

November 10: Adverse Childhood Experiences (Exodus 2:1-10) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help for Heavy Times”. This is our yearlong series, where we’re treading our own path through the scriptures with a new intention, a desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. In the month of November, our mini-series is called “Family Matters,” so we’ll be getting up close and personal with some dynamics that might be playing out with your loved ones, or experiences that you’ve navigated. We hope that despite these heavy topics, we will find ways to support each other and find hope.

I invite you to pray with me before we go further.

Maternal God, who shelters us as a mother hen shelters her chicks, we come to you with hurts and traumas and grief and loss from painful childhoods. Gather us in, hold us, heal us, and help us to write a different story. In your son, Jesus’ name, Amen.

On Friday, October 26, President Joe Biden visited the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona and issued a formal apology, on behalf of the U.S. government, for the treatment of generations of native children who were forcibly removed from their families to be raised in government-run boarding schools.¹ In these schools, children were stripped of their clothing, hair, names, and personal belongings and punished for speaking their native language or acting in any way that might represent their traditional or cultural heritage. This was part of a nation-wide effort to destroy indigenous cultures and forcibly reprogram Native communities, and it began after the “Indian Civilization Act” was passed in 1819 and continued until the late 1960s.

¹ <https://ejj.org/news/president-biden-apologizes-to-native-americans-for-federal-indian-boarding-schools/>

In all, hundreds of thousands of children in the United States and Canada were sent to Indian boarding schools, and thousands died while attending them – mass unmarked graves continue to be found. Tens of thousands more were routinely abused, beaten, shamed, and neglected. Every single one of these children was removed from the love and safety and acceptance and relationship modeling of their families, and from the protective factors of communal belonging and rootedness and rites of passage and shared culture. Every single one of those children experienced trauma and loss and toxic stress that changed them.

And when they were released from boarding schools as young adults and returned to their communities, they carried that trauma and loss and toxic stress with them, and it shaped the way they entered into relationships, related to their community, lived, and parented. Because whole generations were sent away, whole communities were misshaped by the brokenness and trauma they endured, and children born into those misshaped communities inherited that brokenness. Even when the era of forced boarding schools ended, the dysfunction and loss and trauma they caused remained, and continues to be passed down from generation to generation.

American Indians and Alaska Natives born today have a life expectancy that is 5.5 years less than the rest of the United States.² They have the highest rates of suicide, of meth use, and of drug overdose of any American population.³ More than four out of five Native adults have experienced violence,⁴ and Native women are murdered at ten times the national average. I believe that there is a strong link between these current statistics and the systemic removal of generations of children who were raised in boarding schools.

An adverse childhood experience, or ACE, is a potentially traumatic experience that occurs in a child's life before the age of 18. Examples of ACEs include experiencing or witnessing violence, abuse, or neglect; or growing up in a household where there is substance misuse, mental illness, incarceration, divorce, or separation. These adverse experiences activate a stress response in the brains and bodies of children – not just once, but again and again, multiple times a day, for days on end. The stress response itself, which we call the fight or flight instinct, isn't bad – in fact, it equips us to survive situations of danger; it can keep us alive. The problem is that when it happens again and again, and

² <https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/disparities/>

³ <https://www.ihs.gov/newsroom/factsheets/behavioralhealth/>

⁴ <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249815.pdf>

there isn't a consistent buffer (a safe and non-anxious caregiver who can restore the child to calm and safety,) the child's quickly developing brain and body adapt to living in a constant state of stress, and that is toxic. It can affect a person for the rest of their life, doing all kinds of damage to their health and well-being and relationships.

The first large study on ACEs was done in 1998, and there have been many more since then that support its findings. Most studies use a 10-item questionnaire that asks people to check off particular experiences that happened before they were 18, and their answers give them an ACE score between 0 and 10 – the higher the score, the more adverse childhood experiences. Higher ACE scores are correlated with over 40 negative health and life outcomes, including mental health challenges, broken relationships, health risk behaviors, addictions, lower educational and economic attainment, chronic and infectious disease, and early death. Not only that, but there is a consistent dose-response affect: the higher a person's ACE score, the greater the risk to their health and well-being. A person with one ACE is twice as likely to become addicted to alcohol or commit suicide as a person with none; while a person with four or more ACEs is 7 times as likely to be an alcoholic and 12 times as likely to commit suicide.⁵

When a child grows up in the midst of family dysfunction, which Pastor Meg preached about last week, it raises their ACE score; it makes them feel unsafe and rewires their brain to be in a state of constant toxic stress. That elevated ACE score, and the toxic stress it represents, makes it more likely that the child will grow up and struggle with addiction or act out dysfunction or violence in their own family, which will then add to their children's ACE scores. In this way, ACEs and the trauma they represent is passed down from generation to generation, which we see when we look at the fallout from forced boarding schools in Native communities. Dr. Burke Harris, a physician and leading researcher on ACEs, says that in her clinical experience, "it seemed that toxic stress was more consistently transmitted from parent to child than any genetic disease I had seen."⁶

The Scripture that we read this morning from Exodus 2 is a Sunday School favorite that reads like a fairy tale: little baby Moses is tucked into a cozy basket and floats down the Nile until he's found by an Egyptian princess who

⁵ Statistics are from [CDC resources on ACEs](#) and Nadine Burke Harris' book, *The Deepest Well*.

⁶ Nadine Burke Harris, *The Deepest Well*, p.79.

defies her father's death edict and raises him as her own son, paying Moses' own birth mother to nurse him. But there's a different way to tell the story. Hidden in these verses, we find a narrative of trauma and adverse childhood experiences that shaped Moses profoundly.

In Exodus 2 verse 1, we hear that a Hebrew man from the tribe of Levi married a woman from the same tribe, who got pregnant and gave birth to a son. At that time and in that culture, this was every couple's dream, an occasion for great joy. But if you go one verse back, to the final verse of chapter 1, you read this: "Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: 'Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.'"

Can you imagine the mingled hope and fear that Moses' mother felt as her belly swelled? She knew that if she birthed a boy, he'd be under a death sentence – immediately drowning, by state order. Did she try to hide her pregnancy while she continued to work as a slave? Did her stomach twist with worry as she ran through what-if, worst-case scenarios? Research shows that extreme maternal distress can affect a fetus, and I think this qualifies.

When Moses was born, his mother saw that he was a "fine male child", and her heart swelled with love and terror, and she hid him for three months. Now, my first child had colic, and he would scream inconsolably for two hours each night, beginning like clockwork at 5 p.m., starting at one month old. The only thing that would quiet him would be to take him for walks outdoors. Moses' mother couldn't do that. How did she cope when her newborn wouldn't be comforted? Did she try to muffle his cries? Did she hold his mouth shut? Did she shake him, or speak harshly in her fear for his safety? Did Moses' sister have to care for him while her mother went to work? As an enslaved woman who was hiding a newborn, she would not have had maternity leave.

Research shows that the first two months of a child's life are particularly impactful on their long-term health and development, and despite the stress that the baby Moses's brain would have sensed and reacted to as his parents desperately hid him, at least he got to spend that time in the secure, attentive care of his family. All of that changed at the end of his third month, when his mother pushed him out alone into the Nile River, crying, in a "Hail Mary" act of courageous desperation that saved Moses' life and sent him into permanent exile from his family of origin. Like the Native children who were raised by the very government that had broken treaties, seized their homelands, and oppressed their people, Moses was raised in the palace of a genocidal Pharaoh who made his birth family's life bitter with harsh slave labor – even Moses'

name was Egyptian. And despite the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter and the continued presence of Moses' birth mother in his life, these are adverse childhood experiences that would have flooded his developing brain with regular doses of toxic stress.

Dr. Burke Harris writes that "early adversity activates the brain pathways that are associated with vigilance, poor impulse control, increased fear, and inhibition of executive functioning."⁷ And sure enough, our first glimpse of Moses as an adult suggests that this was true of him: when he saw one of his own enslaved tribal members beaten by an Egyptian, he lashed out with impulsive violence, killing the Egyptian; and when his act became known and he was rejected by his own native community and threatened by his adoptive Egyptian family, Moses fled alone into the wilderness and started a new life, marrying into a new family and becoming a father. For 40 years in the desert, Moses ignored and buried his past.

But God didn't let Moses' story end there. From a burning bush in the desert, God told Moses that he would go back to the site of his childhood adversity and adult failure, to take up the frayed threads of that narrative and steer it in a different direction. Even in the face of Moses' desperate protests and insecurities, God remained adamant: Moses would return and lead his people out of Egypt, and God would go with him. The trauma and adversity and mistakes of Moses' past didn't disqualify him; instead, with God's presence and guidance and power, they shaped him into the kind of leader who could lead his people out of slavery and into freedom.

My friends, I know that adverse childhood experiences aren't just a reality in the life of Moses, and they don't just occur in the lives of children who are forced into boarding schools. Studies show that 64% - almost 2/3 of American adults - have experienced at least one type of ACE, and about 1 in 5 adults have an ACE score of 4 or more.⁸ And ACEs don't just occur in marginalized populations; the first ACE study was done in a population that was middle-class and 70% college educated.⁹ Statistically, many of us who are listening right now have suffered at least one adverse childhood experience that shaped us and continues to reverberate in our lives today, impacting our health and well-being and relationships.

⁷ Nadine Burke Harris, *The Deepest Well*, p.146.

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/communication-resources/index.html>

⁹ Nadine Burke Harris, *The Deepest Well*, p.39.

If you'd like to calculate your own ACE score, there are handouts at the worship resources table and in the fellowship hall that have a QR code you can scan to take an online questionnaire. It does ask detailed questions about specific abuses and adverse events, so I'd caution you to only take the quiz if you are prepared to answer them, and if you think that knowing your score would be helpful.

If you have a high ACE score, or can name specific childhood traumas, or simply know that you had a tough childhood, I want to acknowledge the deep pain of that. It's not the way things should have been for you, and I am so sorry. And before I talk about how to move forward, I want to name three things that a painful childhood or a high ACE score doesn't mean.

First, a high ACE score doesn't define you or your future. It doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you; it means something happened to you. It doesn't say anything about your worth or potential or resiliency. And it's not a prediction, condemning you to bad outcomes or cycles of dysfunction you can't escape. It's simply a data point that can help you understand more about yourself, how you have been shaped and formed, how your brain works and is still responding to the past, and the challenges you might be facing on your soul care journey.

Secondly, your ACE score is not a judgment on you or your family of origin, and it's not a mark of shame. We live in a broken world, and every one of us was raised in an environment that was more or less shaped by brokenness and dysfunction and oppression. The early childhood adversity that Moses experienced was a product of his family's efforts to save him from a genocidal regime, and many times, even our parents' best efforts – or our own best efforts as parents – will be affected by the brokenness around us and the dysfunction we've internalized and acted out.

Finally, a high ACE score is not an excuse for behavior that is hurtful towards ourselves or others. It can help us understand our dysfunctional and hurtful words, choices, and actions, and why it's hard to break free from them. It can help us have compassion on ourselves and others, and accept that we are broken and need help. But it doesn't justify the things that we do that continue cycles of brokenness and dysfunction, and it doesn't mean that somebody we love is justified in treating us in a disrespectful or abusive way. We do have a choice, and we can take steps to change things and break cycles. We can learn when our stress response is getting out of hand, and we can learn to change how we react. We can heal, and our stories can change.

But we can't do it alone, we can't do it all at once, and we can't do it without going back and acknowledging some of the core experiences that hurt us. Going back is what President Biden did when he issued a formal apology for forced boarding schools, and it's what Native communities are doing as they collect and preserve stories and testimonies from the boarding school days and set up memorials – it's a step towards healing. And just like Moses protested when God sent him back to Egypt, it's not going to be easy for us. We will need the support of others, and we may need the help of mental health professionals. And just like God answered Moses' protests with the reassurance that, "I will be with you", God will be with you in your journey. If you'd like to meet with Pastor Meg or myself and talk about what your next step might be in a journey to healing, please make an appointment with us.

Because adverse childhood experiences affect us by putting our brains into a state of constant toxic stress, there are tried and true things we can do to bring down our brain's stress level. These include exercise, mindfulness meditation (which we do during the spiritual practices class every Sunday morning at 9:00), good nutrition, adequate sleep, and – most important – healthy relationships and community. Studies show that a person's level of connectedness – to family, community, and culture – can counterbalance adversity.¹⁰ I believe that Moses' forty years in the desert, and the family that he married into and lived with there, helped him stabilize after some of the adversity he had grown up with; and Native communities today are focusing on revitalizing their communal languages and cultural practices as they heal. In the same way, this community can be a healing place through the ways that we connect together, in our small groups and coffee hours and communal celebrations, especially when we reach out to those who might be on the margins to invite and include them in the circle of belonging.

When God sent Moses back to Egypt, it wasn't just to deal with his past. It was to change the future, both for himself and for his people. God sent Moses back to lead his people from slavery into freedom, to address the core issue of oppression that was causing a whole host of adverse childhood experiences. Part of what we are called to, as people of faith, is to work for a world in which the next generation of children don't have the same level of ACEs that we did. That means that we choose to do the hard work of acknowledging our own ACEs and seeking the healing we need so that we don't pass dysfunction on to the next generation. It means that continue to do the work of justice,

¹⁰ Oprah Winfrey and Bruce D. Perry, *What Happened to You?* p.106

addressing poverty and inequality and oppression that create ACEs. And even when we're powerless to change some of the specific adverse experiences that children we know are dealing with, we have the opportunity to be a buffer for them – to be safe people that give consistent love and support and provide a reliable space of belonging. And that can make a tremendous difference.

I want to bring us back to the story of Moses as a baby. It is not a fairy tale, but it isn't a tragedy, either. The trauma embedded in the narrative doesn't drown out the love and provision and salvation woven through. God was at work, protecting and preserving, and God wove Moses' story into an overall narrative of freedom and deliverance and new beginnings. Moses' childhood, with its adversity *and* its grace, shaped him into the leader that God chose to deliver his people.

Kintsugi is the name of a Japanese art form where broken pottery is healed, not by hiding the broken places with paint, but by mending cracks with lacquer and powdered gold. The cracks and breaks remain visible, but they don't prevent the vessel from being whole and functional, and they give it a distinctive beauty that is all its own.

If you've had a painful childhood that included trauma or ACEs, the fact that you're here, right now, means that there are unique strengths that you carry – like resourcefulness or perseverance or empathy – that have shaped you along with the adversity. And as you go back to your past in order to go forward; as you invite Jesus to journey with you and restore you; as you do the hard work of healing and soul care, I believe that the story of your childhood, with all of its pain and its grace, will become part of the distinctive beauty that is all your own, a beauty that speaks hope and life in a hurting world. Amen.

adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)



**ACE score
quiz**

Calculate your ACE score

Scan the code on the left to take an online ACE questionnaire. Remember that a high score is not a judgment or a destiny. It is information that can help you move towards healing and connection. If your ACE score is high, please talk about it with somebody. Make an appointment with Pastors Meg or Heather; or share your results with a medical professional, a therapist, a trusted friend, or a mentor and identify the next step you will take towards healing and wholeness.



**CDC
resources**

Learn more about ACEs

Scan the codes on the right or the left to learn more about ACEs, how they affect us, and how we can respond: as individuals, families, and a community.



**TED Talk
N. Burke Harris**

a blessing for if you've had a painful childhood

Blessed are you who come with your sorrow, allowing your pain to convey all its truth.

Here is where grief is understood at its core, where the dark shadow of betrayal is seen from the inside.

Here, my dear, is where the work of healing begins.

Blessed are you who mourn as you meet yourself once again, as a little child who needed protection but did not receive it, who deserved respect but was not afforded it.

The things that should have happened but didn't and the thing that happened but shouldn't.

The broken family systems and normalized cruelties that allowed your pain to continue far beyond what it should have.

For you have come back now to the God who is alive, to your past, your present, and to your future, who has already moved heaven and earth to restore your dignity and return you to yourself.

And P.S. Take a minute to remind your past self that you are loved now. Tomorrow and forever. And rest. You are safe. You are loved. You are held.

-by Kate Bowler, www.katebowler.com

Kate's support guide for those who have experienced painful childhoods is available by scanning the QR code to the right.



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