

Forged by FIRE



Forged By Fire: A Study Guide

By Rev. Neal Christie

We all have a story. And how we tell a story matters because stories are how we define ourselves. Whose stories we tell, whose stories we deny or elevate, silence or appropriate, tells us something about ourselves in the present. How and who tells our past stories defines in part who we want to see ourselves be in the future. Often memories are simply endured. *Forged by Fire* seeks to move beyond endurance to consider how their integration in life today sustains unity, community and hope.

Forged by Fire intends to inspire, educate and evoke collective stories. In so doing it hopes to affect just actions that sustain a different quality of community in both church and society. This series of five extraordinary stories told by United Methodist people with a commitment to being the church in a transformed society takes root in the deeply complex historical struggles of their ancestors.

Forged by Fire is an encounter with truth tellers--everyday people retelling largely forgotten histories of ways the church of Jesus Christ and the people called United Methodist incarnated prophetic images of the Beloved Community. Truth-tellers challenge the normalcy of civilizations, the banality of evil that passes itself off as common sense. Truth-Tellers change our world—the way we see it, the way we name it and the way we keep faith in the midst of it.

Forged by Fire is a spiritual exercise in speaking justice to the powers that threaten to extinguish God's hope in human history. Scripts and

narratives, images and landscapes, unearthed memories of cultural, economic and political trauma cause us to recall the personal, social and spiritual effect of slavery and sustained institutional racism, forced removal and dislocation, the inequity of shifting borders and challenges to maintaining meaningful cultural identities. From each story we are invited to see history differently and to dialogue on the role of the church in advocating for civil and political rights for marginalized peoples as well as the call of the church in affirming the *Imago Dei*, the image of God incarnate through recognition of human dignity.

Forged by Fire ultimately points to the resilience of the church and people of faith as they dare to act with freedom and with unity to restore community, resist dominant norms, behaviors, and perceptions that justify hate based on race, ethnicity, nationality and language. *Forged by Fire* calls us to be ambassadors in the Wesleyan tradition to a new quality of community both nationally and globally. *Forged by Fire* asks us to consider the emergent needs of different communities and the conflicts these may raise. In the process we are asked to value differences rather than avoid them.

The following questions are intended to initiate small group conversation and to lead to further questions. You are encouraged to reflect on the context of your congregation and extended community in light of these stories and as they point to deeper theological and biblical insight and action.

Some Biblical passages that may prove useful as you listen to these stories are:

Leviticus 25

Deuteronomy 22:8, 20, 23:24-25, 24

Paul's letter to the Romans

STORY 1:

U.S. Internment of Japanese American Communities

“Catch on fire with enthusiasm and people will come for miles to watch you burn.”

-John Wesley

This story relates a perceived conflict between ethnic and national allegiances that legitimated state sponsored evacuation of 110 thousand people of a single ethnic group. What are some other examples of how authority was used to normalize violence to persons or groups? How has the church by its past silences colluded with state authorities and what effect has this had on the church in the present?

In what ways can you imagine the presence of ethnically different groups contributing to the possibility of racial scapegoating in a time of national crisis such as war, economic distress or natural disaster? What prompts otherwise good people to legitimize an abuse of patriotic zeal, leave authority unquestioned and perform acts of violence toward an “out group”?

What conditions might mitigate these forms of violence?

In what ways did the interment of Japanese-American citizens depend on a culture of denial?

How many other populations and whole communities have experienced some degree of disappearance, dislocation and internment?

What has been the church's and society's response for a positive good?

How has the church served as a place of economic redress, forming new community, initiating new economic development, shifting environmental landscapes?

What are the role of allies in this story—those who make use of their privilege of education and social status to advocate for the needs of a marginalized group?

How did allies who had contact with the “outside world” of the internment camps sustain a sense of hope? How are churches called to be allies today for the incarcerated, detained and scapegoated?

What does it mean to live safely and to flourish in a racially and ethnically pluralistic society?

How do “unity” and “community” work together to anchor our commitment to God's greater good in the story?

In what ways do the songs and stories told across generations evoke feelings of gratitude and appreciation for the past and strengthen cultural identity?

What does this story remind you of in your own community?

How does this story affect us?

STORY 2:

The Trail of Tears: Cherokee Forced Removal

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Matthew 3:11, NRSV

This story retells generations later how the second largest Indian nation in the world was pushed to the brink of extinction. How a society remembers its dead tells us a lot about how it treats those who are still alive.

What struck you as most painful and most hopeful in this story?

What are some reasons the “Trail of Tears” may be a subject that does not come up in the Indian world unless one is asked? What role does silence play in honoring the past? What benefit does silence play for those who would prefer to forget the past? When is it appropriate to allow for times of silence in the face of violence? When is it most destructive?

Consider the statement—“Growing up on the reservation we were puppets. We did. We acted”—side by side with the confession—“God made us.” What does the abuse of power based on race and dominance of resources do to our image of God in the story and our image of community?

What are some of the benefits or assets that smaller churches offer the extended community in the midst of historical upheavals, transitions and traumas?

How is the church not only called to repent of the past but to remember and mourn past group trauma?

“Who can be Cherokee? You never know without asking.” What does this testimony say about differences in race, ethnicity, culture, and gender? What questions do we ask to learn more about a person’s history and identity? How can we benefit spiritually from a dialogue and as allies and advocates?

“The church helps Indians feel at home.” This is a defining conviction and powerful world view. How do we understand the Biblical metaphor of exile particularly as found in the prophetic speech of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah and then in the Paul’s letters. What is the role and responsibility of the church to help people to cope with entrance into forced exile, to adapt to living and being in exile and finally to departing out of exile and advocating for an end to systems that perpetuate forms of exile?

What was the motivation behind trying to “Americanize” Native Americans? Other ethnic and racial groups?

Use of theological and political notions of chosenness and exceptionalism have over time and across cultures morphed into pathological rhetorics of divinely sanctioned exclusivism, empire building, colonialism and neo-colonialism, manifest destiny and preemptive strike. How does this sense of chosenness work to create and destroy authentic community? How is it employed to legitimate and normalize the chronic abuse of authority, cultural and verbal violence, physical and emotional violence and structural violence?

Describe how God, Christ, persons, community, past, future, sin and grace are addressed in these stories?

How does this story relate to the previous story? What themes are universal and which are unique to this racial and ethnic history?

How does this story affect us?

STORY 3:

Underground Railroad: African-American Passage to Freedom

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Acts 2:3-4, NRSV

Theologian Joerg Rieger quotes literary critic Frederic Jameson saying, “History is what hurts.” We recover repressed or silenced parts of the past in order to reshape and reconstruct the present and future.

80 million African people were removed to serve as slaves in the New World. What is rarely taught is how African Americans themselves acted as allies, advocates and change-agents for those seeking freedom.

How do we connect with memories of alliance-building with runaway slaves, proponents of the U.S. Civil Rights marches and actions in opposition to the South African apartheid regime? What feelings does this story evoke in us?

How does this story debunk stereotypical myths of the powerlessness of African American communities to be forces for change in the U.S.?

When and where have we most effectively seen a non-majority ethnic or racial group act in our community in ways that demonstrate empowerment? In what ways have the faith-community led these efforts?

What Biblical metaphors and stories most closely parallel the risk taking acts of sheltering slaves, offering hospitality and sanctuary and aiding them in their course toward freedom, safety and security? What contemporary parallels do we have with the story?

What historical movements do we recall when the church acted in opposition to Federal and State laws and rhetoric's of violence as justifiable?

What did their church learn about itself through its participation in these movements? How different would these movements have been if the church had been absent?

Standing in solidarity with runaway slaves who went-over “Instilled pride in my ancestors.” What is the connection between personal human dignity and groups acts of advocacy and solidarity with those who suffer? How do we build up a healthy sense of pride in what those who have gone before us have accomplished? What stories can we share from your congregation?

What would compel us personally and as a church to risk losing our freedom to secure the liberation and well being of others?

Consider the statement—“Our job is to carry the legacy on” alongside the conviction that “One has no sense of direction in life if they don't know where they came from.” What is the understanding of God acting in human history for salvation and liberation?

What spiritual world-view does this story convey? How does this spiritual worldview equip us in everyday life to struggle for racial justice and advocacy in church and society?

Rituals and world-views galvanize people, congregations and cultures. For you and your congregation which rituals most define acts of remembering ancestors who stood in solidarity with oppressed peoples?

How universal is this story?

How does this story affect us?

STORY 4:

*When the Border Crosses Over US-
Hispanic/Latino Struggles on the U.S.
Mexican Border*

*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us
on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*

Luke 24: 31, 32, NRSV.

The infamous Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo changed the course of history for Latinos/Hispanic Americans with the sale and cession of land to the U.S. and the ideological sanction of a God of Empire building. The present conflict around authentic immigration reform and paths to citizenship are a legacy in large part because of the border-imposing history of Empire building and neo-colonial policy.

What are our immediate responses to stories of state confiscated property, perceptions in citizenship, conflict in control and access to resources and cultural appropriation?

What was the history congregations were taught about the Alamo? What purpose does this dominant history serve in maintaining conflict with Latino/Hispanic Americans?

Commenting on WWII the story asks, “Why should (my brothers) die for a nation that is not giving us our rightful place?” How do we respond to this question?

Because justice is not possible except between equals how does this story point to a need to equalize the relationship between those who

have resided in the U.S. for generations alongside the southern border and those who have abuse their power to determine boundaries and borders without due consideration to history?

In what ways do schools, media, national monuments and other crucial institutions can legitimize dominant myths that legitimized the historical appropriation and exploitation of land and resources of Hispanic/Latinos?

Racial profiling and unwarranted detention is an insidious and prevailing practice in many communities. Given the realities of those who cross the border and the role of systemic racism, scapegoating and profiling, what is your response to the story? What is your experience of racial profiling? What is your experience of economic or religious or other forms of profiling? How are we called to be allies to those who experience racial profiling today?

From your perspective what are the primary causes for border-crossing?

The church is a place to equip disciples of Jesus Christ and in so doing can ensure the cultural survival and seek social transformation in many forms. The story details the role of congregations in receiving persons who cross the border. How is our image of God informed by this unique act of Christian hospitality?

Theologically the church exists in Diaspora. The church exists to cross presumed boundaries and borders. Sometimes this places the church in opposition to dominant cultural and political norms and beliefs. As Christians we identify no one nationality as our homeland. How is the identity of the church transformed by practicing hospitality toward immigrants?

What are some ways congregations practice the discipline of hospitality? What are some obstacles? How do we overcome those obstacles?

The story names “unity” and “power” in government and business as essential values and actions that should be exhibited by congregations and marginalized ethnic groups. Discuss some examples of how unity and power have effected change in your community.

How universal is this story?

How does this story affect us?

STORY 5:

The Newest Immigrants—Pacific Islanders

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

-Exodus 3:2 NRSV

The restoration of community begins with the realization that one is not alone. Because the threat of social alienation is so present among immigrant groups, groups seek to approach each other as inter-dependent equals.

What causes migration based on resources?

How does family influence the stress of immigration?

How do the complementary ethics of love and compassion guide and motivate communities to maintain unity and community?

Music and song are essential to the Tongan UMC. How do you imagine voice and song translate into advocacy for their emergent needs as the most recent ethnic immigrant group with significant numbers in the United Methodist Church?

“Family is not a gang. Not all Tongans need to be a in a gang.” What is your experience of the connection between perceptions of ethnic groups and gang violence? How do you respond to this story?

How does the church in the story establish a violence-free zone and foster a safe environment?

What economic, cultural, social, linguistic, ethnic and racial obstacles do Pacific Islanders now face? How has the experience of other ethnic groups that have come before them influenced their understanding of immigration?

“Make sure the younger and older generation don’t clash. Be as one.” What might be greatest obstacles to achieving intergenerational unity today? How do immigrant and non-immigrant groups compare in their success?

Song and worship are prominent in this story. What stories might this new community tell their great-grandchildren a generation from now?

How does this story fit into the other stories?

How universal is this story?

How does this story affect you?

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