

Isa. 40:1–11

Ps. 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Pet. 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

Our Strong Shepherd

**Goal for
the Session**

Tweens will hear Isaiah’s announcement of God as our strong shepherd and plan to treat others with God’s comfort.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Isaiah 40:1–11

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective,” Kathleen M. O’Connor

This passage creates a theological terra firma for a fearful people, not in the destroyed temple, the collapsed monarchy, or the broken covenant of the past, but in God’s never-failing word. At a time when other tangible and intangible ways of relating to God have collapsed, the prophetic word is their anchor. This may be why vocabulary of speaking and calling, voice and word, calling and commanding dominates the text. Though everything else fails, God’s word endures forever, and that God comes to lead them home.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective,” George W. Stroup

For those who live in the midst of exile, cultural collapse, and communal disaster, there can be no true hope except in God. It is futile to hope in individuals or even in the strength of the community, for human beings are inconstant, are fickle, and break their promises. Eventually they wither and fade, not simply because they are mortal, but because they are untrustworthy. The only one who can be trusted to make right what is so badly wrong, who can lead Judah out of exile and into the promised land, is the one whose Word will alone “stand forever” (v. 8).

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective,” Cynthia A. Jarvis

The God we shall see, says Second Isaiah in this pericope, looks like this: on one hand, God will come with might and God’s arm will rule; on the other hand, God will feed this flock like a shepherd. “Here is your God!” we say and so turn those who dwell in unforgiven past tenses to a Word made flesh, pregnant with God’s “shall” and “will.” “Here is your God!” we shout to those whose impending death has made them demand a miracle and so insinuate the mighty Word that alone negates our mortality against its every rival. “Here is your God!” we sing, and with Handel lift up our voice with strength, heralds one and all of good tidings.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard F. Ward

In the face of derision and indifference, we are to speak of this God whose fierce compassion and care for humankind trumps the power of the other “gods” who seem to enjoy sovereignty in human relationships. Advent is a time to hear the promises spoken or sung to the community of faith once again and then sit with them through the season. It is also a time for that community to find its own voice, overcome its objections, and speak words of comfort and assurance to anyone who feels separated or abandoned by God that God *will* arrive and *will* come in gentle power.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Isaiah 40:1–11

Focus on Your Teaching

Tweens seek guidance. Whether navigating the often tumultuous physical and emotional changes of adolescence, rapidly shifting social relationships at school and in the neighborhood, or emerging plans and concerns about “when they grow up,” most tweens want someone to help them find their way—even if they won’t always admit it. Their hopes and fears about today and tomorrow can help them connect with the exiles in Babylon who heard Isaiah’s proclamation. This message of God’s powerful and loving presence and God’s promised guidance through life’s challenges can be comforting news for the tweens you teach too.

Dear God, as I await the coming of your Son, strengthen me to announce and embody your strong love for your people. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- purple or blue cloth
- Advent wreath or 4 votive candles
- matches
- Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player
- Color Pack 1, 2, 3, 27
- copies of Resource Sheets 1, 2
- blindfold
- Bibles
- old road map
- scissors
- markers
- Internet-connected device (optional)

For Responding

- option 1: Bibles, paper, drawing supplies
- option 2: Bibles, recording of “Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted” (from Handel’s *Messiah*)
- option 3: small flower pots, colorful permanent markers, potting soil, herb seeds, craft sticks, water

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, arrange a purple or blue cloth, using the color your church uses during Advent, in the center of your learning space. Place an Advent wreath or four votive candles on the cloth. If you are using option 2 in Responding, plan to play a recording of “Ev’ry Valley Shall Be Exalted” (from Handel’s *Messiah*). If you are using option 3, bring a small (about 4") clay or plastic flower pot for each learner.

Greet tweens by name. Gather around the Advent wreath and explain that today is the second Sunday of Advent. Read aloud the following Advent opening. Have learners repeat each phrase:

Yesterday (point thumbs over shoulders) *Jesus came as a baby in Bethlehem.*

Tomorrow (point index fingers ahead) *Jesus will come to rule in glory.*

Today (wrap arms around self) *Jesus comes to our hearts in the Holy Spirit.*

Ask volunteers to light two candles as the group sings the first two stanzas of “God, We Sing” (Color Pack 27; track 7 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021). Tell learners the candles represent hope and peace. Place Color Pack 3 on the cloth. (If you have Color Pack 25 from the Fall 2020 materials, place it there, also.) Ask:

✠ What does peace look like? Sound like? Taste like? Smell like?

Ask a volunteer to pray aloud:

Holy God, as we light the Advent candles, make your presence known, that we might experience your peace. Come, Lord Jesus.

Extinguish the candles.

God, We Sing

God, we sing with praise
 to you,
 Light the flame of *hope*
 anew;
 Light this candle, light the
 way,
 Bring *hope* into our hearts
 today.
 Jesus, near us as we pray,
 Let *hope* be in our hearts
 today.

God, we sing with praise
 to you,
 Light the flame of *peace*
 anew; . . .

Prophet: In Bible times a prophet was someone who delivered a message from God (“the word of our God,” v. 8). Biblical prophets did not so much predict the future as help people understand how God was at work in the circumstances of their lives.

Option: Show a short video of sheep being herded, such as: www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdrBX3cqF6U. Ask: How does watching an actual shepherd at work help us better understand Isaiah’s image of God as our shepherd?

EXPLORING

Blindfold a volunteer. Turn him or her around several times. Ask the volunteer to walk to a door or window while other learners remain silent. The volunteer must stop when he or she encounters an obstacle. After the volunteer meets an obstacle, invite other learners to call out guidance. Afterward, ask the volunteer:

✠ How did you feel when you started? After you heard voices directing you?

Say that today’s Bible reading is about some of God’s people who were feeling disoriented. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Session Background). Ask a volunteer to read aloud “The Babylonian Exile.”

Distribute Bibles and have learners turn to Isaiah 40. Ask a volunteer to read aloud “The Isaiah Trilogy” on the resource sheet. Point out that Isaiah 40 marks the beginning of “Second Isaiah.” Ask two strong readers to read aloud Isaiah 40:1–11, alternating verses.

Place Color Pack 1 on the table or floor. Form two teams. Give each team a copy of Resource Sheet 2 (Highway Sections) and scissors. Have teams cut apart the highway sections. Explain that teams will use their Bibles to help them answer questions about the Bible reading. For each correct answer, the team may lay a straight section of road on Color Pack 1. For each incorrect answer, it must lay a crooked section. After all questions are asked, the team with the straightest “highway” wins a round of applause. Alternate teams as you ask the following questions, and allow only fifteen seconds for teams to answer:

- ✠ God’s announcement of comfort is for what city? (Jerusalem)
- ✠ How much has Jerusalem paid “for all her sins”: enough, double, or triple? (double)
- ✠ Where is the way or highway of the Lord to be built? (wilderness or desert)
- ✠ How will God’s highway reshape mountains and valleys? (valleys lifted up, mountains made low)
- ✠ Will God’s highway reveal God’s glory, wrath, or wisdom? (glory)
- ✠ How are people like grass and flowers? (need sunshine and water, will die/wither)
- ✠ Fill in the blank: “The ____ of our God will stand forever.” (word)
- ✠ Fill in the blank: “Here is your ____!” (God)
- ✠ Isaiah compares God to what kind of farm worker? (shepherd)
- ✠ Which of these actions will God, our shepherd, *not* do: feed, carry, shear, or lead? (shear)

Display Color Pack 2. Ask:

- ✠ When does a shepherd’s work require strength? When does it require gentleness?
- ✠ What image might Isaiah use today to communicate the same truths about God?

Pass around an old road map and scissors and have each learner cut off a square about 4" x 4". Comment that trying to find our way with only a piece of a map could be disorienting. Ask:

- ✠ When might people feel emotionally or spiritually disoriented?
- ✠ How might you comfort someone who is feeling this way?

**EASY
PREP**

You can view a performance of this section of Handel's Messiah at www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NCO6UzZ2R8.

Invite learners to use markers to write "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9) on their squares as a reminder that God promises to guide them.

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

- 1. Word Pictures** Learners will ponder how God's presence can guide the ways they care for others. Instruct learners to choose a word about God's actions from today's text that suggests a way they might care for others. Encourage them to write, draw, or paint their chosen word in a way that communicates its meaning. For example, a learner might draw a person wrapped in a blanket formed from the letters in "comfort" (v. 1). Take a moment to tweens to explain their art to the group. Display finished word pictures for others in the congregation to see.
- 2. Music Pictures** Tweens will grow in appreciating how music can help them sense God's presence. Ask learners to turn in their Bibles to Isaiah 40:4 and read the verse to themselves as they listen to a recording of "Ev'ry Valley Shall Be Exalted" from Handel's *Messiah*. Invite them to describe how Handel's music conveys the meaning of the words. Discuss: When has either listening to or performing music helped you to sense God's power and presence? Encourage learners to ask their parents about what music helps them to sense God's presence.
- 3. Plant Gift** Learners will create a Christmas gift to remind recipients of God's unfailing Word. Give each learner a small flower pot to decorate with colorful permanent markers. Lead them in the following steps: Fill pot about three-fourths with potting soil. Plant herb seeds according to the package instructions. Write "Isaiah 40:8" in large letters at one end of a craft stick. Insert the stick into the center of the pot. Lightly water the soil. Encourage learners to give the pot away, reminding the recipient to water it and keep it in sunlight. In time, herbs will grow around the craft stick; when they wither away, a visual reminder of God's promise will remain.

CLOSING

Gather learners around the Advent wreath and light two candles. Hold up Color Pack 3. Ask:
✠ What does this image suggest about the meaning of the word *peace*? How does God's presence in our lives promote peace?

Teach the learner's response and then pray aloud:

Teacher: *O God, listen to our cries and come. Fill us with peace as we prepare to celebrate your Son's birth.*

Learners: *Come, Lord Jesus, come. We wait in hope. We wait in peace. Amen.*

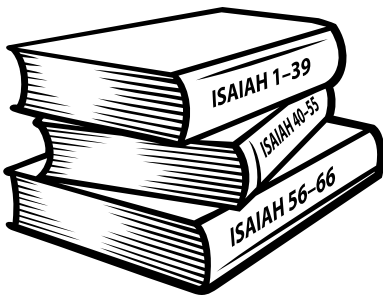
Invite learners to exchange handshakes, high fives, or fist bumps of peace as they say to one another: "The peace of Christ be with you."

Session Background

The Babylonian Exile



In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonian army conquered Judah. They destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem, including the temple. The Babylonians captured many of Judah's people and took them to Babylon, where they forced them to stay for about fifty years. This time is called the Babylonian exile. During the years in Babylon, many Jews came to believe God was using the exile to punish them for their sin. They wondered if God had abandoned them. They wondered if God would ever lead them back home.



The Isaiah Trilogy

Many biblical scholars think the book of Isaiah actually contains three "books," recording prophecies from before, during, and after the time of exile in Babylon.

First Isaiah (1–39): Prophecies from before the exile.

Second Isaiah (40–55): Prophecies from near the end of the exile.

Third Isaiah (56–66): Prophecies from after the time the exiles were given permission to return to Jerusalem.

B.C.E. (BEFORE THE COMMON ERA)

C.E. (COMMON ERA)

1200

1000

900

600

500

about 4

about 33

Exodus

King David

Kingdom divides into Israel and Judah

Judah conquered
Babylonian Exile

Jesus' birth

Jesus' death

December 6, 2020
Our Strong Shepherd

Tweens
Resource Sheet 2

Highway Sections

