

# HIDDEN FIGURES

## INTRODUCTION



Based on a true story, *Hidden Figures* tells the story of three brilliant African-American women at NASA, Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), Dorothy Vaughn (Octavia Spencer), and Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe). Hidden away from their colleagues at NASA and the public, they serve as the brains behind one of the greatest operations in history, the launch of astronaut John Glenn (Glen Powell) into orbit, a stunning achievement that restored the nation's confidence, turned around the Space Race, and galvanized the world.

Even though *Hidden Figures* tells a story that took place half a century ago, it feels timely and relevant, in light of ongoing struggles and conversations around race and gender. In its own unique ways, it also embodies themes and teachings found in scriptures. As such, it is a vital film that demands to be seen and discussed in groups. Below are a series of discussion starters for faith communities around this inspirational and challenging film.

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*This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, **whose mother was Tamar**, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, **whose mother was Rahab**, Boaz the father of Obed, **whose mother was Ruth**, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, **whose mother had been Uriah's wife**, Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud, Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, **and Mary was the mother of Jesus** who is called the Messiah.*

~ Matthew 1:1-16

As a title, *Hidden Figures*, relays a dual meaning. It first refers to the group of African American female mathematicians and engineers that formed the West Computer Group at NASA. Secondly, it refers to the equations, numbers, and mathematics that were either forgotten or had yet to be discovered that would eventually make manned space flight possible. Both uses are vitally important today, both in reality and as a concept.

Katherine, Dorothy, Mary, and their colleagues, due to America's racist and sexist past, were literally hidden from view. They were cordoned off in the basement of an old building, separate and unequal from their white and male counterparts. While their inclusion in the program was something of a last gasp effort to beat the Russians into space, even their superiors never believed that they could *actually* contribute something of value to the process. Thankfully, they were all proven wrong in the end.

These women worked tirelessly to uncover the hidden figures (the numbers and equations) that would propel humanity into space. At that time, so much in technology and science that we currently take for granted was yet to be discovered. Like many other Americans, they stared into space and wondered, "What if?" They were motivated by a shared goal to dream big and reach higher. They worked together, against great odds, to achieve a seemingly impossible goal.

Like the women in *Hidden Figures*, Christian scripture includes hidden figures of its own. Consider the first sixteen verses of the gospel of Matthew in which the author gives a genealogy of Jesus. Hidden among dozens of strange sounding male names are five very important women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (though only named as Uriah's wife), and Mary, the mother of Jesus. The inclusion of these women here is vital for our understanding of the role of women in Judeo-Christian tradition. The author of the gospel included them because God had worked through their lives in human history. You might readily know many of their stories if you are part of a faith community. If you don't, now might be the perfect time to (re)visit them and to life up women's contributions to the faith.

*Hidden Figures* is such an important film because it encourages us to keep our eyes open for the hidden figures, in the forms of both people and knowledge, in both the past and the present. It forces us to look beyond the "way things are" to see a deeper reality, namely, the way things could, and should be.

## Questions for Consideration

1. Think about the world around you. Who are the hidden figures (people) in it? How can you help bring them into the light?
2. How does your faith community honor women's contributions to the faith, both past and present? If they don't, how can you help change this?

# HIDDEN FIGURES

## IMPOSSIBLE MIRACLES



*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?*

*~Psalm 8:3-4*

Mary is a brilliant woman and excels at any task set before her at NASA. But she dreams for more... of becoming an engineer. However, both her race and her gender stand in the way. When she expresses her frustration and dismay to her supervisor, Karl Zielinski, he encourages her to pursue her dreams despite these challenges. He reminds her that he's a Jewish immigrant, whose parents were killed by Nazis, that now works on a space shuttle in the United States. He tells her that, in a very real way, they're both examples of the impossible.

*Hidden Figures* is a deeply human and intimate drama that takes place in a cosmic setting, in light of its characters' work, hopes, and dreams. When we travel into outer space with John Glenn, we are reminded that we are tiny inhabitants of a vast universe. This should put our experiences into stark perspective. That fact that we are alive on, as far as we know, the only planet that can support life is an impossible miracle. That we have made leaps and bounds in science and technology in the fifty years since the events of *Hidden Figures* and that we now have an African American president that serves citizens that lived through the Jim Crow era are both realities that would have seemed like impossible miracles to many people only decades ago.

When we think about the people on whose lives *Hidden Figures* is based, we know that they experienced times of great joy and great sorrow. These broad emotional swings find expression in scripture too. Consider The Book of Psalms, essentially a collection of poems and songs that both praise God and raise lamentations to God. Like many Psalms and important figures in scripture, Psalm 8 compares the glory and grandeur of God to the lowliness of humanity. As wide and vast as the cosmos is and the potential for life that it contains, God still favors human beings and is mindful of and cares for them. In times of celebration and struggle, we can always be grateful for and find inspiration in this seemingly impossible miracle.

## Questions for Consideration

1. How does thinking about your life as an impossible miracle give you hope? How can this energize your work in the world?
2. Look around you and think about people in your communities. Do you see any impossible miracles there?  
If so, who are they and how do they inspire you?

# HIDDEN FIGURES

## THE GOD OF THE OPPRESSED & THE ARC OF JUSTICE



*Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey [...]."*

*~Exodus 3:7-8*

*Hidden Figures* reveals a problematic reality for many people in our world. Women of color are dually oppressed as victims of both racism and sexism. *Hidden Figures* portrays this in poignant ways. Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary are questioned at every turn and forced to endure hardships that their white and male counterparts will never know. They are forced to use separate facilities (restrooms or coffee pots, for example) or have their work scrutinized by their "superiors."

In light of this dual oppression, Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary's successes are doubly impressive. Thankfully, their oppression is not the end of the story as they excel to great heights both within the NASA program and in American history overall. As a result, their stories are even more inspirational for anyone that watches and listens.

*Hidden Figures* should serve as yet another reminder that, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." We see this at work *within* scripture as well, time and time again, but, perhaps, most famously in the book of Exodus. Here, God hears the cries of the oppressed Israelites in Egypt and, through Moses, delivers them from slavery under Pharaoh. Throughout scripture, and culminating in the life of Jesus, who God anointed to proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, heal the sick, and set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18), God is at work on behalf of the poor and oppressed. In those moments in life where we, like Al Harrison (Kevin Costner) in *Hidden Figures*, stand up for the oppressed in our community, we become the voice and hands of God bringing justice to our world.

## Questions for Consideration

1. Consider the members of the communities in which you live. Where have you seen oppression, and where have you seen people overcome it? How does this inspire you?
2. Along with the previous questions, in what ways can you be the eyes and ears, voice, and hands and feet of God to help alleviate the oppression or suffering that others experience around you?

# HIDDEN FIGURES

SOMEONE  
HAS TO  
BE  
FIRST



Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"  
~Matthew 14:28-31

Mary wants to be an engineer, but this requires additional classes that are only available at the local, segregated high school. In petitioning the local judge to let her enroll in these classes, she appeals to his ego. In doing so, she also points out the ways in which he—a white man—and she—a black woman—are similar. He was the first in his family to go to college and the first judge to be appointed by three different governors to the same seat. She is the first in her family to go to college and the first African American woman to graduate from West Virginia University. As she longs to be the first African American female engineer at NASA, she tells him that he can be the first judge to help her break this barrier.

Like Mary, many of us probably know what it's like to be the first member of our family to go to college or graduate school or to hold a particular job. We are familiar with the blessings and challenges that these experiences bring. On the other hand, like Peter in the selection from Matthew above, we're also familiar with trying something difficult (or seemingly impossible) and failing. We know the pain of embarrassment and crushed hopes. Hopefully, we also know the joys of being supported by family members and loved ones during those difficult times.

Even if we aren't pioneers in our communities, we can still know the feeling of being first and the faith (in God, others, and ourselves) that it takes to rise to a challenge. We might live in (unintentionally) segregated communities. If so, opportunities to reach beyond those boundaries and practice inclusion abound. At the same time, we might be surrounded by friends, family, or colleagues that engage in offensive language or behavior. As a result, we face opportunities to be the first to speak out against that and to stand up for those that can't speak for themselves.

## Questions for Consideration

1. Where have you seen someone be "first" in their community? Did this birth conflict or inspire change?
2. Think about times that you've tried to be first or tried to step out on the water, so to speak, and failed. What did you learn from this experience and how did it strengthen you moving forward?

# HIDDEN FIGURES

## SHARED DREAMS, SHARED WORK



*"Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."*

*~Matthew 18:19-20*

*Hidden Figures* is so inspirational because it reminds us of a time in our history when we were, at least in one respect, united in a common goal, the race to space. Men and women (black and white) were captivated by this quest and dared to dream the impossible. In many instances, as the film shows, people put aside their differences and transcended an oppressive status quo to achieve these goals and dreams.

We live in a deeply divided world, politically, culturally, and economically. These divisions run deep and, at times, seem like they can never be bridged, which makes speaking of a shared goal seemingly impossible. Even so, this should not deter us from pursuing the betterment of our communities, both near and far. If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, scripture is full of encouragement for us to work together in unity through faith. If we consider the verses from Matthew above, this shared work can have unimaginable outcomes.

While the challenges that face us today are huge, we should also remember, and be encouraged by, the reality that true change rarely takes place overnight. Can we begin, in our own, small communities, to identify opportunities for change and improvement? Can we band together with people similar to, and different from, us to take on these challenges?

## Questions for Consideration

1. Think about the times in which change has taken place in your communities, even the smallest change. What actions or events birthed that change and what brought it to fruition?
2. Where in your communities do you now see the need for change? What small actions could set that change in motion?

# HIDDEN FIGURES

IT'S  
ALL  
ABOUT  
EDUCATION



*Train up a child in the way he should go,  
Even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

~Proverbs 22:6

*Hidden Figures* should be required viewing, especially in our junior high and high schools. As it celebrates technology and the sciences, it uplifts women and revels in the very real contributions that they have made, and continue to make, in these fields. It also reveals how important education has been, and continues to be, in improving our individual and collective lives. It is important to note that this education doesn't *only* take place in the classroom.

Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary are all very brilliant and excel at every level of education and task set before them. Despite their intelligence, wisdom, and success, they refuse to stop learning. Katherine accepts a challenging position, Mary applies for graduate classes, and Dorothy teaches herself an early computer language, which eventually leads to a promotion. These women are the products of, and a testament to, a good education. But education also takes place outside of the classroom. The men of NASA are all brilliant as well, but they still have important lessons to learn. Their education comes through encounters and shared experiences with others that may be different from them—here, namely, African American women.

As a result, *Hidden Figures* embodies the famous Proverb quoted above. The Book of Proverbs is full of verses about the importance of pursuing and valuing knowledge and wisdom and in instilling this quest, so to speak, in children at a young age. Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary excelled as adults in their field because the love of learning and the celebration of knowledge and wisdom was such a part of their childhood that it became second nature to them later in life. If we can follow the wisdom of Proverbs and the example of these brilliant women, perhaps we can contribute to a future generation of leaders that love knowledge and use wisdom to cure the problems that face us.

## Questions for Consideration

1. Think about your educational experiences. Where has education shaped and/or improved your life?  
Where have encounters with others shaped and/or improved your life?
2. In what ways is your community of faith committed to education? If it's not, how might you help change this?  
Are there ways in which educational and faith organizations can partner together to improve their wider communities?