

## **Lesson Plans for "Empire"**

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### **Lesson 1 - Monstrous Empires and the Kingdom of God**

#### **Concept**

The first lesson will engage Safwat Marzouk's essay, "Monstrous Empires and the Kingdom of God." It will allow participants to explore the representation of empires as monsters while differentiating between the policies of empire and the vision of the kingdom of God.

#### **Setting**

This lesson is intended for an adult education class within a 45 minute session, but may be adjusted to meet your needs.

#### **Objective**

- 1) Participants will describe the characteristics of a monster and discuss how they relate to empires (ancient and modern).
- 2) Participants will discuss examples of faith communities who are living out the vision of the Kingdom of God presented in Daniel 7.
- 3) Participants will reflect on ways their own faith community can more fully live into the "beautiful mosaic" of community described in the text.

#### **Preparation**

- 1) Participants can read the essay "Monstrous Empires and the Kingdom of God: What Do Monsters Reveal about the Empire?" before class, but it is not required.
- 2) Arrange the room in a way that allows for large group conversation and small group discussions.
- 3) Write this question on a whiteboard or newsprint: **"What characteristics make a monster?"**

#### **Materials**

Newsprint or whiteboard  
Markers  
Bibles  
Pens  
Hymnals or copies of "The Church's One Foundation"

#### **Opening**

Greet participants as they enter. Ask them to reflect on the question written on the board.

After a few minutes of discussion, have people share their responses. Have a scribe record the responses on newsprint or a whiteboard.

#### **Presenting**

Read Daniel 7:1-8, 15-25 together.

What words and characteristics describe the monsters in Daniel 7?

What do the monsters do? (See specifically verses 5,7,19-20, 23, 25)

How do you feel about the use of monsters as a representation for empires?

Marzouk asserts that most scholars have understood the fourth beast of Daniel 7 to refer to the Greek Empire, and the small horn to refer to the Seleucid king Antiochus the fourth who called himself Antiochus Epiphanies, "Antiochus, God Manifest." The book of Maccabees gives a fuller picture of the imperialistic politics of Antiochus Epiphanies: "the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all people should be one people, and that all should give up their particular customs." Making all people one and the same meant making all peoples Greek by adopting Greek customs and abandoning whatever sets the different peoples apart.

Can you think of modern examples where empires or imperial policies seek to impose sameness on people or result in the loss of particular identities?

Can you think of modern examples where empires or imperial policies "break apart" or "stamp down"?

### **Exploring**

Divide participants into groups of 4-6 people. Have each group read Daniel 7:9-14 together.

How is the "human one" different from the monsters portrayed earlier?

How does this passage offer hope in the midst of empire?

What vision for the Kingdom of God emerges from this text?

### **Responding**

In conclusion, Marzouk argues "When humans are content with their humanness, their potential monstrosity is avoided... and note that as the text describes the Kingdom of God, the different nations, peoples, and languages maintain their unique identities as members of the kingdom of God. God's reign offers humans something common that brings them together, namely, they are all equal humans before God regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic status. At the same time, the kingdom of God does not attempt to make its members identical with each other. The members of the kingdom of God are called to embrace and celebrate cultural, linguistic, and racial differences, creating a beautiful mosaic of a community that seeks to worship God and to serve other human beings who are both within and outside of their faith community."

What does it mean to be "content with your humanness"?

Can you think of examples from your own experience where a community resembles this "beautiful mosaic" of people and identities?

What are some of the challenges? What are some of the gifts of this type of community?

How can your faith community move closer to this vision of the kingdom of God?

### **Closing**

To close sing (or read) verses 1&2 of "The Church's One Foundation" - #321 in the *Glory to God* hymnal of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

*The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.*

*She is his new creation by water and the word.*

*From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride.*

*With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.*

*Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth,*

*her charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth.*

*One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,*

*and to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.*

## Lesson 2 - Kingdom of God: space for dialogue

### Concept

The purpose of the second lesson is to engage with Tim Hartman's response essay, to consider different theological perspectives, and to reflect on how the Kingdom of God can create space for dialogue.

### Setting

This lesson is intended for an adult education class within a 45 minute session, but may be adjusted to meet your needs.

### Objectives

- 1) Participants will reflect on their own particular cultural and theological context.
- 2) Participants will engage with a scriptural interpretation that grows out of a different cultural and theological context than their own.
- 3) Participants will identify opportunities to create a community of dialogue in their own areas.

### Preparation

- 1) Participants will have read Tim Hartman's response essay.
- 2) Arrange the room in a way that allows for large group conversation and small group discussions.
- 3) Either provide copies of *Return to Babel: global perspectives on the Bible* or make copies of the essays on Exodus 20:1-17 (one essay/perspective for each small group)

### Materials

one copy of *Return to Babel: global perspectives on the Bible* for each small group (or a copy of one of the essays on Exodus 20:1-17)

Bibles

newsprint and markers

note cards

pens or pencils

### Opening

Greet participants as they enter. Give each participant a note card and invite them to spend a few minutes describing their own context including race/ethnicity, nationality/immigration status, job/career/vocation, gender, sexuality, education level.

### Presenting

Share this quote from the response essay:

"When blinded by one's cultural context, theology is often thought to be objectively true, that is any given biblical text has one, correct interpretation. Mbiti and every other postcolonial theologian who has followed after him have challenged this universal theological approach as neglecting the particularities of context. Questions of culture, gender, socio-economic status, even geography and climate shape the theological questions posed and the answers generated."

Discuss these questions: do you agree with Mbiti's assertion that theological questions and answers are shaped by culture, gender, socio-economic status and even geography? Have you experienced times when your cultural context has blinded you to other people or ways of thinking?

## **Exploring**

Read Exodus 20:1-17 together.

What does this text mean to you?

How have you heard this text interpreted in your life?

## **Responding**

Divide the participants into groups of 4-6 people.

Distribute copies of *Return to Babel* or one essay per group.

Have each group read and discuss one perspective on Exodus 20:1-17.

Reflect on these questions: does this interpretation differ from ways you have thought about this text in the past? If so, how?

Have each small group share a summary of the theological perspective/interpretation they discussed.

How can the church become a place of dialogue and “deep listening”?

## **Closing**

To close sing (or read) “This Is My Song” - #340 in the *Glory to God* hymnal of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
but other hearts in other lands are beating  
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,  
and sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine.  
But other lands have sunlight too, and clover,  
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.  
So hear my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

*This is my prayer, O lord of all earth's kingdoms:  
thy kingdom come; on earth thy will be done.  
Let Christ be lifted up till all shall serve him,  
and hearts untied learn to live as one.  
So hear my prayer, O God of all the nations:  
myself I give thee; let thy will be done.*

### Lesson 3 - Kingdom of God: intentionally toward others

#### Concept

In his response, "On Being Conscious of What We Choose to Worship," Mrinalini Sebastian insists that "to opt for the kingdom of God amounts to allowing ourselves to be persuaded by the dignity of all human beings." The third lesson will consider the ways this vision of the Kingdom of God challenges the imperial values that dominate US media and culture.

#### Setting

This lesson is intended for an adult education class within a 45 minute session, but may be adjusted to meet your needs.

#### Objectives

- 1) Participants will identify values and ideologies that dominant US culture encourages us to worship.
- 2) Participants will reflect on the different value system envisioned in the kingdom of God.
- 3) Participants will respond with ways to consciously live into those values.

#### Preparation

- 1) Participants should have read Mrinalini Sebastian's response "On Being Conscious of What We Choose to Worship."
- 2) Gather popular magazines, newspapers, and advertisements for use during the lesson.
- 3) Arrange the room in a way that allows for large group conversation and small group discussions.
- 4) Write this quote on a board or newsprint "**There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship."**

#### Materials

Magazines, newspapers  
Scissors  
Newsprint  
Markers  
Bibles

#### Opening

Greet participants as they enter. Have participants reflect on the quote with people around them and share examples from their own lives. Ask each group to give a brief summary of their conversation.

#### Presenting

In his response, Sebastian continues the quote from above: "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship... On the one hand, we have the choice to worship god, to pursue some kind of spirituality, or to adhere to a set of principles, and, on the other, to worship money, beauty, power, and intellect."

Have participants look through the magazines and newspapers on their tables and find three illustrations of the things that we are encouraged to worship.

Have each person share the images or items that they have identified.

Discuss these questions:

What cultural values emerge from these images and advertisements?

How can these values be destructive?  
Are there ways they “pretty much” eat you alive?  
Can they also be life-giving?

Record the responses on newsprint where the class can see them.

### **Exploring**

Divide participants into groups of 4-6 people.

Assign one passage to each group:

- Isaiah 58:6-12
- Isaiah 65:17-25
- Deuteronomy 10:12-22
- Luke 4:16-21

Have the groups discuss these questions: what values emerge from your text? What does it tell you about life in the kingdom of God? How can these values be life-giving? Are there ways they “pretty much” eat you alive?

### **Responding**

Have each group share the values that emerge from the reading of their text. Write them on the newsprint. Compare the two lists of values.

Sebastian states that “to opt for the kingdom of God amounts to allowing ourselves to be persuaded by the dignity of all human beings. It amounts to consciously distancing ourselves from powers that devour, break in pieces, and stamp what is left with their feet... I will seek to consciously uphold that vision of the kingdom of God that is intentionally turned toward, and receptive to, the planetary subjects.”

How can you consciously choose to live into to the values of the kingdom of God?

Brainstorm specific examples for your congregation.

### **Closing**

To close sing (or read) verses 1&2 of “Called as Partners in Christ’s Service” - #761 in the *Glory to God* hymnal of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

*Called as partners in Christ’s service, called to ministries of grace,  
we respond with deep commitment fresh new lines of faith to trace.  
May we learn the art of sharing, side by side and friend with friend,  
equal partners in our caring to fulfill God’s chosen end.*

*Christ’s example, Christ’s inspiring, Christ’s clear call to work and worth,  
let us follow, never faltering, reconciling folk on earth.  
Men and women, richer, poorer, all God’s people, young and old,  
blending human skills together gracious gifts from God unfold.*

## **Lesson 4 - Kingdom of God: confronting empire**

### **Concept**

The purpose of the fourth lesson is to engage with Andrew Foster-Connors response essay and consider the ways that the kingdom of God calls us to confront imperial policies and systems.

### **Setting**

This lesson is intended for an adult education class within a 45 minute session, but may be adjusted to meet your needs.

### **Objectives**

- 1) Participants will discuss examples of faith communities that are confronting empire.
- 2) Participants will identify opportunities to confront or engage empire on the ground.

### **Preparation**

- 1) Participants should have read Foster-Connors response essay.
- 2) Print copies of articles/illustrations to distribute during the "Exploring" section.
- 3) Arrange the room in a way that is conducive to both large group discussion and small group conversations.

### **Materials**

Articles/examples of faith communities engaging imperial policies or systems (see links provided or you may find your own examples)

Newsprint or whiteboard

Markers

### **Opening**

Greet participants as they enter. Ask if there are any questions or responses to Foster-Connors essay.

### **Presenting**

Foster-Connors relates a story about BUILD, a local community organizing group in Baltimore, that has sought to engage with and confront unjust policies on the ground.

As a group, summarize his main points.

What stood out to you in his essay?

Have you ever participated in the type of confrontation he describes?

### **Exploring**

Divide the participants into groups of 4-6 people.

Distribute one of the following articles to each of the small groups for discussion.

- Southside Presbyterian and the Sanctuary Movement - <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/1/21/southside-model-for-immigration-response/>
- Willow Grove Presbyterian and Syrian Refugees - <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/2/24/new-jersey-church-prepares-welcome-syrian-refugees/>
- PCUSA response to mass incarceration crisis - <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2015/3/9/presbyterians-respond-mass-incarceration-crisis/>

- Westminster Presbyterian and Black Lives Matter - <http://westminstergr.org/blacklivesmatter>

Discuss these questions: how is this group confronting empire? what difference do their actions make? have they “personalized” injustice to hold people accountable for their agency? are their actions or discussion anticipating healing for those who are oppressed and those who benefit from that oppression?

### **Responding**

Invite each group to share the ways their article illustrates the call to confront empire through activism or justice work.

Brainstorm organizations or movements in your area that are confronting empire. Are there ways you could be involved?

### **Closing**

Close by singing or reading this prayer by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (music can be found in the hymnal, *Glory to God*, hymn #750)

*Goodness is stronger than evil;  
love is stronger than hate;  
light is stronger than darkness;  
life is stronger than death.*

*Victory is ours; victory is ours  
through God who loves us.*