Have you ever felt like you are in the wrong place with the wrong people? What were signs of this?

Leaving Israel was not part of the plan for these exiles. Israel was home for them—where they were born and raised, where their families had jobs and histories. It was the place they worshipped God—in the temple and all through the land. When they got to Babylon, the place

of their exile, they wondered: “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137.4). Are there situations in your life and community right now where it is hard to see God?

Look at the advice to exiles in Jeremiah 29.5-6.

- What are exiles to do while they are living in a foreign land?
- What do these activities have in common, if anything?

These activities—building houses and living in them, planting gardens and eating the produce, giving people in marriage—are all investments in the future. It takes time to do these activities and enjoy the results. And this is what exiles are encouraged to do. In the foreign land. When things had not gone according to plan.

Life in exile is uncertain, and uncertainty is where the exiles must live. They have to relearn who God is in a foreign land. In this passage from Jeremiah, the way to know who God is by acting with confidence toward neighbors and toward the shared future.

“Mobilizing others to achieve purpose under conditions of uncertainty—what leaders do—challenges the hands, the head, and the heart.”¹

The exiles are to take action in uncertainty, living according to the values of their faith and through their actions, investing in the lives of their neighbors. The story they tell is a story of God’s shalom showing up in what they thought was the most unlikely place. They arrive in the middle of their story to the middle of someone else’s, and the word from God is: live here, seek shalom here.

¹ Marshall Ganz, “Public Narrative, Collective Action, and Power,” in *Accountability Through Public Opinion: From Inertia to Public Action*, ed. Sina Odugbemi and Taeku Lee. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2011.