

# STUMBLING TOWARDS HOLINESS

 PARISH  
CATALYST

**Small Groups**  
Lent 2019



## **WELCOME TO LENTEN SMALL GROUPS 2019**

Many of us feel a bit adrift given the revelations that have recently rocked, and will continue to rock, the Church for some time to come. At times we can feel as lost and wandering as the Israelites did when they journeyed for 40 years in the Sinai desert before reaching the Promised Land. It seemed appropriate this year for our small groups to join the Israelites in their wandering, so this year's small groups will meet around the Lenten Sunday readings from the Hebrew Scriptures – the first reading from each Sunday.

### **THE WEEKLY THEMES**

**Week One** (March 10-16)

**EXILE** "My father was a wandering Aramean" Dt 26:5

**Week Two** (March 17-23)

**FAITH** "Abram put his faith in the Lord" Gn 15:6

**Week Three** (March 24-30)

**COMMITMENT** "Send Someone Else" Ex 4:13

**Week Four** (March 31-April 6)

**PROVIDENCE** "Our Daily Bread" Mt 6:11

**Week Five** (April 7-13)

**RENEWAL** "Doing Something New" Is 43:19

## STUMBLING (together) TOWARDS HOLINESS

*“Let my reader travel on with me when she shares fully in my convictions; let her search with me when she shares my doubts; let him return to me when he recognizes that he is in error; let him call me back to the right path when he sees that I am in error. In this way let us advance along the road of charity toward Him of whom it is written.”*

St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1, 3.

# BEFORE EACH MEETING

## **Review Sharing Guidelines**

1. What is shared in the group stays in the group.
2. Everyone's input is valuable. At the same time, no one is required to speak.
3. Please only share on the level at which you are comfortable.
4. Please limit your sharing to 3-5 minutes and wait until everyone has had the opportunity to share before you share again.
5. Only one person speaks at a time.
6. Please, no cross talking, which means no commenting on another person's share. "I" statements are better than "you" statements.
7. Please, no side conversations. Value one another by listening.
8. Please show up on time.
9. Please turn off your cell phone. If you need to make a call or text, please take it outside.
10. Each session three people will be asked to volunteer to read 1) the quote for the week and the scripture reading, 2) THEN and NOW, and 3) the closing intentions.

## **Opening Prayer** *(please read together)*

We bless you Lord for our calling  
for nurturing in each of us a disciple's heart.  
A heart that rejoices in your coming,  
a heart sustained by your Spirit,  
a heart encouraged by fellow disciples.

May there grow in each of our hearts  
the disciple's commitment to serve,  
the disciple's willingness to learn,  
and the disciple's joy in becoming  
a medium of your grace.

AMEN

From "Prayers for Parish Groups," Harrington and Kavanag

## AT THE END OF EACH MEETING

**Leader:** Let us pray to the God who supports and nourishes us along the path of life. Let us thank God for the signs of care and loving providence that we find so reassuring along the way.

Response: *God of hope, accompany us along the way.*

In the fear and apprehension, in the hesitation and insecurity that we experience as we follow you....

Response: *God of hope, accompany us along the way.*

In the sense of mystery, in the wonder that dawns in us as we seek to follow you...

Response: *God of hope, accompany us along the way.*

In the expectation and pain and restlessness that we experience as we follow you...

Response: *God of hope, accompany us along the way.*

When we grow tired and weary, when the burden makes us falter and want to stop...

Response: *God of hope, accompany us along the way.*

When we grow in insight, as your wisdom prompts us when to let go and when to take up...

Response: *God of hope, accompany us along the way.*

When we glimpse your presence and thrill to the sense of your nearness...

Response: *God of hope, accompany us along the way*

Prayers for Parish Groups, Harrington & Kavanagh

### **Concluding Prayer** (*Leader*)

God of hope,

Like the people of Israel, we also complain,

We too need to learn.

Enliven in us the memory of how you have released us from bondage.

Teach us to rest secure in your presence accompany us on the way.

Inspire us to acknowledge the signs of hope

And to respond to the invitations to new life

That we find along the way.

AMEN

Prayers for Parish Groups, Harrington & Kavanagh

## **Week One: EXILE** “My father was a wandering Aramean” Dt 26:5

*We live in the age of the refugee, the age of the exile.* Ariel Dorfman

### **Deuteronomy 26:4-10**

Moses spoke to the people, saying:

"The priest shall receive the basket from you  
and shall set it in front of the altar of the LORD, your God.  
Then you shall declare before the Lord, your God,  
'My father was a wandering Aramean  
who went down to Egypt with a small household  
and lived there as an alien.  
But there he became a nation  
great, strong, and numerous.  
When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us,  
imposing hard labor upon us,  
we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers,  
and he heard our cry  
and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.  
He brought us out of Egypt  
with his strong hand and outstretched arm,  
with terrifying power, with signs and wonders;  
and bringing us into this country,  
he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey.  
Therefore, I have now brought you the firstfruits  
of the products of the soil  
which you, O LORD, have given me.'  
And having set them before the Lord, your God,  
you shall bow down in his presence."

THE WORD OF THE LORD

### **THEN**

Deuteronomy portrays the people at a critical time, the exodus and journeying through the wilderness; when God delivered them from Egypt, fed them in the desert and delivered them to the entrance of the Promised Land. Although Moses is denied the satisfaction of entering the Promised

Land himself, in Deuteronomy he not only encourages and commands Israel to take possession of the land (Deut 9:103, 31:1-8), in this reading he designs the celebration liturgy that should take place once the people have taken possession of the land.

Each year, during the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Israelite farmer was to offer God the first fruits of the harvest in thanksgiving for the gift of the land. The farmer was to bring his gifts to the priest who set them on the altar. As part of the ritual the farmer then pronounced a creed that began, “My father was a wandering Aramean,” and continues with a recital of God’s saving deeds and a prayer of gratitude. (The wandering Aramean might refer to Abraham or to Jacob, but more likely it is Jacob, whose family became a nation in Egypt.)

## **NOW**

For the past two thousand years Christians have been journeying – no longer towards the Promised Land but towards Jesus. We stumble through our own wilderness towards holiness; bringing along our egos and last year’s scars, an unruly hope, several debilitating fears, an unwarranted joy and a hesitant heart – and ask Jesus what to make of it. We are haunted as we watch people all over the world – and especially at our own borders - wander in search of safety, longing to find a place to reconstruct their lives in exile far from their homes.

## **Sharing Questions**

1. This Lenten series is titled, “Stumbling Towards Holiness.” What does “holiness” mean to you?
2. Have you ever experienced in your faith journey a moment when you were especially aware of the holiness of the moment? What made it so significant for you?
3. Have you ever experienced a wilderness phase in your faith journey? Please share some of that experience.
4. Moses saw but never entered the Promised Land. What do you take away from that

## **Week Two: FAITH** “Abram put his faith in the Lord” Gn 15:6

*“Faith don't come in a bushel basket, Missy. It come one step at a time. Decide to trust Him for one little thing today, and before you know it, you find out He's so trustworthy you be putting your whole life in His hands.” Lynn Austin, Candle in the Darkness*

### **Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18**

The Lord God took Abram outside and said,  
"Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can.  
Just so," he added, "shall your descendants be."  
Abram put his faith in the LORD,  
who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.

He then said to him,  
"I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans  
to give you this land as a possession."  
"O Lord GOD," he asked,  
"how am I to know that I shall possess it?"  
He answered him,  
"Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat,  
a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."  
Abram brought him all these, split them in two,  
and placed each half opposite the other;  
but the birds he did not cut up.  
Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses,  
but Abram stayed with them.  
As the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abram,  
and a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him.

When the sun had set and it was dark,  
there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch,  
which passed between those pieces.  
It was on that occasion that the LORD made a covenant with Abram,  
saying: "To your descendants I give this land,  
from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates."

THE WORD OF THE LORD



## **THEN**

For people of faith, Abraham has always been an icon of faith and trust in God. (Think about the time God tests him by asking him to offer up his son, Isaac). But just before the passage we read today, God speaks to Abram (not yet Abraham) and assures Abram of God's fidelity, saying "Fear not, Abram! I am your shield; I will make your reward very great." Abram's trust falters, possibly because of his advancing age, and he responds, "O Lord God, what good will your gifts be, if I keep on being childless and have as my heir the steward of my houses, Eliezer? Abram continues to fret, repeating this worry, "See, you have given me no offspring, and so one of my servants will be my heir."

Then God reminds Abram that this God is the very same God who called Abram out of Ur, promising him a new land to possess. Abraham chooses to trust God again and "puts his faith in the Lord." God seals the covenant with a ritual in which animals are split and the covenanting parties take an oath and commit themselves to fidelity.

## **NOW**

To be a believer today is to live in a certain moral loneliness. None of us can rely any longer on the fact that we live in a culture that was once Christian, that we are seemingly surrounded by other Christians, or that we once had faith. None of these alone is enough today to sustain a Christian faith in an age which is as agnostic, pluralistic, secular, seductive, and distracting as our own. We live in a culture that no longer carries the faith for us.

To have a living faith today one must at some point in his or her life make a deep, private act of faith. There are anti-faith forces in our lives. They are all those things, good and bad, within us and around us that tempt us away from prayer, from self-sacrifice, from being more communal, from being willing to sweat blood in a garden in order to keep our integrity and commitments, and from mustering up the time and courage to enter deeply into our own souls.

(Adapted from Holy Longing, by Fr. Ron Rolheiser).

## **Sharing Questions**

1. When did your faith become something that you accepted as your own, not that of your parents, or your partner, or your church?
2. What distracts you most from “putting your faith in the Lord?”
3. When you “look to the skies and count the stars,” what do you imagine God’s covenant is with you?
4. Do you have any personal rituals that you practice that help you experience God?

## **Week Three: COMMITMENT** “Send Someone Else” Ex 4:13

*Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes... but no plans.*  
Peter Drucker

### **Exodus 3:1-8A, 13-15**

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian.

Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush.

As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed.

So Moses decided,

“I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned.”

When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, Moses! Moses!”

He answered, “Here I am.”

God said, “Come no nearer!

Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.

I am the God of your fathers, “ he continued, “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.”

Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

But the LORD said,

“I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering.

Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians

and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Moses said to God, "But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you."

God spoke further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. "This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations."

#### THE WORD OF THE LORD

#### **THEN**

In this reading we find God's call to Moses. Moses, curious to investigate a burning bush that is not being consumed, goes over to take a look. God calls him by name, "Moses, Moses," and Moses responds, "Here I am."

Moses does not recognize God in the fire. God makes Moses aware of the sacredness of this moment and space, and even provides some self-identification as "the God of your father," which is further clarified with the addition of the names of the ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

After being informed of the divine presence, Moses becomes terrified and could not even look at the fire. In verses 12 thru 16, which are deleted from this reading, God tells Moses that the plight of the Israelites in Egypt has been head. God says to Moses, "Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt"

Moses, not wanting to commit to God, begins objecting. Perhaps because Moses has only recently self-identified as a Hebrew, having spent most of his life as an adopted Egyptian, his first objection was around his own identity. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?"

God's responds, "I will be with you." Though reassuring, there is no guarantee of success. Moses looks for other ways to turn God down. His second objection concerns God's identity. Moses worries that when he goes to the Israelites and says to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you, that they may ask him God's name. "What do I tell them?" This objection prompts God to reveal the name, *Yahweh*, "I am."

In chapter four, Moses has a series of additional objections, which prompt God to give Moses supernatural powers and a promise to be with Moses when he speaks. In a last ditch effort Moses says, "send someone else," which prompts God to include Aaron in the mission as the spokesperson for Moses.

## **NOW**

Nobody doubts our generation's sincerity. In terms of spirituality, our struggle is not with sincerity, but with direction. Our hearts are good, but it is our minds and feet that do not know which way to go. Many roads beckon, many voices call, and we already know that there are many ways that one can fall off the narrow tightrope that Jesus once called the path to eternal life.

"In the end, faith is not simply the good, secure feeling that God exists. Faith is a commitment to a way of living beyond good and secure feelings. To have faith means to sometimes live our lives independent of whatever anxieties and doubts may come. Ultimately faith is not in the head or the heart but in the action of a sustained commitment. Faith is fidelity, nothing more but nothing less.

And, perhaps more than anything else, that gift is what is needed today in our families, in our churches, and in our world in general. The greatest gift we can give to those around us is the promise of fidelity, the simple promise to stay around, not to leave when things get difficult, to not walk away because we feel disappointed or hurt, to stay even when we don't feel wanted or valued, to stay even when our personalities and visions clash, to stay through thick and thin."

Ronald Rolheiser

## **Sharing Questions**

1. Has there ever been a “burning bush” moment in your life when you were taken aback by a profound sense of the divine?
2. In this season of your life, how do you experience God’s call?
3. Is being committed to Christ and the gospel message the same as being committed to the church?
4. Has the recent scandals and cover-ups in the church caused you to question your commitment to Catholicism, or to organized religion?

## **Week Four: PROVIDENCE** “Our daily bread” Mt 6:11

*“You say to God, “I have never seen you provide for me.”  
God says to you, “You have never trusted Me.”*

*Corallie Buchanan, “Watch Out! Godly Women on the Loose”*

### **Joshua 5:9a, 10-12**

The LORD said to Joshua,  
“Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.”

While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. On the day after the Passover, they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day after the Passover, on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

### **THEN**

The people are encamped at Gilgal, their first stop in the Promised Land. From here they will go against Jericho. The Lord tells Joshua, “Today, I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you,” which, perhaps refers to Israel’s social position in Egypt. But the words certainly indicate a rupture with the past.

It is the beginning of a new stage in Israel’s history. Egypt and the desert hardships are things of the past. They had crossed the Jordan River and performed the rite of circumcision, signifying the people’s intimate commitment to the Lord. The reference to the Passover is brief. The focus is not on the exodus itself, but on the shift in the people’s diet. The provision of manna has ceased; from now on they will feed on the fruits of the Promised Land. With this shift, the wilderness period comes to an end and the period of conquest begins.

## **NOW**

“The spiritual life is not a quick sprint to a well-marked finish line, but a marathon, an arduous lifelong journey into an ever-widening horizon. To sustain ourselves on that road, even after we have some assurance that we are on the right road, requires that along the way we continually find what metaphorically might be termed, “Elijah’s jug,” namely, the sustenance that God promised to provide to those who are walking the long road toward the divine mountain.”

Ronald Rolheiser, “The Holy Longing”

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## **Sharing Questions**

1. We have often heard the phrase “God will provide.” Has that been meaningful in your life?
2. Tell us about a time in your life when you reached a goal or experienced a big win or success and how you celebrated?
3. Have you experienced times in your life when “the manna ceased,” or when your relationship with God changed?
4. Is God always there for you?



## **Week Five: RENEWAL** “Doing Something New” Is 43:19

*Be willing to be a beginner every single morning.* Meister Eckhart

### **Isaiah 43:16-21**

Thus says the LORD,  
who opens a way in the sea  
and a path in the mighty waters,  
who leads out chariots and horsemen,  
a powerful army,  
till they lie prostrate together, never to rise,  
snuffed out and quenched like a wick.  
Remember not the events of the past,  
the things of long ago consider not;  
see, I am doing something new!  
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
In the desert I make a way,  
in the wasteland, rivers.  
Wild beasts honor me,  
jackals and ostriches,  
for I put water in the desert  
and rivers in the wasteland  
for my chosen people to drink,  
the people whom I formed for myself,  
that they might announce my praise.

### **THEN**

In this second part of the book of Isaiah, the Israelites are once again enslaved; this time in Babylon. The poet encourages the Chosen People to look forward to the day they are once again liberated from exile; reminding them of the powers that were unleashed upon the Egyptians at the time of their first liberation.

The story of salvation wasn't completed with the exodus from Egypt. God sets the present generation on the road to Jerusalem and the future. The new exodus will be even more marvelous than the previous one; God will again pave a highway, and the wilderness will be transformed into a

second paradise, where wild animals will honor their creator and the chosen people will drink from abundant streams and praise God. Isaiah is shining the light on the “something new” that lies on the horizon. He is soothing the exiled people, encouraging them to trust that God will restore them to their homeland in an even more wondrous exodus than before.

## **NOW**

Today, as the children of Western culture, we struggle with practical atheism. Our churches are slowly emptying and more and more the sense of God slips from our ordinary lives. This problem with God stems not from the fact that we are any less sincere or moral than previous generations, but from the fact that, for reasons whose roots go back hundreds of years, our consciousness is now clouded with self-centeredness, practicality, and restlessness. We are contemplatively asleep.

“The road back to a lively faith is not about answers, but about living in a certain way – contemplatively. Blessed are those who do not take life for granted, for they are within measurable distance of taking it as granted to them by God. Blessed are those who learn to see the finger of God in the conspiracy of accidents that make up their lives; they shall be rewarded with daily miracles. Blessed are those who say yes to something higher than themselves; in that genuflection they will say the creed. And blessed are those who make this a life-long quest; they will make a good beginning.”

Ronald Rolheiser, “The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God.”

## **Sharing Questions**

1. Where do you look for hope and “new things” in the world today?
2. Do you have a contemplative practice in your life? If not, would you like to start one? What might that be?
3. What is your greatest hope for the Church?
4. Do you see anything new “springing forth” in your life, or in the Church, or in the world today?

