

Isa. 40:1–11

Ps. 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Pet. 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

Message of Hope

**Goal for
the Session**

*Children will observe and celebrate God as our hope in the
midst of difficult situations.*

■ 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

YOU WILL NEED

- small table or large box
- purple or blue cloth
- yellow paper
- crayons, pencils
- scissors, tape
- Bible
- Color Pack 1, 2, 27, 28
- Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player
- copies of Resource Sheet 1

For Responding

- option 1: 8" round paper doilies, copies of Resource Sheet 2, crayons or markers, scissors, glue sticks
- option 2: construction paper, stapler, tape, markers or crayons, narrow gift wrap ribbon
- option 3: *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player, Color Pack 28

Some churches use the color blue in worship during Advent as a symbol of hope. Some churches use purple, a color of royalty, to honor the coming of our king, Jesus. In your class, use the same color your church uses in worship.

Focus on Your Teaching

When your learners hear the word *hope* during December, these concrete thinkers will likely think of their Christmas wishes. In families where money is limited or where there is animosity about parental custody arrangements for the holidays, children may not feel hopeful at all. Tune in to the feelings that learners express concerning their holiday plans. Assure them that God's gifts of love and hope are for them, however they celebrate Jesus' birth. This month, expect learners to be more restless or excitable. Try to balance energetic activities with quieter ones.

Gracious God, help me to quiet myself and listen for your Word. When I face difficult situations, renew my strength and refresh my hope. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, color the candles and ribbon on Color Pack 1 with a blue or purple crayon, matching the color your church uses in worship during Advent. Make two small yellow paper flames. (If you still have Color Pack 25 from the Fall 2020 materials, hang it outside your teaching area to help others count the Sundays in Advent. Add a flame to it each week.) Set up a worship table by covering a small table or box with a purple or blue cloth, using the color your church uses in Advent. Place Color Pack 1 and a Bible, opened to Isaiah 40, on the cloth. If you are using option 2 in Responding, cut five 12" lengths of narrow gift wrap ribbon for each child.

Welcome each child as he or she arrives.

Gather learners around the worship table. Remind them that it is the season of Advent. It is time to prepare for Christmas, Jesus' birthday! On Color Pack 1, point out that there is one candle for each Sunday in Advent. Explain this is the second Sunday in Advent, and the candle this week is the candle of hope. Ask a volunteer to tape yellow paper flames to the first and second candles as the group sings "I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy" (Color Pack 27; track 12 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021).

Invite the children to tell about times they were really hoping for something. Follow up by asking what happened. Say that today's Bible reading is about hope.

EXPLORING

Show Color Pack 2 to introduce Isaiah. Explain that Isaiah was a prophet. God chose him to speak God's word to the people in his nation. Open your Bible to Isaiah 40:1–11 to show where Isaiah's words are recorded. Read aloud the following version of the text:

I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy

I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
down in my heart,
Down in my heart, down in
my heart;
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
down in my heart,
Down in my heart to stay.

God is with us, God is with
us, praise ye the Lord;
Praise ye the Lord, praise ye
the Lord.

God is with us, God is with
us, praise ye the Lord;
Praise ye the Lord always.

The people in Isaiah's nation, Israel, had lived through a long time of war. Jerusalem, their capital city, had been destroyed. Their enemies had captured them and taken them to a faraway land. They thought there was no hope.

God told Isaiah to comfort Israel. Isaiah sang a song: "Comfort, comfort my people!" says your God" (Isaiah 40:1, CEB). God had Isaiah tell the people that their hard times would come to an end. God would lead them back to Jerusalem and help them rebuild.

Isaiah told the people that God's power would save them. He told them to trust God, because "God's word will exist forever" (v. 8, CEB).

Isaiah told the people to be on the lookout for the ways God was working to lead them back home. He said, "Go up on a high mountain, messenger Zion! Raise your voice and shout, messenger Jerusalem! Raise it; don't be afraid; . . . Here is your God!" (v. 9, CEB).

Isaiah said that God will treat God's people like a shepherd treats his sheep.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Like a Shepherd). Ask learners to trace the dot letters with a finger as the group reads the word *shepherd* in unison several times. Read aloud the Bible verse, inviting learners to join in. Discuss:

- ✧ Why did Isaiah say that God treats us like a shepherd would? What kinds of things does God, our shepherd, do?
- ✧ What good news of hope did Isaiah speak to the people?

Distribute pencils and have learners to use them to trace the dots in *shepherd* and then to complete the dot-to-dot puzzle. Invite them to imagine they are this sheep, and they are sitting on God's lap. Ask:

- ✧ What are you saying to God?
- ✧ What is God saying to you?

Summarize that God stays close to us in our hearts, keeps us safe, and shows us how to live. We can trust God to take care of us, and this gives us hope! Discuss:

- ✧ What helps you to have hope when you are feeling sad, scared, discouraged?
(Responses may include: receiving a hug, having someone listen to their problem, being with a friend, singing, praying.)

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **Doily Sheep** This activity will help the children identify God as their shepherd and a source of hope. Give each child a 8" round paper doily. Have learners fold their doilies in half. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Doily Sheep), crayons or markers, scissors,

EASY
PREP

Some messages children might shout: God loves you! Don't give up! Our hope is in God! Trust the Lord! God will help us!

and glue sticks. Tell children to color the head and legs of the sheep and cut them out. Also have them cut out the verse. After learners glue the head and legs to the doily, have them glue the verse on the sheep, wherever they choose. When all have finished, invite learners to hold their sheep and close their eyes. Tell them you will ask them some questions; they will answer to themselves, inside their heads: When do you feel close to God, your shepherd? What words of hope and love do you sense God is whispering to you today? Encourage them to take time to listen for God's words of hope and love at home too.

- 2. Good News Megaphone** Children will make megaphones to help them to shout out messages of God's love and hope. Distribute construction paper and crayons or markers. Invite learners to decorate one side of the paper with happy designs and the words *hope* and *love*. Show learners how to lay the paper on a flat surface, decorated side down, and then start rolling the paper from one corner to make a cone shape with a small opening at one end and a large opening at the other. For each child, staple the edge of the paper cone at the large opening. Have children tape the seam to prevent the megaphone from unrolling. Give each child five 12" pieces of narrow gift wrap ribbon to tape around the large opening as streamers. Talk about what messages of hope learners might shout through their megaphones. Invite each one to deliver several messages to the group.
- 3. Music of Hope** Music can help children recall and experience messages of hope. Play "The Whole World Is in God's Hands" (Color Pack 28; track 19 of *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021). Review the words and invite learners to sing along as you play it again. Work as a group to create motions to accompany the words of one or two of the stanzas. Sing the song again with the motions. Discuss: What message of hope do you hear in this song? Who might like to hear this message of hope from you?

The Whole World Is in God's Hands

*The whole world is in God's hands,
 The whole wide world is in God's hands,
 The whole world is in God's hands,
 The world is in God's hands.*

The wind and the wave are in God's hands . . .

The fish and the bird are in God's hands . . .

All of the animals are in God's hands . . .

All the world's people are in God's hands . . .

You and me are in God's hands . . .

CLOSING

Gather around the worship table and invite learners to tell what they know about hope and the hope God gives us. Sing the following words to the tune of "I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy" (Color Pack 27; track 12 of *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021) to emphasize the Advent theme for this Sunday:

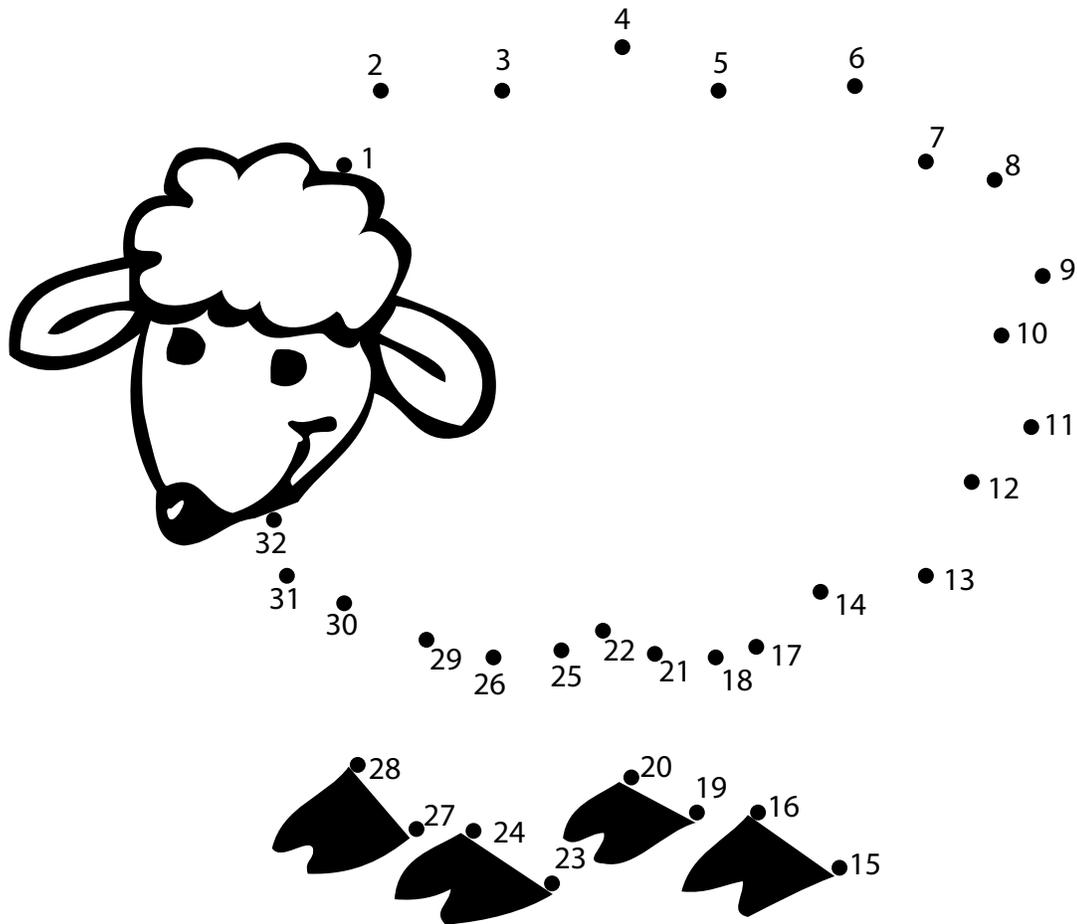
I've got the Advent hope, Advent hope, down in my heart,
 down in my heart, down in my heart.

I've got the Advent hope, Advent hope, down in my heart,
 down in my heart to stay.

Bless each child, saying: "(Name), God blesses you with hope."

Like a Shepherd

shepherd



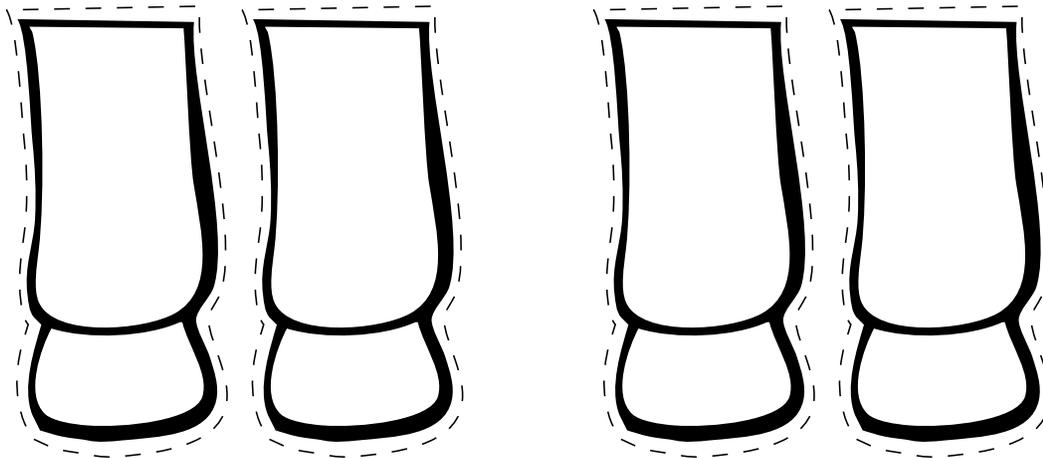
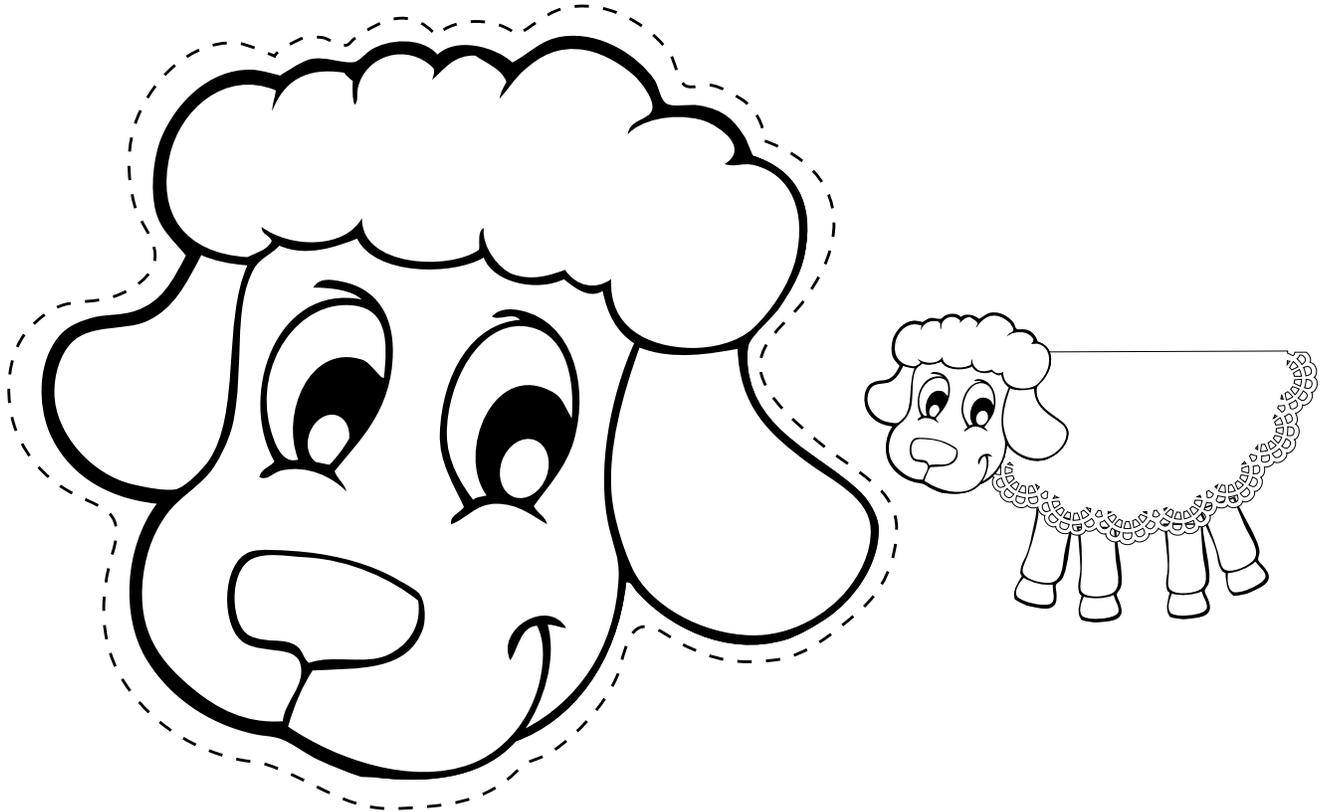
Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;
he will gather lambs in his arms and lift
them onto his lap.

—Isaiah 40:11, CEB

December 6, 2020
Message of Hope

Grades (K) 1–2
Resource Sheet 2

Doily Sheep



Like a shepherd, God will
tend the flock.

—Isaiah 40:11, CEB

Isa. 40:1–11

Ps. 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Pet. 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

Shepherd with a Mighty Arm

Goal for the Session

Children will listen to Isaiah's words about the comforting God and acknowledge how they can accept and give thanks for such comfort.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

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

For many children, daily life is frenetic. School opening gets them out of bed early. They have activities after school and homework at night. Weekends may be filled with sports or other group activities. Think about the children in your group. What do they talk about when you ask about their week past? Where are the patches of peace and comforting words in their day-to-day lives? Remember that the approach of Christmas adds stress to their lives as well as to the lives of the adults around them.

God of peace and comforting words, help me set the priorities of this season appropriately and convey those priorities to the children. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- poster board
- marker
- purple or blue cloth
- Advent wreath
- Bible
- offering basket
- matches
- Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player
- Color Pack 1, 2, 27
- Resource Sheet 1, 2

For Responding

- option 1: 8" round paper doilies, copies of Resource Sheet 3, crayons or markers, scissors, glue sticks
- option 2: construction paper, markers, hand mirrors, white paper, scissors, tape
- option 3: small flowerpots, permanent markers, potting soil, herb seeds, craft sticks, water
- option 4: *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player; Color Pack 27

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, print the Advent ritual on poster board to use during the Sundays of Advent and underline the children's parts. If you have already done so, replace *hope* with *peace* and change *first* to *second*. Place a bookmark at Isaiah in the worship table Bible.

As the children arrive, invite them to arrange these items on the worship table: purple or blue cloth, Advent wreath, Bible, and offering basket. When it is time to begin, play "God, We Sing" (Color Pack 27; track 7 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021). Explain that today is the second Sunday of Advent and that a new church year began last Sunday. Light two candles on the Advent wreath. Show the children the Advent ritual on poster board. Explain that they will say the underlined lines. Lead the ritual or invite a child to lead it.

Leader: On this second Sunday of Advent,

Everyone: we remember the peace that God gives us.

Leader: And we pray:

Everyone: God of peace, we gather today to prepare for the birth of your son. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Receive the offering. Extinguish the candles.

For children who were absent on the previous Sunday, particularly since it was a holiday weekend in the United States, invite the group members to review what they know about Advent. Some children will remember the Advent wreath or an Advent chain. Others may recall that the season contains the four Sundays before Christmas and that during this time the church prepares for the birth of Jesus. Encourage them to tell how they celebrate Advent in their homes. Summarize their answers so the information above is clear.

To move to the theme for the session, ask:

✠ What words make you feel better when you are sick? Lonely? Tired? Scared?

After the children have responded, suggest that they listen for comforting words in the Bible story.

EXPLORING

Show a short video of sheep being herded, such as: [youtube.com/watch?v=VdrBX3cqF6U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdrBX3cqF6U)

Ask a child to retrieve the Bible from the worship table and open it to the bookmark. Read or invite a volunteer to read the name of the book. Invite a child to turn to Isaiah 64, the focus scripture for the previous session. Show Color Pack 1 and invite the children to tell what they remember about Isaiah. Supplement what they say with this information:

Isaiah was a prophet of God during a time when the Israelites, the people of God, were taken to another country and forced to stay there. The verses from Isaiah in the previous session, near the end of the book, are a lament, a crying out in great sorrow and sadness referring to what they found when they returned to Jerusalem.

To include prereaders, appoint readers for each group and have each group echo the words.

Have a child turn to Isaiah 40. Explain that this part of the story occurs before the people returned, when they are sad about being away from their homeland. Tell the story on Resource Sheet 1 (A God of Strength and Tenderness). Ask:

- ✪ How did the people of Israel feel at the beginning of the story?
- ✪ How did they feel at the end?
- ✪ What helped them change?
- ✪ How did this change bring them peace?

Another way for the children to experience the story is with the choral reading on Resource Sheet 2 (Raise Your Voice). Leaders or older confident readers can take the parts of Narrator and Isaiah. Form two groups with the other children. After the choral reading, show Color Pack 2. Ask:

- ✪ What does it mean that “God will gather us up like lambs and carry us home”?
- ✪ Who is strong and caring in your life?

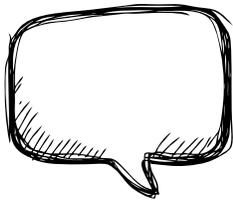
RESPONDING

If possible, provide two options so children have a choice. Select one that is more challenging for children who are able to work on their own.

1. **Doily Sheep** These sheep with words from Isaiah will remind the children during the week of a strong, comforting God. Give each child an 8" round paper doily. Have the children fold their doilies in half. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 3 (Doily Sheep), crayons or markers, scissors, and glue sticks. Have the children color the heads and legs for their sheep and cut them out, along with the verse. After they glue the head and legs to their doilies to make the sheep, they can glue the Bible verse on the sheep, wherever they wish. Read the verse together. Ask:

- ✪ What words of peace and comfort might God be whispering to you today?

Suggest that the children display their sheep at home to remind them of God's peace and comfort.



Speech bubble

**EASY
PREP**

God, We Sing

1. 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.

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

- 2. Comforting Words** The children will create comforting messages for themselves. Distribute construction paper and markers for them to draw portraits of themselves. Have hand mirrors available for them to look at themselves closely. Urge them to include details such as eyebrows, freckles, and eyelashes. From a sheet of white paper, have the children cut speech bubbles (see example in sidebar). On the speech bubble, each learner is to write a comforting message from God and tape it to his or her portrait. Place the portraits on the worship table.
- 3. Plant Gift** Thinking about those who give comforting words may bring memories of people special to the children. Provide small flowerpots for them to decorate with colorful designs using permanent markers. Fill each pot about three-quarters full with potting soil. Plant herb seeds according to the package directions. Write “Isaiah 40:8” in large letters at one end of a craft stick. Insert the stick in the center of the pot. Lightly water the soil. Encourage the children to keep the plants in sunlight and water them regularly. Invite them to give away the plant when the herbs cover the stick or give it to a special person now with instructions to keep it in the sunlight and water regularly.
- 4. Song** The children seek God’s hope through song. Read the first stanza of “God, We Sing” (Color Pack 27; track 7 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021). Talk together about what from God gives hope. Then read the second stanza and ask the same question about peace. After the conversation, sing stanzas one and two together.

CLOSING

As the children gather at the worship table, play “God, We Sing” (Color Pack 27; track 7 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021). Light the candles on the Advent wreath that were lit earlier. Explain that one candle represents the hope that comes from God and the second one represents the peace that God provides.

Sing the first and second stanzas of “God, We Sing.”

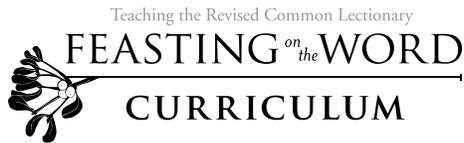
Pray:

God of strength and gentleness, we leave this time of learning and thinking to prepare for the birth of Jesus. Help us remember the hope and peace that come from you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

As each child leaves, say: “(Name), go with peace in God. Prepare for the birth of Jesus this week.”

December 6, 2020

Shepherd with
a Mighty Arm



Multi-Age
Resource Sheet 1

A God of Strength and Tenderness

based on Isaiah 40:1-11



Long before the people of Jerusalem were permitted to return to their homes, they were discouraged and filled with sadness that they could not live in Jerusalem. They needed words of comfort and the assurance that God had not forgotten them.

The prophet Isaiah, a prophet of God, was given words by God to say to the people. These words told of God's love for the people. After they had been waiting many years, God told Isaiah to tell them:

*God says, "I will comfort my people."
Speak kindly to the people of Jerusalem.
Tell them that their lives as slaves here will be over.
Tell them that I have forgiven them twice over.
A voice cries out in the desert, "Clear a path for God!
Make the highway smooth for God.
God's glory will be seen by everyone."
This is from God's mouth.*

The people listened and some of their sadness lifted, but Isaiah had more to say.

*God will come with strength, with a strong arm.
And God will come like a shepherd.
God will gather the lambs tenderly and carry them,
and God will guide the sheep gently.*

The people knew about strong armies and they knew about good shepherds. They felt better knowing that God would be both strong and gentle for them. Now they were certain that God would lead them home to Jerusalem.

December 6, 2020

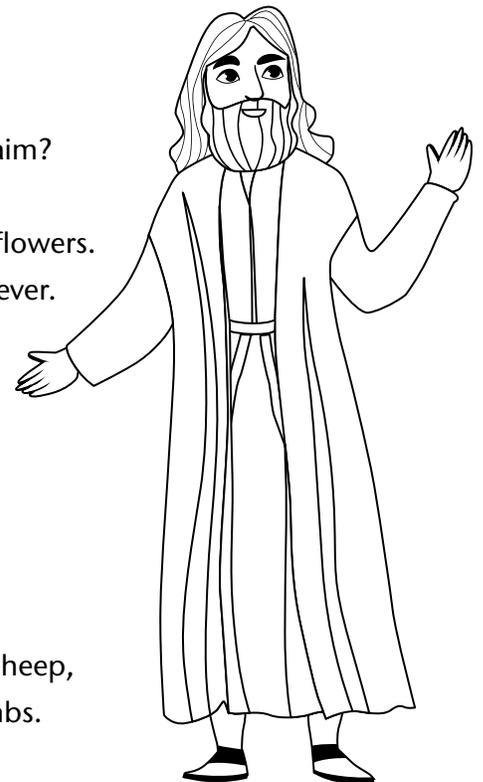
Shepherd with
a Mighty Arm

Multi-Age
Resource Sheet 2

Raise Your Voice

(Groups 1 and 2 stand on opposite sides of the learning space. Isaiah and Narrator stand in the center.)

- N** Narrator: It was a hard and difficult time for the people of God.
- 1** Group 1: Alone in exile.
- 2** Group 2: Far from home.
- A** All: Cut off from God.
- N** Narrator: Then God spoke:
- I** Isaiah: Comfort, comfort my people.
- 1** Group 1: Encourage them.
- 2** Group 2: They have suffered long enough.
- I** Isaiah: A voice cries out in the wilderness:
- 1** Group 1: God is coming!
- 2** Group 2: Get ready!
- I** Isaiah: Clear the way for God!
- 1** Group 1: Make the road smooth and straight.
- 2** Group 2: Fill in the bumps.
- I** Isaiah: God is coming!
- A** All: God is coming!
- I** Isaiah: A voice calls out:
- 1** Group 1: Proclaim a message.
- 2** Group 2: What message shall we proclaim?
- I** Isaiah: All humankind is like grass.
- 1** Group 1: They last no longer than wildflowers.
- 2** Group 2: But God's love stands firm forever.
- I** Isaiah: Climb a high mountain.
- 1** Group 1: Tell the good news.
- 2** Group 2: Shout it out!
- I** Isaiah: Raise your voice!
- 1** Group 1: Don't be afraid!
- 2** Group 2: God is coming!
- I** Isaiah: God will take care of us.
- 1** Group 1: Like a shepherd cares for the sheep,
- 2** Group 2: God will gather us up like lambs.
- A** All: And carry us home.

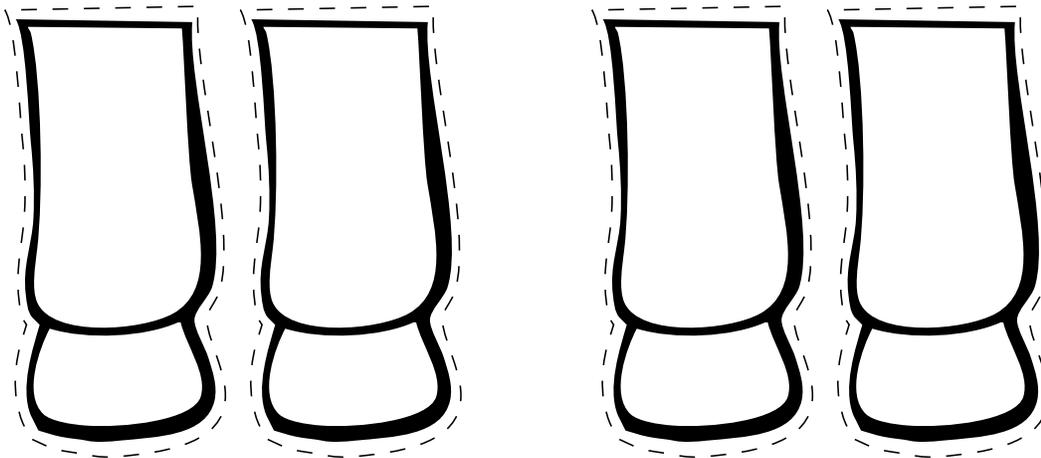
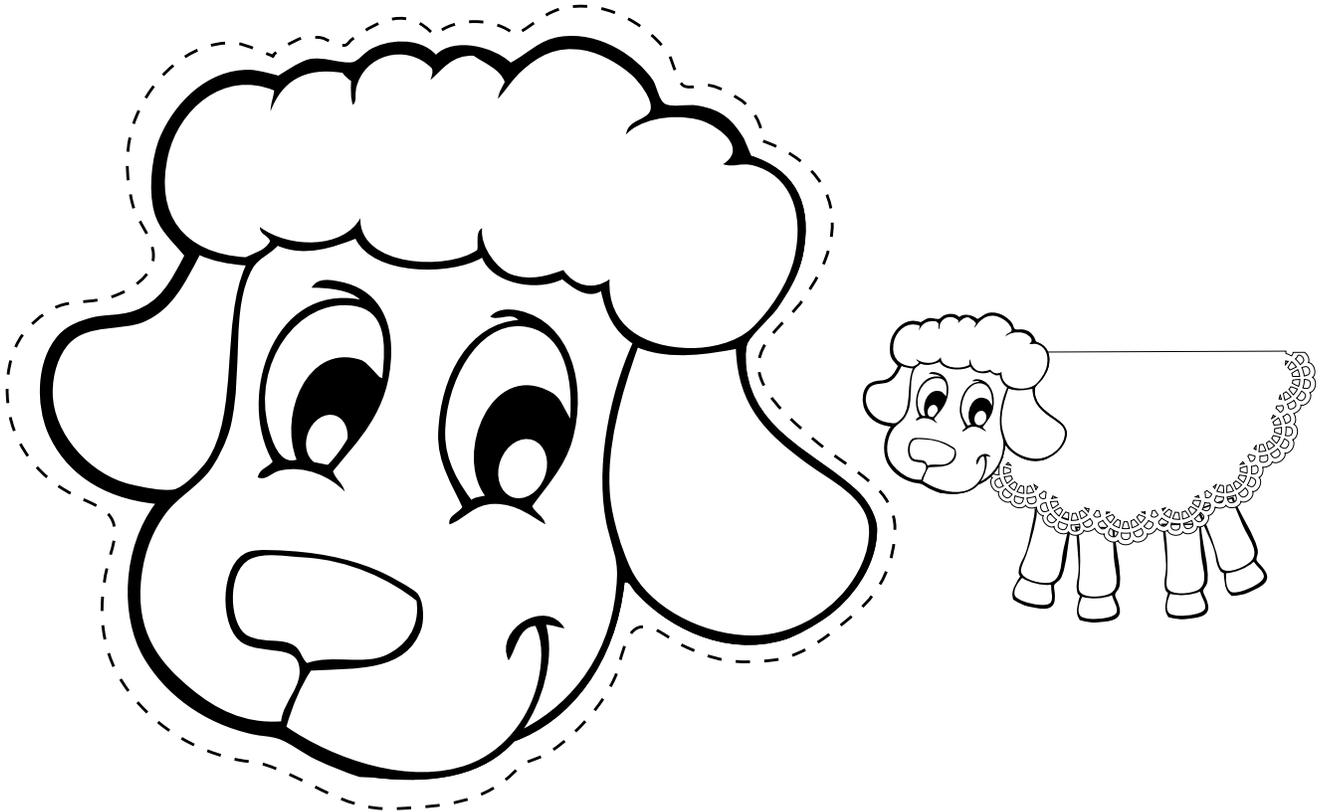


December 6, 2020

Shepherd with
a Mighty Arm

Multi-Age
Resource Sheet 3

Doily Sheep



Like a shepherd, God will
tend the flock.

—Isaiah 40:11, CEB

Isa. 40:1–11

Ps. 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Pet. 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

A Reason to Hope

**Goal for
the Session**

Adults will rediscover the source of their comfort as described by Isaiah and express hope in it.

■ 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

The holiday season is a time of celebration—filled with office parties, family gatherings, and exhortations to “Get in the holiday spirit!” As the glistening snow covers the frozen earth, though, so our celebrations tend to cover the angst of life. Depression and loneliness often increase during the season. Be aware of the burdens you carry as you prepare this session. The adults who gather with you will bring similar concerns. Specific struggles may not be revealed, but participants will welcome the opportunity to talk about how Isaiah’s words apply to their lives.

God of comfort, grant me the sensitivity and insight that I need to lead this study. May I sense your presence and movement. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Advent wreath
- candles
- lighter
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 13, 2020

For Responding

- option 1: computer, tablet, or smartphone
- option 2: felt blocks, glue gun, scissors, 3' x 3' backing cloth

The book of Isaiah was composed by at least two authors. Their messages and the context to which they spoke are different.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place the Advent wreath in a central location in the room and have a lighter available. If using option 3 in Responding, compile a list of local service ministries with contact information. Someone in the church office or a person in the congregation who is familiar with social ministries may be able to help.

Welcome participants and introduce any visitors. When all have taken a seat, light two of the Advent wreath candles. This week’s candle is the love candle.

Acknowledge that often it is very difficult to sense God’s love when we face disappointment or tragedy. Ask the participants to think of a time in their lives when they experienced a huge disappointment. Then have them identify one reaction they had to that disappointment. Invite a few volunteers to briefly tell their reactions. Tell the participants that today’s session explores God’s words to a people who have faced a huge disappointment.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O Loving God, as we explore your words of comfort to your hurting people, may your Spirit enlighten us so that these words speak comfort and hope to us today. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have a volunteer read Isaiah 40:1–11.

Explain that today’s focus text was written to God’s people while they were in exile. This time is called the Babylonian Captivity (587–538 BCE). Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Words of Comfort), which explains the plight of the exiles and the context of today’s

focus scripture. Have the participants read the resource sheet silently and then invite reactions and observations.

Spend a few minutes discussing the meaning of verses 1–2. Tell participants that the exiles, like many people, when faced with disaster, asked, “What did I do to deserve this?” They understood their suffering to be authored by God. The book of Isaiah affirmed their perspective and proclaimed that God was punishing them for their rebellion and hardheartedness. Today’s focus scripture is the beginning of the second part of Isaiah (chapters 40–55, commonly called Second Isaiah) and promises that God has not abandoned God’s people. Along with the punishment, there is also forgiveness, restoration, and hope.

Ask the participants:

- ✧ How comfortable are you with seeing God as the cause of suffering?
- ✧ Can God both punish and love?

Form three groups. Ask each group to find the source of comfort in their assigned verses. Have group one look at verses 6–8, group two look at verses 9–10, and group three look at verse 11. If the group is fewer than six people, form two groups and have both groups examine verse 11 in addition to their other verses.

Gather the whole group together and ask each small group to report on their findings. Their responses should be similar to: verses 6–8, people are fickle, but God is faithful; verses 9–10, God will come and act powerfully; verse 11, God will minister to God’s people with gentle love.

Have the group reflect on these sources of comfort by asking:

- ✧ How were Isaiah’s words comforting to the exiles?
- ✧ Which image of comfort offers the most hope?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Isaiah 40:1–11). Have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt. Ask the participants to identify how Second Isaiah sought to comfort the exiles. Take a few moments to read other Second Isaiah passages that comfort God’s people. Ask for volunteers to read Isaiah 41:17–20, 42:1–4 (note that the exiles understood the “servant” to be Israel) and 43:1–2.

Have everyone read the “Now What?” excerpt silently. Invite a brief discussion on what it might mean for your congregation to “find its own voice [and] overcome its objections.” Draw Exploring a close by asking the participants to identify ways by which your congregation “speak[s] words of comfort and assurance to anyone who feels separated or abandoned by God that God *will* arrive and *will* come in gentle power.”

EASY
PREP

Group involvement in service projects builds up the group and meets needs. If there are too many schedule conflicts, though, encourage participants to act individually.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Hope Through Music** The words of comfort, which are found in this passage of Isaiah, are reasons for hope. One way participants can be encouraged to hope is through music. Play the music video “Comfort Ye My People” by Lamb (*Lamb Favorites* CD of 1995; www.youtube.com/watch?v=-60VmCRYLE). Allow time for the participants to tell how the music inspired hope in them. If the participants would enjoy a more classical piece of music, play “Comfort Ye My People,” from Handel’s *Messiah* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dDjva1ecYo). Encourage participants to be alert during Advent for the themes of comfort and hope in the music sung during worship and in the Christmas songs heard.
- 2. Crafting Love** As Isaiah used visual imagery to craft his message, so the participants may express their Advent love by crafting a visual symbol. Discuss ideas for a visual symbol of the love expressed in Isaiah and explored in this session. Reach a consensus. Direct adults to the banner-making materials, and have them work together to create an Advent banner of love. Encourage adults to bring that visual symbol into their prayers and preparations this week for the season of Advent.
- 3. Community Service Project** Comfort and hope are not meant to be hoarded, but rather given away. Provide the participants with the list of ministries you have compiled. Point out that the lists are not exhaustive and that additional ministries can be selected. Invite the group members to discuss the various opportunities and decide which one they would like to do. If your group is large, the participants may form two or three small groups and choose a specific project that they are passionate about. Challenge the participants to celebrate God’s words of comfort with others by taking the time to serve at their chosen ministry at least once during the season of Advent.

CLOSING

Have each person say a word of comfort that they rediscovered during the discussion of Isaiah 40:1–11. After everyone has had a chance to speak, gather around the Advent wreath. Ask the participants to join hands. Extinguish the two candles.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Eternal God, we leave this place and enter the world as your people who have heard you speak words of comfort and hope to us. Empower us to speak these words of comfort and hope to others, as we walk among our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 13, 2020, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet before the next session.

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.

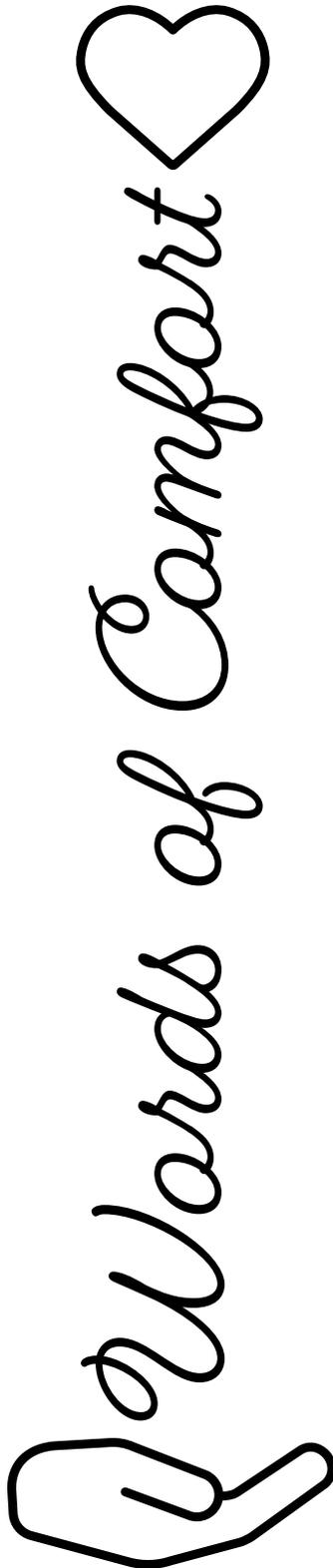
NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—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.

Words of Comfort



Words of Comfort

In 587 BCE, the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem ended. The temple was destroyed. The city was ransacked and leveled. Many of the people of Judah and their leaders were forced into exile in Babylonia. Before the exile, the prophet whom scholars now call First Isaiah spoke harsh words of judgment upon the people of Judah. The people had forsaken the Lord, had gone after other gods, trusted in foreign powers, and neglected the needs of the poor. After the people were exiled, a new prophet arose whom scholars identify as Second Isaiah. Recorded about one hundred years after First Isaiah, his words were very different. They were words of comfort.

The exiles had lost everything they held dear. The temple where the Lord had dwelt had been destroyed. They had been driven from the land promised to their ancestor, Abraham. Their religious observances and dietary customs were forbidden, and they struggled to keep themselves a separate people. They questioned their faith: Had the God of Judah been defeated by the gods of the Babylonians? Was their God powerful enough to rescue them? Would their God once again turn his face toward them?

There are times when the words “Don’t worry, everything will be all right” can seem like a cliché. Isaiah’s words were words of comfort to the exiles, because they redirected the attention of the people from their plight to the God of their salvation.