

Video Two: Judith Ledbetter, Memorial UMC, Charles City, Virginia

“Call and Response”

Opening Prayer (Facilitator)

Small Group Covenant

The facilitator and participants read the small group covenant. Take time to write it together, if needed.

Scriptural Passage: Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean and the sister of Laban the Aramean, from Paddan-aram. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife since she was unable to have children. The Lord was moved by his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. But the boys pushed against each other inside of her, and she said, “If this is what it’s like, why did it happen to me?” So she went to ask the Lord. And the Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb; two different peoples will emerge from your body. One people will be stronger than the other; the older will serve the younger.” (Genesis 25:20-23, CEB)

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are well-known patriarchs in the Genesis story. Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, and Leah, some of the matriarchs, may be less familiar. Through these women, God kept the promise “all nations of the earth will be blessed because of your descendants” (Genesis 26:4). Sarah birthed one son, Isaac, and in today’s lesson, Isaac is childless. Isaac’s fervent prayer for his wife, Rebekah, moved the heart of God, and Rebekah became pregnant. Rebekah prayed for relief from intense pain and discomfort during her pregnancy. Rebekah dared to ask God the point of her suffering. God responded to Rebekah’s call with a prophetic word about nations and peoples and God’s plan to overturn the cultural hierarchy of birthright and blessing for the firstborn male.

Rebekah “asked the Lord,” not Isaac or other women. The God of Abraham and Isaac spoke directly to her, a pregnant and powerless woman. Can we imagine that Rebekah heard stories of God instructing and talking to others? Is God now using her to keep his promise to Abraham? Why is God entrusting her with this knowledge? In the fullness of time, Rebekah delivered fraternal twins with Jacob, the younger holding onto Esau, the older brother.

Do we dismiss Rebekah as a shrewd and manipulative woman because she favored Jacob and deceived Isaac and Esau? Do we question the patriarchs and what they heard from God, or their faults? Will each of us search to know God and to obey God’s will? Obedience to God will disrupt expectations of family, friends, and church members.

When the first Africans arrived in 1619 at Point Comfort in Hampton, Virginia, Europeans’ dominant culture professed that God created Africans less than

human. Europeans dispossessed Native Americans of land and enslaved Africans with no hope of freedom for themselves or their descendants.

Methodist slaveholders William Armistead, Mary Dandridge, and David Minge emancipated their enslaved brothers and sisters. They acted on the words: “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, CEB). They listened and obeyed God, not the norms of the racialized society in which they lived.

Reflect on Rebekah’s internal struggle before God and the discussion question before watching the video.

Discussion Questions (before video)

When have you taken an unpopular stance because of your faith?

VIDEO

Discussion Questions (after video)

What are your feelings/reactions/thoughts about the fact that slavery was controversial in early American Methodism?

What inspiration or guidance can the church take from this particular period of its past?

Discipleship in Action: The Power to Ask Hard Questions

Rebekah did not understand the pain she experienced and called out to God for answers. Asking hard questions about the role of the Church in racism takes courage. Seeking answers on deep divisions in the social, political, and religious life of America is painful. Searching for hope amid chaos may seem futile. Jesus responds to our faintest cry: “Ask, and you will receive. Search, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door is opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8, CEB)

Time for Self-Reflection

How will you practice listening to God’s voice? What will you ask of God?

Do you have a conflict with a family member, neighbor, or colleague that God is challenging you to face?

Have you felt a nudge from the Holy Spirit to interact with someone who does not look like you or think like you?

Closing

Take time for comments, questions, and announcements. The facilitator or a participant offers a closing prayer.