



BIBLE STUDY ALONG THE WAY SESSION 2

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

by Julie A. Kanarr



Materials you will need

- Postcards (or blank 3x4 or 4x6 index cards)
- Optional: paper and colored pencils/pens/markers for faith/life map activity
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*

Theme Verse

“Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” (1 Kings 19:7b)

Road Map

In this session, we will walk first with the Israelites and then with the prophet Elijah on their respective wilderness journeys. Hungry and complaining, the Israelites are fed by God as they travel from Egypt toward Mt. Sinai. Elijah, exhausted after his escape from Queen Jezebel’s wrath, takes refuge in the wilderness. Like the Israelites before him, Elijah also is a weary traveler who is fed by God and strengthened for his journey to God’s holy mountain. We will explore both Elijah’s and the Isra-

elites’ paths of discouragement and their experiences of God’s providing for them. Along the way, we will look for the intersections between their journeys and our own paths of faith.

Preparing the Way

Sing “Will You Come and Follow Me” (*ELW* 798).

Reflect on a time when you have become restless during a journey. Perhaps you were wondering “are we there yet?” Perhaps you were tired and hungry and wanted to rest, or even quit. What fed you so you could continue? How did you cope with the frustrations, irritations, and challenges of traveling?

Are We There Yet?

READ EXODUS 16:1–12.

The writer of Exodus looks at the Israelites' time in the wilderness as a time of theological and spiritual formation. Their escape from slavery becomes a pilgrimage to Mt. Sinai, God's holy mountain, where the commandments they receive flow out of the divine announcement, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:1).

The hardships the Israelites face become opportunities for reflection on what it means to live as God's people, especially in difficult times. Each episode in their journey becomes an invitation to renewed trust in God's promise of redemption, protection, and provision. There is a recurring pattern: The Israelites complain, and God responds. God always remembers and keeps God's promises.

After being delivered from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites step out into the wilderness. Though they had worked under oppressive conditions, their life along the Nile River meant that they had not lacked for food or water. Now they face the hardships that accompany their freedom. Hungry and thirsty, they are wearied by their travels. Pleasant oases, such as they found at Elim with its abundant water and shade (Exodus 15:27), are few and far between.

As their discomfort level rises, they lash out against their leaders, blaming Moses and Aaron for their situation. The Israelites look back at their life in Egypt through the rear-view mirror of nostalgia. In the receding distance, their past looks more attractive than their present. With the long stretch of desert in front of them, they can only imagine their future as bleak. They would rather trade the unfamiliar challenges of the wilderness for the comforts of home, forgetting that those comforts had been far outweighed by their brutal oppression (Exodus 1:8–2:25).

Moses and Aaron recognize that although they

are the targets of the Israelites' anger, the Israelites' complaints are actually against God. In responding to their complaint, God announces both a test (16:4) and a promise (16:6). Their hunger raises a spiritual issue: God will faithfully provide food for them. Will the Israelites respond with obedience? Though the Israelites repeatedly fail that test, God steadfastly provides for their needs, with the gift of meat in the evening and manna in the morning. God's provision for their daily needs is coupled with God's relentless yearning that they be faithful, and "know that I am the Lord your God" (v. 12).

REST STOP

1. What issues do the Israelites struggle with during their wilderness journey?
2. Where are the points in your life or faith journey where you find it difficult to trust?

Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

READ EXODUS 16:13–36.

Against the backdrop of the wilderness and its hardships, God's daily provision of manna offers the Israelites a lesson in trusting God and discovering what constitutes "enough." In God's wilderness economy, there is no scarcity, no surplus, and no room for greed. Those who gather a lot and those who gather a little all find that they have enough, but no more. Those who try to store up their manna for the next day discover that the excess rots. They learn that hoarding stinks, literally.

The practice of Sabbath rest is woven into this story. On the sixth day, the Israelites are instructed to gather enough manna to last for two days, and assured that it will not rot. The absence of manna on the Sabbath underscores the lesson that God is the source of their daily bread. Those who go out to gather manna on the Sabbath anyway discover that God is faithful to the promise of what God will and will not do. They

look around, but there is no manna on the Sabbath. On this wilderness journey, the gift of Sabbath rest is not optional.

The Israelites are instructed to gather one jar of manna to carry with them, as a reminder of their journey. More than just a souvenir keepsake from their trip, this jar is to be a tangible reminder of God's care for them and of what they have learned during their time in the wilderness.

Despite their complaints and repeated failures to obey God's commands, God remains faithful to God's promises. God sustains the weary travelers with the rhythm of daily food and weekly rest. Thus strengthened, they journey through the wilderness on their way to Mt. Sinai, and then to the Promised Land.

REST STOP

3. What lessons do the Israelites learn from the gift of manna?
4. Where are the intersections between the Israelites' experience in the wilderness and your own life and faith?

Write a post card from the wilderness, noting your thoughts, feelings, questions, and reflections about this place and your journey through it. You may wish to write from the stance of the Israelites, or of Moses, or from your own perspective of being with them on their journey.

Food for the Journey

READ 1 KINGS 19:1–10.

The prophet Elijah's journey into the wilderness comes after his protracted conflict with Ahab, the king of Israel. Elijah was outspoken in proclaiming God's judgment against Ahab for his unfaithfulness to God. One of the recurring issues throughout the time of ancient Israel's history was that of religious syncretism (the merging or combining of different beliefs). Given that their Canaanite neighbors were polytheistic, it was difficult for the Israelites to maintain the practice

of monotheism with exclusive loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Despite the commandment "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3) Ahab had built a temple for Baal, the Canaanite fertility god associated with rainfall and creation's rebirth, and a shrine to Ash-toreth, a Canaanite goddess. Ahab had also married Jezebel (the daughter of a neighboring king), who practiced the Canaanite religion with its worship of Baal.

Elijah (whose name means "my God is Yahweh") arranged a public contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. The deity who sent fire down from heaven to kindle the sacrificial offering would be acclaimed as a true God. Elijah wins with an impressive demonstration of God's power, and has the priests of Baal seized and put to death as false prophets (1 Kings 18:20–40).

When she hears that Elijah had defeated and killed the 450 prophets of Baal, Jezebel is angry and seeks vengeance against Elijah. Elijah flees into the wilderness, sits down under a broom tree (a large desert shrub) and sinks into despair. Despite all of his successes, he feels like a failure, persecuted and alone. Physically spent and emotionally exhausted, Elijah is at the point of collapse. He lies down for a nap. Elijah wants to die.

God's response to Elijah's prayer does not grant his death wish. As God had once fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna, now God provides food and water to nourish Elijah, to strengthen him for his upcoming journey. Twice, Elijah is awakened by an angel who urges him to get up and eat.

In a journey reminiscent of the Israelites' 40 years in the wilderness, what had become as an escape from danger becomes a pilgrimage to God's holy mountain. Elijah travels 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb, another name for Mt. Sinai. There he takes refuge in a cave. God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God listens as Elijah pours out his story, lamenting Israel's unfaithfulness and his own plight. Elijah

laments that he is the only faithful one left, and that his life is in danger.

REST STOP

5. What is Elijah's experience like on his journey into the wilderness? In what ways is it similar to that of the Israelites?
6. Where are the intersections between Elijah's path and your journey of life and faith? Have you ever had similar highs and lows?

Elijah Encounters God

READ 1 KINGS 19:11–18.

Elijah stands on the mountain at God's direction. He experiences a series of dramatic signs commonly associated with divine power: an earthquake, wind, and fire. God, however, is not found among them, even though God's mighty rush of fire from heaven that had consumed the offering during the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel (see 1 Kings 18:38). Instead, God is found within the sound of "sheer silence" (sometimes also translated as "still, small voice.") God's absence from the expected places opens Elijah, and us, to receive God where we do not expect God to be.

God repeats the question "What are you doing here?" Again, Elijah pours out his story of faithfulness, and weariness. God listens, but does not let Elijah remain stuck in his place of despair. God sends Elijah back out of the wilderness with a specific action plan, telling Elijah where to go and what to do next. God assures Elijah that he is not alone, because there are still many others, 7,000 in all, who continue to be faithful.

REST STOP

7. In what ways does Elijah's meeting with God strengthen him and renew him in his faith and mission?
8. Have you had times when you felt God strengthened and renewed you and your faith? Can you share some examples?

Write a postcard from Mt. Horeb, noting your thoughts and reflections. You may wish to write from Elijah's perspective.

Optional: Further Exploration

Continue to work on the map of your faith and life you began in during Session 1. You may wish to focus on the spiritual "landscape" that you have traveled through (for example, wilderness, mountaintops, places of rest, and refuge). You may wish to create landmarks representing times and places of questions and doubts, complaints, and reassurance.

Closing

Gather your postcards. Re-read them and share them with your group if you desire.

After a time for silence, pray together:

O God, full of compassion, we commit and commend ourselves to you, in whom we live and move and have our being. Be the goal of our pilgrimage and our rest along the way. Give us refuge from the turmoil of worldly distractions beneath the shadow of your wings. Let our hearts, so often a sea of restless waves, find peace in you, O God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, page 86)

Looking ahead

In session 3, we will travel with those who encountered Jesus along the way. We will join in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well and walk with the disciples who met the risen Christ along the road to Emmaus. We will reflect on how we experience Christ with us in our own journey of faith. 🌿

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LEADER GUIDE ALONG THE WAY SESSION 2

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by Julie A. Kanarr



Road Map

While the three sessions of this study share the common theme of a journey, each session stands on its own as an independent unit. There are two questions at the end of each section. The first is intended to guide participants in reflecting on the meaning of the text, and the second invites participants to reflect on their own life and faith journey in light of the text.

While this leader guide provides some suggested responses, there are no right or wrong answers. The responses in the leader guide may serve to jump-start stalled conversations among participants or open up new avenues for reflection. For a more detailed introduction to the study, see the leader guide for session 1 in the June issue or at gathermagazine.org.

Are We There Yet?

1. The Israelites had forgotten the oppression they had experienced as slaves. Their nostalgia skews their vision (like looking through a curved rear-view mirror, where “objects may be closer than they appear.”) The past looks better and their

present situation seems worse. Having forgotten what God has done for them in the past, they are unable to trust that God will care for them in the present, and into the future.

2. Participants may reflect on their faith journey, their personal lives, or relationships with family, friends, co-workers, or others. Some may find it difficult to trust when past promises have been broken. Others may find it difficult to trust when the one making the promise is someone they have little previous experience with. Some may have more difficulty trusting when the promise seems to be “too big” or too good to be true.

Give Us Today our Daily Bread

3. No matter how much manna is gathered, everyone has the same amount, an *omer* (a measure of approximately one to two liters, the size of a large bottle of soda). Those who try to store up their manna for the next day are doing so in direct disobedience to God’s command and in flagrant lack of trust in God’s will and/or ability to keep promises. The absence of manna to gather on the Sabbath underscores its nature as a divine gift.

4. Participants may relate to one or more of the themes in Israel's wilderness journey. Some may reflect on their experiences of complaining, fear, weariness, or uncertainty. Others may describe a time when God has provided for their needs. Some may talk about what keeping the Sabbath might mean in the context of their own lives. Others may wrestle with what it means to have enough in a world where both scarcity and greed are a reality. The experiences of the Israelites help us to recognize that there is room in our faith walk for times of doubt, despair, frustration, questions, and difficulty.

Food for the Journey

5. Participants may see a variety of connections between these two stories. The Israelites were escaping from oppressive slavery; Elijah was escaping from a threat to his life. The Israelites complained. Elijah despaired. The Israelites spent 40 years in the desert; Elijah, 40 days. Both journeyed to the same mountain. Both were fed by God, and strengthened for their journey ahead.
6. Some participants may identify with Elijah's weariness. Some may describe times when they have felt fear or despair, or simply wanted to give up. Some may share his experience of success turning to failure. Some might identify with Elijah's experience of being threatened for speaking the truth. Others may identify with his feeling of being alone and that others are against him. Some may yearn for a chance to take a nap in the shade. Some participants may describe how God has strengthened them, fed them, and encouraged them so that they can continue on. Some participants may reflect on the connections between God's invitation to "get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you" and what it means for them to receive Holy Communion.

Elijah Encounters God

7. God summons Elijah out of the cave and tells him to stand on the mountain. God doesn't let Elijah hide or leave him to wallow in his despair forever. (Participants may note that God did not leave Elijah alone and despondent under the broom tree either.)

God's presence in the sound of sheer silence brings reassurance to Elijah that God is present in unexpected places. Twice, God asks "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God listens with patience and compassion as Elijah tells his story. The very act of telling one's story can sharpen one's sense of understanding and bring a renewed sense of purpose. God responds to Elijah's lament and corrects Elijah's misperception that he is the only faithful one left. The mission plan that God lays out for Elijah is a plan for his prophetic successors, which assures Elijah that his life and work are not in vain.

8. Participants may consider how God meets them in surprising, unexpected ways. Elijah experienced God in the "sound of sheer silence." Some may reflect on how they encounter God in quiet places. As God was not in the dramatic events of the earthquake, wind, or fire, some participants may also be keenly aware of places where they feel God's absence. Some may describe how they recognize God listening to them in prayer. Some may consider how the act of responding to God's question "what are you doing here?" can lead to a greater sense of clarity and renewal of purpose and mission. (You may want to look at Women of the ELCA's free, online resource "Sacred Spaces." Download it at www.womenoftheelca.org.)

Optional: Further Exploration

Provide paper and writing/drawing materials for participants to map their journey of life and faith. Some may desire to continue to work on the map they began in the previous session. Some may wish to create a new map (such as topographic, showing mountains and valleys, rivers and roads).

Invite participants to reflect on the spiritual geography of their lives, including times of difficulty and joy. Encourage participants to be attentive to times when they have experienced wildernesses and places where they have encountered God. 🌿