

Hard & Holy Work

A Lenten Journey through the Book of Exodus

A SERMON SERIES GUIDE FOR PREACHERS

Hard and Holy Work is designed as a small-group, Lenten Bible study. Chapters in the book correspond to the weeks during the Lenten season. Questions at the end of each chapter offer opportunities to discuss, reflect, and respond to God's call through daily reflections for individuals, prompts for small-group discussion, and ideas for taking action in the outward work of justice and liberation. Additionally, YouTube videos to help introduce each week's content at small-group sessions are available at <https://tinyurl.com/WJKYouTube>.

This guide presents an additional and/or complementary possibility: a Lenten sermon series based on *Hard and Holy Work*. You are invited to preach through this material as your congregants read the Bible study and participate in small-group discussions. This guide provides a few sermon ideas for each weekly text from Exodus.

We believe Lent calls us into the hard and holy work of both self-reflection and working for justice. Both introspection and action. During this season, we encourage you and your community to use the book of Exodus to explore deeply a life of spiritual awakening and social action.



A Lenten Sermon Series Based on *Hard and Holy Work*,
by Mary Alice Birdwhistell & Tyler D. Mayfield

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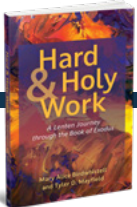
Ash Wednesday

Beginning the Journey of Lent

◀ Scripture Focus: Exodus 6:2–9 ▶

Sermon Possibilities

- Introduce the Lenten season and the sermon series by focusing on the two themes of *Hard and Holy Work*: reflection and action. Present these two aspects of the spiritual life as different sides of the same coin. They are ultimately not opposing or separate concepts, but together provide a liberating spirituality. (See the opening pages of the chapter on Ash Wednesday.)
- Remind congregants that Lent does not have to focus only on giving up, on self-sacrifice. The season can also lead to new spiritual practices. It is a time of spiritual discipline that trains us not only to go inward and reflect on our connection to God, but to seek new ways to move outward, to be the body of Christ in the world around us.
- Use the sacred geography of Louisville illustration at the beginning of this first chapter to illustrate the study's two themes. Or develop your own example(s) from your own communities and unique contexts of bringing together the work of greater spiritual awareness and social concern. (See the “Sacred Geography of Louisville, Kentucky” section of the chapter, pp. 1-5.)
- Invite congregants to consider their own sacred moments and/or spaces that call them into spiritual reflection and justice work.
- Introduce the biblical book of Exodus as a book about “ancient people on a dramatic journey from enslavement in Egypt toward liberation.” (See “The Book of Exodus” section of the chapter, pp. 5-7.)
- Use the Cole Arthur Riley quote on p. 10 to reflect on Ash Wednesday and introduce this Lenten study. How can Ash Wednesday help unsettle us and move us beyond what is comfortable so that we can see the divine in everything and everyone around us more clearly?



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The First Week of Lent

Not on My Watch

◀ Scripture Focus: Exodus 1:8–2:10 ▶

Sermon Possibilities

- Use the refrain from Nadia Bolz-Weber—“No—not on my watch”—to tell the story of the ancient women in Exodus 1 and 2:1-10 alongside contemporary stories of a God who sees.
- Introduce the Lenten season and the sermon series by pointing out the two themes of *Hard and Holy Work*: reflection and action. Then, explore the spiritual need to look outward and see what is happening in the world, to pay attention with care just as God does.
- Focus your sermon on Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1 as examples of both paying attention and choosing resistance. (See the “Women Conspiring against Pharaoh” section of the chapter, pp. 14-17.)
- Incorporate examples from your own context about who is “seen” and perhaps “unseen” in your own church and community. Use this as an invitation for your church to have a broader awareness toward folks on the margins in your own area.
- Use the chapter sections “We All Want to Be Seen” and “But Are We All Seen?” (pp. 18-23) to craft a sermon about our deep spiritual need for loving attention and the harsh reality that so many people feel unseen. Ask your congregants to pay attention to people and situations in a new way this week as noted on p. 26 in the “Taking Action” section.



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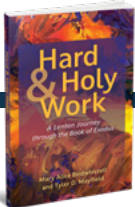
The Second Week of Lent

Paying Attention, Seeing Injustice

◀ Scripture Focus: Exodus 2:11–25 ▶

Sermon Possibilities

- As we continue the journey through Lent and the book of Exodus, Exodus 2:11-25 focuses on Moses' ability to pay attention to the injustices around him. Connect his growing ability to pay attention to the obstacles we face today as we seek to attend to injustices in our world.
- Use the Double Dutch experiment with *National Geographic* (p. 27) or the story of *Horton Hears a Who!* (p. 31) to ponder our unawareness of whole communities and systems around us. What claims our focus to such a degree that we cannot see these communities and systems?
- The quote by Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas about “proximity” (p. 36) provides an opportunity to invite congregants to come close to our neighbors in mutual listening and learning. What are some opportunities you see for your community to do this? Where can these authentic relationships begin to develop?
- Focus on Exodus 2:23-25 to note how God listens and sees the cries of God's people. (See the “And God Knew” section at the end of the chapter, p. 37.) How can we find encouragement in this God who listens and knows? What does this mean for our work of paying attention to injustice?



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The Third Week of Lent

Look Again!

◀ Scripture Focus: Exodus 3 & 4 ▶

Sermon Possibilities

- Use Exodus 3:1-5 to preach about the divine possibility of the present moment. Are we paying attention? Now? Are we open to see the bush burning? (See the “Holy Ground” section of the chapter, pp. 43-44.)
- Reflect on finding God in unexpected places, in wilderness moments, in dry places. God shows up not in a temple or typical holy place, but in the desert. (See the “Wilderness Moments” section of the chapter, pp. 45-48.) What does this tell us about God? About the wilderness?
- Summarize Exodus 3:1-9 briefly and then focus on the less familiar 3:10 wherein God sends Moses away from the burning bush and to Pharaoh to lead the people of God out of Egypt. We like to end the story after the burning bush episode, but this is only half of the story! How do our burning bush moments affect the world around us? (See the “Holy Spaces Have Holy Consequences” section of the chapter, pp. 48-51.)
- We wrote this book in the midst of protests for justice for Breonna Taylor here in Louisville, Kentucky. We began to see Black Lives Matter signs as burning bushes calling for justice in our city. What might be some burning bushes in your city or context that are compelling you to take some sort of action? How can you introduce your congregation to take a closer look?
- Consider Exodus 4 and Moses’ excuses to avoid leading. Despite his protests, God is present to him. We can trust God’s presence to be with us when God calls us to action. (See “Who Am I to Go?” section of the chapter, pp. 51-55.) Where have you and your congregation seen this to be true?



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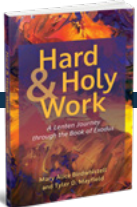
The Fourth Week of Lent

Wade in the Water

◀ Scripture Focus: Exodus 14 ▶

Sermon Possibilities

- This week's Scripture reading skips ahead to Exodus 14, so it may be helpful to summarize briefly the events between Exodus 4 and 14, including the most important event: the deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh.
- Focus on Exodus 14:13-14 and the instructions to “keep still.” In a moment of terrible confusion and fear, with the army of Pharaoh bearing down on them, the people of God are complaining, but God reassures them and invites them to stillness. How might this connect to your congregation's journey toward acting for liberation, and the confusion and uncertainty that may arise as you move together toward this new way of being? Use Psalm 46:10 as a prayer for the Lenten journey of liberation. (See the “Keep Still” section of the chapter, pp. 60-62.)
- Preach about the crossing of the Red Sea as a joint effort. God's power is reassuring, but God also works through people to accomplish this liberating moment. (See the “Crossing the Red Sea is a Joint Effort” section of the chapter, pp 65-67.) When have you or has your community experienced a time when God asked you to make the first move, promising to meet you once you take that first step?
- Tell the stories of Harriet Tubman and Moses side by side as liberators of God's people. (See “The Moses of Her People” section of the chapter, pp. 67-69.) How do these stories of risk give us the broader perspective we need to encourage us to take our own risks, in our time, on behalf of those experiencing oppression?



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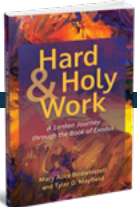
The Fifth Week of Lent

Finding God on Day 2

◀ Scripture Focus: Exodus 16:2–30 ▶

Sermon Possibilities

- Use the idea of “day 2” to frame a retelling of Exodus 16. How might your congregation find itself in the messy middle? Share the good news that day 2 is not the end of God’s story. (See “The Messy Work of Day 2” section at the beginning of the chapter.)
- Explore the Israelites’ complaining in the wilderness. Reframe this and other examples of biblical complaint as a turning toward God and the result of paying attention to the injustice around us. (See the “Complaining in the Wilderness” section of the chapter, pp. 74-76.)
- God provides manna during day 2. God is faithful to God’s people—even in the wilderness, even when the people complain. What is a way in which God has provided for you or your congregation when you have taken risks and gone beyond your comfort zone on behalf of others?
- Invite people to rest, to practice Sabbath, during this Lenten season as a spiritual discipline. Invite them to see rest as a practice of resistance and as a way to equip themselves for the ongoing hard and holy work God is calling them toward. (See the “Rest Is Resistance” and “Sabbath” sections of the chapter, pp. 78-82.)



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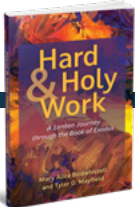
Palm Sunday & Holy Week

The Next Right Thing

◀ Scripture Focus: Exodus 17:1–7 ▶

Sermon Possibilities

- Present Palm Sunday as a moment of joy in the face of despair. The joyfulness of this Sunday is a form of resistance against those elements in our world that encourage hopelessness. How might your congregation find or experience joy in the midst of the challenges surrounding you, particularly the injustices you have been tuning into even more closely during this season of Lent? We can celebrate even as we know what this Holy Week will bring. (See “Joy in the Face of Despair” section at the beginning of the chapter, pp. 87-88.)
- In Exodus 17, God shows Moses the next right action to take. Even though Moses is overwhelmed—there is no water in the wilderness!—God knows the next right thing. It doesn’t have to be extraordinary or earthshaking. (See the “If God Is with Us...” and “The Next Right Thing” sections of the chapter, pp. 89-92.) What might some next right steps be for your congregation? What small thing do you sense God may be asking you to do?
- Consider re-telling Mary Alice’s story at the end of the chapter (see “Sticky Notes of Courage,” pp. 97-98). What words might be on your own sticky note to encourage you or your congregation forward in the hard and holy work of acting to bring about justice and equity for all people?
- The season of Lent is coming to a close, but this hard and holy work will continue for the rest of our lives. How will you live into this Easter work of liberation and resurrection? What challenge will you offer to your congregation to keep taking brave steps forward?



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