

Somebody's Hurting Our People and It's Gone On Far Too Long - A Bible Study

Comments for facilitators:

This Bible Study is designed to be interactive and collaborative. Timeframe: 90 minutes

Objectives:

- Provide low-key way for religious folks to connect with Poor People's Campaign, build community
- Highlight biblical tradition of care for the poor & resistance to oppression
- Frame civil disobedience as expression of faithfulness to God & our moral values as well as a strategic means
- Invite reflection on what our faith demands of us.

What you need:

- Printouts of the handout (last page of this document). Ideally, as many as people present, else share. If you have access to free printing, maybe print out the [whole speech](#) for people to take home to read.
- If you have chairs, arrange in a circle, else seat people in a circle on the ground or otherwise
- Make sure to have an opportunity for people to sign up to the campaign (laptop with the website)
- pens, additional Bibles, banners of the Song Lyrics (nice to have, but not necessary)

As you prepare the session

- Pray,
- listen to the songs (see below) and sing along.
- Prepare by reading the texts in their contexts + the notes in this document.
- go over these resources on good facilitation: [10 Tips for Effective Facilitation](#) (1 p), [CPT - Facilitation](#) (6 ps)

Outline (for 90 minutes):

Before the event starts: Greet people as they come in, encourage conversation.

Opening Circle (5-10 minutes): "It's great to see so many people here today... To get to know each other a little bit, why don't we go in a circle? Please tell us your name and in **1!** sentence (**1!** word if more than 20 people): "Name someone who you are carrying with you in your heart."

Song: *Somebody's Hurting Our People* (see lyrics below and on handout) (3 minutes)

What is Bible-Sharing? (5 min): Bible-Sharing is a method for studying the Bible together that helps us listen to the text, each other, and the Spirit in between. It was developed in South Africa during the struggle against Apartheid. In this Bible study, we put the words of scripture next to those of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to provoke our imagination. When we put the words of King--whose context is close to our own--next to scripture it helps us see how the Bible speak to the realities of our lives. If this feels jarring, it's because we have spiritualized so much of the Bible. Reading King next to the Bible helps us remember that the good news is not about "pie in the sky when we die," but about God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

Steps of Bible-Sharing and explanation:

- 1) Open in prayer: Lead group in short prayer. **(2 minute)**
- 2) Listen to the word: Each participant reads a sentence along circle until both texts are done. Allow for passing. Have a few minutes (ca. 5 min) of silence. Read again. **(15 minutes total)**
- 3) Give voice to the word: Everyone reads out words or phrases that speak/stick out to them. **(10 minutes)**
- 4) Silence Give a few minutes for silent reflections **(5 minutes)**
- 5) Share the word Free Conversation on words that stuck out, how does this speak today? **(30 minutes)**
- 6) Close in prayer Close with prayer and lead people in song. **(5 minutes)**

Close event: Announce next Poor People Events, including live-streams, collect sign-up, clean up. **(5 minutes)**

Suggested Questions (if conversation gets stuck):

1. Have you heard the story of Shiphra & Puah before? What struck you as you heard it this time?
2. What is the fire King is talking about? Is this fire still burning?
3. Where do you see yourself in this story? Why?
4. What do you think it means that the midwives feared God?
5. What would you disobey a command by Pharaoh for?
6. What happens next in the story? (Moses lives & leads Israel into from slavery in Egypt to freedom. If the midwives had not disobeyed Pharaoh's orders that would not have been possible)
7. How can we be part of the "brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system" King called for?

Notes on the Biblical Text

A **Word of Caution:** This Bible Study is designed to be interactive and collaborative. These notes are for the facilitator's preparation, **NOT** to read off. Use to validate and deepen participants' observations with the texts.

Francine Klagsbrun, a Jewish theologian says the refusal of Shiphrah and Puah to follow the Pharaoh's genocidal instructions "may be the first known incident of civil disobedience in history" (wikipedia)

About the Pictures: The first picture shows the first verse of the song. The second shows women of the National Welfare Rights Organization marching during the original Poor People's Campaign in 1968. The third is an imaginative painting of two Hebrew women with a baby. It could be Shiphra and Puah and a child they saved, or it might be Moses' mother and his sister, Miriam.

In Memory of Her: Note that while the Egyptian king is unnamed (pharaoh is a title), the main character in this story are women with names "Shiphra" and "Puah." How many female characters from recent movies can you name? How many women in the Bible can you name? How many women heroes of the movement?

Hebrews were poor: **Habiru** (meaning "dusty, dirty") is a term used in 2nd millennium BCE texts throughout the Middle East for people variously described as rebels, outlaws, raiders, mercenaries, bowmen, servants, slaves, and laborers. The biblical word "Hebrew", like Habiru, denotes a social category, not an ethnic group. Most modern scholars see the 'Apiru/Habiru as potentially one element in an early Israel composed of many different peoples, including runaway slaves from Egypt, displaced peasants and shepherds." From [Wikipedia "Habiru."](#)

"Hebrew midwives" – Who are these women? They could be Hebrew or Egyptian (impacted or allies) Laurel Dykstra: "Traditionally, these midwives – Puah and Shiphrah – have been thought to be Hebrew. But the words usually translated 'Hebrew midwives' could also mean 'midwives to the Hebrews,' leaving the matter unresolved. ... That their nationality remains ambiguous actually appeals to me. Seeing the midwives as Egyptian allies of the Hebrews not only strengthens my commitment to resistance, it also deepens my confidence that people of privilege can be part of God's liberating work."

Shiphra & Puah see through divide-&-conquer tactics of the powerful: (Barber: fusion movements win)

Dykstra: "The subtle word-change rejects the gender distinction that the Pharaoh made when he focused his attack on the most prized possession of a patriarchal culture. It whispers that "the children," not just "the sons," are the future of any people."

They exploit, subvert, and mock the racism of the powerful

Building on his conviction that a chasm of class, race, and power separates Egyptian and Hebrew women, they explain that "the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife come to them" (1:19). The word translated vigorous has a second possible meaning: animal-like. If

we read it as vigorous, the midwives are insulting the Pharaoh by contrasting his death-dealing plans with a people so full of life and strength and vitality that they do not even need midwives. If we read it as animal-like it is a ruse, mocking the way racist and classist stereotypes blind the powerful to see the potential of poor black, brown, and white people to resist.

On Lying Biblical tales of lying women consistently omit or underplay an important fact: The women's status is inferior to the men they lie to. They deceive because they lack power. ... In Puah & Shiphrah, we encounter ordinary women who act courageously, defy authority, and break the law – all in order to do what they (and millions after them) believe to be right. Their story is but one of many accounts in the Hebrew Bible of people whose “fear of God” overcame the intimidating power of oppressive authority. The frequency with which the Bible portrays acts of deliverance as contingent on defiance of authority is not coincidence. It is an imperative, frequently a costly one.

After success, Pharaoh escalates his repression. But eventually, the children of Israel are freed. The story goes on to tell the story of Moses, who many remember as the one who led Israel into freedom. Many have compared him to Martin Luther King. But what we often leave out of the story is the courage of Shiphrah and Puah. But without them and the other courageous women in this story, Moses might never have lived to become Israel's liberator.

Notes on King's Nonviolence and Social Change

This speech is from 1967 in the lead up to the original Poor People's Campaign. King details the plight of the poor in the US and internationally. He points to the many connection between poverty, racism, and the war economy, and argues that only the government will be able to make the changes necessary to alleviate or end poverty. But he also knows that there is a strong alliance against such changes.

The central question, according to King is whether nonviolence can work to achieve the goal of “breaking up” this alliance and as he said elsewhere “make the power structure of this nation say yes when they may be desirous to say no.” Against critics who say nonviolence won't work King recounts the successes of the civil rights movement and argues for the effectiveness of disciplined nonviolent movements. He points out the racism and sexism of the critics who see black men as incapable of nonviolence and tells stories of the nonviolent discipline of militant groups that decided to partner with his campaign.

King closes by arguing that the deprivation of “millions of poor people in this country” also provides an opportunity for radical change since they “have very little, or even nothing, to lose.” He argues that the only thing that can bring about change is for the poor and dispossessed of this nation to come together as a “freedom church of the poor” which will act with a “freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.”

These words still inspire people today. They are at the heart of the inspiration for this new Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.

*This Bible study was compiled by Benjamin Isaak-Krauss as part of the Poor People's Campaign 40 Days of Action. It is not officially endorsed by the campaign. Most of the bible study is based on Laurel Dykstra's book *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002). An abridged, free version [here](#). The facts are drawn from the Poor People's Campaign's audit “[The Souls of Poor Folks: Auditing America Fifty Years After the Poor People's Campaign](#).” The Kairos Center also compiled resources for the [40 Days of Action: Liturgical Resources for Christian Worship](#). Feel free to use this material for any purposes that align with the [moral principles of the Poor People's Campaign](#). For questions, feedback, criticism feel free to reach me at bjkrauss@jamb.edu.*

Song: Somebody's Hurting Our People

Audio: [here](#) and [here](#) (if you're brave also see other songs: <https://tinyurl.com/y77z9l5w>)

Background: This song emerged from a town hall meeting around coal ash. Duke Energy was spilling coal ash into poor Black, brown, white neighborhoods. They approached the NAACP in North Carolina, but suddenly Duke Energy wanted to make a big donation to the NAACP. After hearing testimony after testimony of people impacted physically and mentally by the coal ash, this song came as an inspiration. The NAACP decided to reject the money and take on the fight for clean water. May this song guide us to do the right thing as well.

Lyrics:

| | |
|---|---|
| Somebody's hurting my sister and it's gone on far too long Yes, it's gone on far too long It's gone on far too long I said, somebody's hurting my sister and it's gone on far too long And we won't be silent anymore | Somebody's hurting my brother... Somebody wants to build that wall... Somebody's hurting poor people... Somebody's hurting our children... Somebody's poisoning the water Somebody's ignoring the homeless... Somebody's closing our borders... Somebody's hurting our families... |
|---|---|

Note on facilitation

Affirm all answers, encourage cross-talk, allow for silence. Make space for all. Moderate over-eager participants. Weave threads of conversation. Use facts (below) like salt. Talk less, listen more. Pay attention to time. End when it's best.

For more suggestions on Facilitation:

[10 Tips for Effective Facilitation](#) (1 p),

[Christian Peacemaker Teams – Facilitation Skills Packet](#) (6 ps)

Relevant facts (see also the [Indiana Fact Sheet](#) compiled by the *Poor People's Campaign* for more local facts)

- 51.9 percent of US children under the age of 18 (38.2 million children) are poor or low-income (using the Census' Supplemental Poverty Measure and 200% of the federal poverty threshold).
- Using that same measure, 33.9 percent of White people, 60.3 percent of Black people, 65.1 percent of Latinx people and 41.1 percent of Asian people in the US are poor or low income.
- Women held in local jails are the fastest-growing segment of incarcerated people in the United States; the majority are Black or Latinx.
- 8 out of 10 poor families with children received AFDC benefits in 1979. In 2015 just over 2 in 10 poor families with children received TANF benefits. In 14 states the rate is less than 1 in 10.
- 2/3 of minimum wage earners are women (and today's minimum wage—\$7.25—is worth \$4.00 less than 1968. If the 1968 minimum wage had kept pace with overall income growth, it would have been \$21.16 in 2012).
- 10,002 people died in 2017 while waiting for a judge's decision about their disability benefits application.

Somebody's Hurting Our People and It's Gone On Far Too Long - A Bible Study

**Somebody's
Hurting My
Sister...
and its Gone On
Far Too Long...
and We Won't Be
Silent Anymore**



Steps of Bible-Sharing

- 1) Open in prayer
- 2) Listen to the word
- 3) Give voice to the word
- 4) Silence
- 5) Share the word
- 6) Close in prayer

Exodus 1:8-22 (The Message Version)

A new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know Joseph. He spoke to his people in alarm, "There are way too many of these Israelites for us to handle. We've got to do something: Let's devise a plan to contain them, so that if there's a war they don't join our enemies, or just walk off and leave us."

So they organized them into work-gangs and put them to hard labor under gang-foremen. They built the storage cities Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. But the harder the Egyptians worked them the more children the Israelites had—children everywhere! The Egyptians got so they couldn't stand the Israelites and treated them worse than ever, crushing them with slave labor. They made them miserable with hard labor—making bricks and mortar and back-breaking work in the fields. They piled on the work, crushing them under the cruel workload.

The king of Egypt had a talk with the two Hebrew midwives; one was named Shiphrah and the other Puah. He said, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the sex of the baby. If it's a boy, kill him; if it's a girl, let her live." But the midwives had far too much respect for God and didn't do what the king of Egypt ordered; they let the boy babies live. The king of Egypt called in the midwives. "Why didn't you obey my orders? You've let those babies live!" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women aren't like the Egyptian women; they're vigorous. Before the midwife can get there, they've already had the baby."

God was pleased with the midwives. The people continued to increase in number—a very strong people. And because the midwives honored God, God gave them families of their own. So Pharaoh issued a general order to all his people: "Every boy that is born, drown him in the Nile. But let the girls live."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: The Trumpet of Conscience - Nonviolence and Social Change, 1967

There is nothing wrong with a traffic law which says you have to stop for a red light. But when a fire is raging, the fire truck goes right through that red light, and normal traffic had better get out of its way. Or, when a man is bleeding to death, the ambulance goes through those red lights at top speed.

There is a fire raging now for ... the poor of this society. ...Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds. They need brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system until the emergency is solved. ... The dispossessed of this nation — the poor, both white and Negro — live in a cruelly unjust society.

They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. ... There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new & unsettling force in our complacent national life.