

YOUTH LESSONS FOR



4 LESSONS USING A SANCTIFIED ART'S ORIGINAL ARTWORK ESPECIALLY FOR VIRTUAL DISCUSSION

Unraveling hardened hearts |
Unraveling greed | Unraveled by
suffering | Unraveling political power

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Dear youth leader,

I'm so glad you've found the beautiful and amazing resources that are part of A Sanctified Art's *Unraveled* collection. I've been using these images in weekly discussions with my youth group in Fall 2020 and the art draws the kids into discussion in virtual meetings far more successfully and consistently than other strategies I've tried. I purchased the devotion that goes with the *Unraveled* series, and the content didn't always seem to go in the direction that was most useful for my 6th-12th graders each week. I created separate lessons that focus on the art and a distinct *Unraveled* theme that's different but usually related to the original devotion.

To use these 4 lessons (more to follow in a separate post), just purchase the licenses to the art a la carte or purchase the devotion with the appropriate copying license, engage your youthies, and share your screen with the art when the time comes to discuss it. I've been so pleased with the nuance in their interpretation and the ways that the art helps them to more deeply enter the story and consider its implications for their own lives. I also share these lessons weekly with families as some of my youth are zoomed out and not participating. But, as A Sanctified Art clearly knows, art is an intergenerational resource and I know parents are glad to have an option for some guided spiritual formation work in the absence of youth group participation. Each lesson includes a prologue to situation the group in the story, a scripture reading, art engagement, wondering and imagining questions, and a reflection prompt that's ideal for journaling, or as a follow up email.

Find more of my ideas and lessons for youth ministry, study guides for adult small groups, or information about how I can help you developing a curriculum together at www.jenkidwell.com.

Peace + Justice,
Jen Kidwell

Lessons

Unraveling Hardened Hearts

Unraveling Greed

Unraveled by Suffering

Unraveling Political Power

Unraveling Hardened Hearts

Prologue: The Israelite people live in slavery in Egypt for hundreds of years. Eventually, God calls a leader for them who will help to lead them out of Egypt and into a land of their own, a land where they will benefit from their own labor and organize their society by their own choices. The leader called by God to do this is Moses, who was not, by his own admission, “a man of words,” and who sometimes let his sense of outrage lead him to violence. Moses was an Israelite who grew up in the Egyptian Pharaoh’s household, but he fled the city after he had killed an Egyptian man for beating an Israelite slave. God called Moses to confront Pharaoh and demand that he release God’s people, and then also asked his brother Aaron to help.

Pharaohs were considered gods in Egyptian culture, and this sets the stage for a cosmic battle. It’s more of a battle between Moses’ God and Pharaoh than it is between Moses and Pharaoh, but Moses is the messenger and participates in executing the 10 plagues that demonstrate God’s power. Ultimately, the Israelite people are freed, but not without considerable heartache and Egyptian loss of life.

Pharaoh remains unconvinced that Moses’ God is in any way worth paying attention to, even after 9 miraculous plagues! His heart remains hardened to the cries of the people, and he continually tries to resist God’s plan to free the Israelite people.

Read: Exodus 5:1-9; 7:8-23

Wonder and Imagine:

How does this image interpret the story? Where is your eye drawn? Why might that be?

<https://sanctifiedart.org/image-licensing-library-listings/anti-creation-narrative>

Why do you think Pharaoh’s heart was hardened against freeing the Israelites?

[A super close reading of this story reveals that it’s complicated. Sometimes the story says that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, sometimes the story says that Pharaoh hardens his own heart!]

- 1. In scripture, God tells Moses and Aaron that God is going to harden Pharaoh’s heart so that God would be able to demonstrate God’s power. This is a confusing part of the story, but might make more sense when you remember that this battle was one between God and Pharaoh because the Egyptian people saw Pharaoh as a god. If God is powerful enough to change Pharaoh’s heart, then this is another way that God can show God’s power in the battle over the Israelites.*
- 2. Sometimes in the story, the Hebrew makes it clear that Pharaoh hardens his own heart. This might seem more familiar to us.]*

There are plenty of times in history and in stories when it seems that people's hearts have become hardened to seeing the suffering of the people around them. What are some examples? Why do you think this happens?

How do we help others "unravel" their hardened hearts? What strategies work for other people to approach you when you've made mistakes or when you have harbored harmful ideas about other people? What about when you have something (like power!) that you don't want to share?

Reflect:

In what ways have you seen evidence of people with hardened hearts around you in the world? Have you heard or read stories about people's hearts being softened to be more sympathetic to a problem? Have you experienced this? How can you help prevent your own heart from hardening to injustice around you? Are there times when you work for freedom for people like Moses, and also times when you are unwilling to listen, like Pharaoh?

Unraveling Greed

Prologue: During the time when Jesus lived, Palestine and the Jews were ruled by the Roman empire. The Roman army was brutal and Roman officials lived in local communities and helped local leaders rule over the people. Like in most countries now, the Roman leaders collected taxes from the people who lived in the states they controlled. They hired people from within the community to collect the taxes, and those people were usually not very popular. They had chosen to be allied to a foreign power and to take money from their neighbors. They developed reputations for stealing money and cheating people by making them pay more than they owed. Average Jews considered tax collectors to be greedy and untrustworthy traitors.

Read: Luke 19:1-10

Wonder and Imagine:

How does this painting interpret the story? Where is your eye drawn? What do you notice?

<https://sanctifiedart.org/image-licensing-library-listings/jesus-looked-up>

Have you ever drawn a portrait or a self-portrait, or visited a museum that features portraits? What was that experience like for you?

Have you ever felt like an outcast? Have you ever done something to harm others and felt like you were punished for it by being excluded?

Why do you think Zacchaeus declared he was going to give back to the poor and to make amends to those he cheated? (Maybe he was “showing off” for Jesus, but Jesus didn’t seem to think so.)

How does welcoming and including someone encourage generosity?

Reflect:

The final verse of this story says that Jesus comes “to seek out and to save the lost.” Zacchaeus’ generosity is a marker that he’s been claimed by Jesus, and is re-engaging the community. Jesus *saw* him and gave him an opportunity to be generous, and Zacchaeus responded with enthusiasm. How is our own generosity a response to being seen by Jesus? How can we invite others who are excluded from the community to participate in building new community together?

Unraveled by Suffering

Prologue: Perhaps you've heard the story of Job (Job like "robe" not like "job"). This is a story about when everything goes wrong even though you follow all the rules. It's a story about when really terrible things happen to people who believe the "right" things about God and who do what they're supposed to do to worship God. We don't know whether this story actually happened – it's really hard to imagine God testing someone like this on purpose just to win a bet or prove a point, which is how the story starts. But we know that "bad things happen to good people" all the time, and we all try to figure out an answer as to why. So even if the story didn't happen exactly in this way, we can read the story as one way that the ancient Hebrew people tried to make sense of why this kind of thing happened, and who tried to figure out where God was in the midst of people who suffer terribly.

The story goes like this: Job is faithful and prosperous, has a large loving family, and many friends. One day Satan visits God and says, "You know he's only faithful because his life is awesome, right?" God says, "Nope. That's not true! I'll let you make his life miserable and I bet he'll still be faithful. Let's watch."

God allows awful things happen to Job. His family dies and his animals die and he gets sick and is in pain all the time. His friends come to hang out with him but they aren't very helpful. They keep telling Job to give up on God. It gets dark. Job gets angry. And very sad.

Job tries to stay faithful, but he simply can't understand how God can be fair and just and still have treated him this way. There's a lot of talking about this. Eventually, God "appears to Job in a whirlwind," to respond to him. What do you think God says in return?

Read: Selected verses from Job 38-42 [The Message]:

And now, finally, GOD answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. God said:

2-11 "Why do you confuse the issue?

Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about?

Pull yourself together, Job!

Up on your feet! Stand tall!

I have some questions for you,

and I want some straight answers.

Where were you when I created the earth?

Tell me, since you know so much!

Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that!

Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?

How was its foundation poured,

and who set the cornerstone,

While the morning stars sang in chorus

and all the angels shouted praise?

And who took charge of the ocean

when it gushed forth like a baby from the womb?

That was me! I wrapped it in soft clouds,
and tucked it in safely at night.
Then I made a playpen for it,
a strong playpen so it couldn't run loose,
And said, 'Stay here, this is your place.
Your wild tantrums are confined to this place.'

God says: "Now what do you have to say for yourself?
Are you going to haul me, the Mighty One, into court and press charges?"

Job says: "I'm speechless, in awe—words fail me.
I should never have opened my mouth!
I've talked too much, way too much.
I'm ready to shut up and listen."

God says: "Do you presume to tell me what I'm doing wrong?
Are you calling me a sinner so you can be a saint?
Do you have an arm like my arm?
Can you shout in thunder the way I can?
Go ahead, show your stuff.

[God gives a long list of examples of things on the earth that illustrate God's power and the deep mysteries of creation.]

Job says: You told me, 'Listen, and let me do the talking.
Let me ask the questions. *You* give the answers.'
I admit I once lived by rumors of you;
now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears!
I'm sorry—forgive me.

God goes on to restore Job to his wealth. He has more kids, and he's happy until he dies at an old age.

Wonder and Imagine:

How does this painting interpret the story? Where is your eye drawn? What do you notice?

<https://sanctifiedart.org/image-licensing-library-listings/way-to-wonder>

What do you think of God's answers to Job? Does God answer Job's questions about the justice behind why he is suffering? Or does God answer a different kind of question?

When you see bad things happen to a person, does your reaction depend on whether you thought that person was a good person?

Why do you think bad things happen at all? How does this influence your faith?

Have you ever heard any good advice that someone gave to someone else who was suffering? Or who had gotten really down about the state of the world? What was that advice? What about examples of bad advice?

Reflect: God tells Job that he is thinking too small; that God's presence is beyond what we can control. Essentially, God says that when we are tempted to control God's actions or demand certain actions from God, we need to instead take refuge in God's "bigness," God's cosmic-ness. Does this feel at all comforting to you? How do you feel when something happens to you that you can't control? Where can you find God when bad things happen?

Unraveling Political Power

Prologue: The story today is about what happened long ago when the people of God found themselves defeated in battles, their nation ransacked, and their people exiled into a foreign power: Babylon. After King David and his son King Solomon ruled over Israel, the kingdom split into two kingdoms, north and south. Roughly 200 years later, the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian empire, and roughly 150 years after that, the southern kingdom fell to the Babylonian empire. The Babylonians had defeated the Assyrians, and came to annex the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. A great deal of the Old Testament details these stories: how generations of kings ruled and dealt with surrounding political powers and how generations of prophets tried to keep the kings and the people faithful to who God called them to be.

Jeremiah was a prophet to the southern kingdom; he watched as his city – the city where God’s temple was – got destroyed by the Babylonians and how many of the prominent Israelites were marched off to Babylon to an unknown fate. They searched for God and wondered whether God would ever provide a path back to their precious city, temple, and identity as a nation.

After many people were sent into exile, (Jeremiah stayed in the captured Jerusalem), he sent them a letter containing revelations from God about what they could expect for the rest of their time in exile. There were some false prophets emerging in the community who were giving the people messages that contradicted God’s prophesy through Jeremiah. The text of the letter is our scripture for today.

Read: Jeremiah 29:4-14

Wonder and Imagine:

How does this image interpret the story? Where is your eye drawn? Why might that be?

<https://sanctifiedart.org/image-licensing-library-listings/new-roots>

What is God’s advice to the exiled people in this passage?

The Israelites were sad and suffering, but they were told to *settle in* and wait for God to release them from captivity. Who among us today is waiting for liberation? What groups may have been waiting for a long time?

God’s command to the Israelites to wait was in the context of the political system of empire – not democracy. There wasn’t a system in place for them to seek freedom, so God’s advice was to live their lives as best they could while they waited. In modern democracies and

institutions like schools and churches, many of us share power that can be used to seek liberation for ourselves and others. How can we use this power?

[voting, protesting, letter-writing, starting school clubs, working with school board to change policies, educating ourselves, getting our churches to partner with other groups, learning about the companies we purchase things from, lobbying at lobby days, etc.]

In the time surrounding the 2020 election, there is a great deal of emphasis on what lies ahead for the United States. Does this passage tell those of us *with power and voices* to wait? How do we balance our power and role to help bring liberation with God's power to bring liberation as we are looking towards a future when God's promises are realized?

Reflect:

This passage includes a verse that's very famous: verse 11, which says, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord. "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." Maybe you've heard this verse before or it's one of your favorite; it's a very comforting idea. However, the rest of the passage makes it a little bit more challenging, because God's plan doesn't happen right away. How does it feel to wait for God's promises to be realized? What if they are only realized for future generations, like in the case of the exiled Israelites? How do we keep up hope when it seems like the road to God's promises is long?