



Wandering in the Wilderness

Overview

A play for Friends of all ages that invites Friends to live into the Bible story of the wandering Israelites. We do not know whether the Bible story is based on historical events; but by living into the story, we can discover why this story has survived for perhaps 3000 years. The story provides a safe context for exploring the feelings that rise up among members of a spiritual community.



60 min.



All Ages



Newcomer Friendly

Aims & Objectives

When you have completed this topic, you will have experience in discernment needed for decision-making in a spiritual community.

Materials & Set-up

Copies of the dialogue, enough for all participants. No audience.

Credits: Betsy Meyers,
Exercise Authors

Instructions

This is a play for “all-Meeting” participation: Everyone can be a part of the cast (no audience needed). After acting out the play, invite participants to use the story to help them reflect upon their own experiences of discernment in spiritual community.

Roles:

- Narrator – *assign this part to someone with a strong reading voice*
- The Pillar of Fire by night and the Pillar of Cloud by day – *This can be played by one person or by several people. Because there is no reading involved, this is a good assignment for the youngest children in the group [“and a little child shall lead them.” Isaiah 11:6], or for anyone who is not a reader.*
- Moses
- Aaron
- Joshua and Caleb – *If your group is small, one person can play both parts; otherwise, assign it to two people.*
- The Ten Other Scouts – *This part can be played by one person or up to ten people.*
- The Israelites – *All the other members of the community play this part.*

Props Needed:

The Pillar of Fire by night and the Pillar of Cloud by day – Cut pieces of red, orange, and yellow construction paper into flame-shaped pieces that can be waved to represent the Pillar of Fire; cut white or light-gray construction paper into cloud-shaped pieces that can be held up to represent the Pillar of Cloud.

Golden Calf – You can make a Golden Calf out of construction paper or get creative by exploring modern-day equivalents of the Calf: a piggy bank? a picture of gold displayed on an electronic tablet device?

Manna from Heaven – A box of plain crackers or other simple food put out on a plate to be “gathered” by the Israelites will work for manna.

Water – Small cups of water (one for each participant) to go with the “manna.”

The River Jordan – Tape a few pieces of blue construction paper together to form the river.

Script

(Stage directions are in italics; Bible references are included for information and further reading. There is no need to read these aloud as the play is performed.)

Place the River Jordan on the far side of the room (at a door that leads to another room, if possible), and instruct the cast not to cross the River until the script tells them to do so. Place the manna and water on a table in the middle of the room.

Narrator: (As the Narrator reads, the pillar of fire and of cloud walk around the room, and the rest of the cast follow them.) When Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, the Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. (Exodus 13:21) When the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night moved, the Israelites would set out on their journey, and when the pillars settled in one place, the Israelites would make camp there.

Israelites (*whining*): Moses, we are thirsty. We have no water to drink in this desert.

Narrator: The Lord commanded Moses to strike a rock with his staff. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers. (Psalm 78:16) *Moses points to the water, and each of the Israelites takes a cup of water.*

Israelites (*whining*): We are hungry. Moses, why did you bring us out of Egypt just to starve us to death?

Narrator: Then God rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Mortals ate the bread of angels. (Psalm 78:24-25) *Israelites gather and eat manna.*

Narrator: Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. The people went around and gathered it. When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it. (Numbers 11:7-9) But, as good as the manna tasted, the Israelites got tired of eating manna day after day.

Israelites (*whining*): Manna from heaven for dinner again! Moses, why can't we have something different for a change?

Narrator: Now this made Moses feel angry and bitter. Moses wondered why he was burdened with an ungrateful spiritual community. Moses called upon the Lord.

Moses (*angrily*): Lord, why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? (Numbers 11:11) Really, God, is this the way you treat your faithful servant, by giving him an unfaithful community to lead?

Narrator: Then Moses went alone up to the top of Mount Sinai to discern how God would command people to treat one another. (*Moses goes off to a far corner of the room with the pillars of cloud and fire.*) Moses stayed on the mountain for a long time, and the Israelites become impatient. (Exodus 32)

Israelites: This Moses, who brought us out of the land of Egypt, what has become of him? Aaron, we want a god like all the other people have.

Aaron (*hesitating*): Well . . ., OK, if that is what you want, then give me all your gold, and I will make a golden calf that you can worship. You can bring sacrifices and eat and drink and revel at the altar of the golden calf.

Narrator: So just like that, the Israelites made a calf and worshiped this cast image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. (Psalm 106:19-20) When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what had happened, he asked God not to be angry with the Israelites. So God continued to lead the Israelites through the wilderness with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. (*The pillars lead the Israelites around the room.*)

Narrator: Then Moses discerned that it was time to send scouts ahead to the promised land to find out what the land was like. Moses selected 12 people to be the scouts. (Moses motions Joshua and Caleb and the other scouts to go to the other side of the Jordan, and they go there.) After 40 days, the scouts returned with their report. (*All scouts return.*)

Joshua and Caleb: The land across the Jordan is a wonderful place to live. It is fruitful, flowing with milk and honey.

Ten Other Scouts: But we should be afraid to go to try to go there. The people who live there are very strong and will not welcome us. They will devour us. Be afraid; be very afraid.

Israelites: We are afraid to go into this unknown, so-called “promised land.” We would rather be slaves in Egypt than die by the sword in that land.

Narrator: So the Israelites were not ready to go into the promised land. They had to wander in the wilderness until all of them were transformed. (The Israelites follow the pillars of cloud and fire around the room.) After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites were transformed as a spiritual community together, and they were ready to cross the Jordan into the promised land, led by Joshua and Caleb. (Joshua and Caleb lead all the Israelites across the River Jordan into the promised land.)

Queries for Worship/Sharing

After performing the play together, consider the following queries:

The story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness provides a safe context for exploring our feelings about discernment in spiritual community. It reminds us that humans have been seeking discernment together for at least 3000 years, and sometimes this is not an easy process. Along the way there is boredom, anger, fear.

Can you understand the feelings of any of the characters in the story?

Which character resonates with your experience? The Israelites who are bored with the same food day after day, even if it is the bread of angels (perhaps you might feel this way at a time of spiritual dryness)? Aaron, who goes along with the will of the majority, even though he has doubts? Moses, who feels angry and bitter that his spiritual community has not lived up to his expectations? Joshua and Caleb, who spoke the truth from their hearts but were not heard by their community?

Though death is a metaphor for transformation, sometimes in Friends Meetings we have to wait until a certain Friend passes away before the Meeting can take an action. All Friends should remember that if they say in business meeting, “That will happen over my dead body,” their wish is likely to come true.

Additional Queries:

- Am I bringing a humble and teachable spirit to group discernment in my spiritual community?
- How has the Inward Teacher been working in me as I have participated in business meetings? Have I felt transformed by my experiences of group discernment?
- How has the Divine been working in my spiritual community? Has the Light been working in mysterious ways – perhaps through difficulties or conflicts -- to call us to go deeper and into greater faithfulness?
- Do we recognize that the spirit of love with which we conduct our business together may be more important than the outcome of the discernment?
- This activity of reading the play aloud can be modified by assigning group members to read the various parts and then consider together the queries listed above.