

# Christianity

## Sermon Starters Shared by Christians and Jews

*[Note: Most of the reflections on the male characters listed below are based on the work of Kalman Kaplan in his Psychology of Hope. They were summarized by Talitha Arnold who is also the author of the reflections based on female characters.]*

### **Hagar (Genesis 16:1-4; Genesis 21:8-21)**

Twice the Egyptian slave of Sarah and Abraham finds herself at the point of despair and death in the wilderness. The first time is after Abraham, at Sarah's urging, has used her to conceive a son. The second time is when Sarah is jealous of Hagar's son, Ishmael, and tells Abraham to cast her out. In both stories, God hears her cries and an angel of the Lord responds to her. In the second story, God opens Hagar's eyes to see a spring of water that saves both her life and her child's. Both stories remind us of God's presence even in the deserts of our lives. God hears our cries and can open our eyes to the possibilities of life around us. The stories also remind us of the role of our faith communities to be such "streams in the desert" for persons in despair or grief.

### **Moses (Numbers 11:10-25)**

By the third book about the Exodus, Moses is exhausted from leading the people. They are hungry for meat, tired of manna, and longing for the fleshpots of Egypt—and they blame Moses. In turn, he cries out to God. He tells God the burden of leadership is too much and that God might as well go ahead and kill him at once.

God doesn't grant Moses' request. Instead God tells him to gather 70 elders to share the burden of leadership. God gives them some of the spirit that had been poured out on Moses—and therefore some of the responsibility. God also makes good on the promise to give the people quail along with the manna. The story is a good one not only for our congregations, but also for faith leaders in particular. When the burdens of leadership and pastoral care become too great, as they often can, Moses' story reminds us to reconnect with the source of that leadership—namely God's spirit—and also to ask others to help carry the load. Suicide prevention, pastoral care, and other aspects of mental health ministries need to be shared by the whole congregation, not just the rabbi, pastor or priest.

### **Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi (Ruth 1)**

Although neither Naomi nor her daughters-in-law ever express their desire to die, you cannot find three people more bereft nor more vulnerable in all of scripture. Each of them individually and all of them together have walked through the "valley of the shadows" with the multiple deaths of husbands, sons, and fathers-in-law. In addition, as widowed women without male relatives to protect them, they

are among the most vulnerable people in their cultures. Naomi expresses her despair when she tells her relatives not to call her “Naomi,” which means “Pleasant,” but “Mara,” for the bitter turn her life has taken.

Yet somehow each of the three women find their way back to life. For Orpah and Naomi, it meant each returning to her own people and community. For Ruth, it meant stepping out into an unknown life with a new people. Connecting to community and trusting in the future were key elements for all three. Such connection and faith in the future are ways to deal with despair and vulnerability in our time, too.

### **Elijah (I Kings 19:1-21)**

Like Moses, the Prophet Elijah is at the end of his rope. He's defeated the prophets of Baal but now he's on the run from the evil King Ahab and the wicked Queen Jezebel, who is after his head. Just as Hagar did, Elijah flees to the wilderness. Falling exhausted under a broom tree, Elijah asks to die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life.” Just as God didn't grant Moses' request to die, so God offers a different answer to Elijah. God sends an angel who gives the prophet something to eat and drink (not unlike what our congregations do when someone is going through a difficult time). When the prophet makes his way to Mt. Horeb, God listens to his anguish and exhaustion. And as God told Moses to commission 70 elders to share the burden, so too God raises up young Elisha to help the older prophet continue in life and ministry.

Being cared for in body and soul, having someone who listens to our anguish and despair, having a friend, co-worker or partner to share the load—Elijah's story offers many ways we can help those who are feeling overwhelmed by life. ~(*Based on Efreem Epstein's Elijah's Journey and Dr. Kalman Kaplan's Psychology of Hope*)

### **Jonah (Jonah 4:1-11)**

The Prophet Jonah has an odd reason to want to die: he's succeeded! God called Jonah to go to the wicked city of Nineveh and tell them to repent. Jonah doesn't want to do it, not because he's afraid but because he knows God is a God of mercy and will spare the evil Ninevites if they change their ways. So he boards a ship, gets caught in a storm, gets thrown overboard and is swallowed by a great fish. You know the rest of that story! God gives him a second chance to go to Nineveh and get them to repent. This time he does what God wants. Lo and behold, it works! The people of Nineveh turn from their evil ways, even the king! God keeps his part of the bargain and doesn't destroy the city. And that makes Jonah mad! Mad enough to want to die. He gets even angrier when the castor oil plant under which he's stewing shrivels up and dies. “I do well to be angry, angry enough to die,” he explodes to the Lord.

God listens to the prophet but then challenges his reasoning. If Jonah could have pity for a plant, shouldn't God have pity for a hundred and twenty thousand foolish Ninevites, “who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” On first hearing, it may sound like an odd answer. (It may sound odd even on second hearing.) But God's response to Jonah's complaint puts the prophet's life

in perspective and also reminds him of the breadth and depth of God's mercy and love, be it for the Ninevites and their cattle or Jonah himself.

## **Christian Sermon Starters:**

### **Coming Out of the Dark (John 1: 1-5)**

The creation story from the first chapter of Genesis tells of God creating light out of the darkness. Light is a symbol of hope and new life throughout our sacred scriptures. The Gospel of John proclaims, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1: 5) The foundation of our faith is God’s victory over darkness and the ultimate triumph of light. Darkness can be terrifying for those experiencing mental illness. But love comes out of the darkness and this love gradually draws us back into the light of this world. For persons experiencing a mental illness, we can be instruments of God’s love by extending care, compassion and hope to those in the grip of darkness and despair.

~Rev. Alan Johnson

### **The Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32)**

When young adults have a mental illness they often feel lost and abandoned by family, friends and church. Parents need to realize that young people make mistakes because they are young and sometimes because their judgment is impaired by a mental illness. Most, like the prodigal son, come home. If they don’t seem to be headed in this direction, parents need to know the signs and not be afraid to intervene. Seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. The church can play a vital role in educating the congregation so the church can be a safe, supportive community for youth and families struggling with these issues.

~Rev. Alan Johnson

### **The Philippian Jailer (Acts 16: 11-34)**

When the Apostle Paul heals a slave girl of the spirit that had overtaken her, he and his helper Silas are arrested and imprisoned in the city of Philippi. That night, an earthquake breaks open the prison cell. Thinking his prisoners have escaped, the jailer draws his sword to kill himself. But Paul and Silas have not fled. Instead they stayed and reassure the jailer that there is a better way to live his life. Sometimes our role is to help the person who is in distress to find a new direction—in the words of the African-American spiritual, to “find the way out of no way.”

~Rev. Talitha Arnold

### **Jesus' Encounters with Persons with Mental Illness (Mark 1:21-28)**

The very first story of Jesus' healing someone is that of the man with the “unclean spirit” in the Capernaum synagogue. In fact, there are more stories in the Gospels of Jesus healing persons afflicted with “troubled spirits,” “unclean spirits,” “demons” (all 1<sup>st</sup> Century ways of talking about mental illnesses and/or spiritual distress) than all the other healing stories combined. (e.g., Mark 5:1-20; Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 8:28-34; 9:32-34; Matthew 12:22-24, etc.).

Regardless of what one believes about the actual healing, the stories offer insight into Jesus' care for persons with mental distress. He reaches out to them, listens to them, shows compassion toward them, offers comfort and hope. We are called to do the same.

~Rev. Talitha Arnold

## **Self-Denial & Self Surrender (Mark 8:34-35)**

And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever would save their life will lose it; and whoever would lose their life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."

This verse could be misunderstood to be speaking about suicide. This is not the case and below is commentary from two well-known theologians about how it can be better understood as a call to self-denial and/or self surrender, not suicide.

### **Self-Denial**

"Jesus' calls to self-denial, to taking up one's cross, and to losing one's life in order to save it, are mentioned six times in the four Gospels. (See also Matt. 10\_39; Luke 9:24; 14:26-27; 17:33; John 12:25.) Through the centuries they have prompted innumerable acts of selfless courage. In the context of Mark's Gospel, they emphasize the necessity of putting a low priority on the value of one's own life when it comes to a choice between maintaining that life at all costs and bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ. Thus life itself could more easily be dispensed with in order to serve others in Christ's name." (*What does the Bible say about Suicide*, by James T. Clemons, May 2007, p. 63)

### **Self-Surrender**

"Once 'crucified' with Christ that is 'surrendered to Him,' you in fact can live and have meaning and purpose in your life. With self-surrender, Christ asks us to take the one thing that we own (the self) and give it back to God. In surrendering the self, we may naturally fear that nothing will be left. We wonder about how are we to live without the self, which give us identity, value, and worth in this world. However, it is in the total surrender of one's life that one finds true meaning and joy in life. The surrendered self no longer accommodates itself to the pattern and values of this world, for it has been liberated from the demands of the world and placed in the hands of Jesus. The self is now free." (E. Stanley Jones, *Victory Through Surrender*, p. 20)

Note: In addition to the resources listed below, please explore the sample Jewish prayers and sermon starters among the Jewish resources offered on this website. Since most are based on Hebrew Bible (aka "Old Testament") scripture, they are part of the Christian tradition and offer deep wisdom and hope.