



YOUTH STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Words of Hope, Restoration, and Peace: A Youth Study for Advent

Isaiah: Words of Hope

Introduction for the Leader

Study Overview

Baby Jesus is coming! This is the time of year when we read the story of John the Baptist preparing the way for the Lord, the news of Mary receiving strange news from the angel Gabriel, and the poem in John's Gospel about the Word becoming flesh. But Advent is also the time of year when we are most likely to hear from the prophets of the Old Testament.

There is good reason for this. The prophets spoke of someone in King David's lineage who would reign as messiah and king. The prophets point us toward Bethlehem, the Davidic lineage, pregnancy, and the birth of a child as signs that God's saving action is on the way! When the early Christians and Gospel writers set out to tell the story of Jesus, the words of the Old Testament prophets were ringing in their ears.

But the prophets wrote centuries before Jesus' birth, and, while the Gospel writers looked back and saw how Jesus fulfilled those ancient words, these prophecies were originally meant for their own contemporary audience. When Isaiah, Micah, or Zephaniah speak, they aren't looking five hundred to seven hundred years into the future. They are looking at the people and events of their present situation. They are speaking words of hope, restoration, justice, and peace, words

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Words of hope

GATHERING

- Sharing words of hope

OPENING

- Prayer
- Introduction to the study

EXPLORING

- Isaiah and Jesus
- Hope for today

RESPONDING

- Using *your* words

CLOSING

- Prayers of hope

not meant to be put into a time capsule until Jesus would arrive but to be heard in light of the current and urgent needs of their communities.

This Advent series will engage some of the familiar prophecies we often hear during the season of Advent. Youth will learn about the original context of these prophecies, explore the Advent themes inherent in them (hope, restoration, justice, and peace), and discuss how these prophecies also echo through the stories of Jesus.

Introduction to Session 1: Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah makes his first appearance in the Bible in 2 Kings 19–20, where his story is tied exclusively to the story of King Hezekiah of Judah (the southern kingdom to Israel's northern kingdom). Isaiah and King Hezekiah saw Israel destroyed by Assyria and feared the same for Judah. Isaiah prophesied to Hezekiah that Assyria would not overtake Judah, but that Babylon, a few generations after Hezekiah's death, would eventually overtake Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem.

The book that bears Isaiah's name is one of the three longest prophetic books of the Old Testament, along with Jeremiah and Ezekiel; it is sixty-six chapters long! Isaiah, however, is actually more like three separate books, as it clearly has at least three different writers who wrote in different periods of ancient Israel's history. First Isaiah (chap. 1–39) is like an expanded version of the story from 2 Kings. It even includes, word for word, selections from 2 Kings. First Isaiah tells the famous story of Isaiah's calling. It also includes oracles and judgments against nations such as Israel and Judah.

Second Isaiah then picks up after Jerusalem has been destroyed and many of the inhabitants of Judah have been taken into exile to Babylon (modern-day Iraq). It's a book of comfort and encouragement for a people who have found themselves scattered from their land and from each other. They are wondering where God is and why God did not save them from Babylon. It begins with chapter 40—"Comfort, O comfort my people"—and runs through chapter 55.

We will focus on Third Isaiah today. It begins in chapter 56 and speaks to the Israelites after they have rebuilt their temple and are seeking to rebuild their faith and their communities (ca. 515 BCE). The Edict of Cyrus, king of Persia, has released the Israelites to go back to their homeland. In many ways, the Israelite community post-exile is even worse off than they

were in captivity. Those returning home are entering a ravaged homeland. The rebuilt temple was a shadow of its former glory, and there was much work still needed to rebuild community, identity, commerce, religious practice, and hope for the future. If the model for Second Isaiah is slavery in Egypt, then the model for Third Isaiah is the wilderness. The Israelites might be free to some extent, but surviving and thriving as a nation is still up in the air.

Isaiah 61:1–4 will have some familiar sounding language. This is the scroll that Jesus reads in the synagogue when he returns to his hometown, Nazareth (Luke 4:16–22). But here Third Isaiah isn't thinking about Jesus when writing "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me." The author is speaking of himself. The one writing these things is proclaiming good news to those who have been brought out of exile to return to and rebuild their homes. The year of the Lord's favor for the author isn't a future date, but now. This is the year when we will start rebuilding the ruins that used to be our cities.

This passage echoes the establishment of the jubilee year (Lev. 25:8–55), the fiftieth year when all land is to be returned to its ancestral owners and prisoners and slaves are to be set free. Third Isaiah sees the jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor, playing out for Israel via the Edict of Cyrus, by which they are set free from bondage and given back their land.

The imagery of hope is strong in this reading, and it gives the sense of wrong being set right and bad being made good by pairing the two together throughout: good news and oppression; binding up and brokenness; liberty and captives; release and prisoners; garland and ashes; gladness and mourning; praise and faint spirit; repair and ruined cities. At every turn, Third Isaiah is prophesying to the ancient Israelites that the Spirit of the Lord is proclaiming that their present reality will be overturned by their hoped-for reality, and it starts now.

Jesus also used this passage to tell the people in his home synagogue that the hoped-for reality of God's reign was starting now, in his time. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he said (Luke 4:21). Advent is about expectantly waiting for God's promise to come, but Isaiah and Jesus encourage us to see how hope is already blossoming in the present, even as we wait for the fullness of God's kingdom to come.

Goal for the Session

Youth will explore Isaiah's call to hope, even in the face of despair, and express hope for others.

Preparing for the Session

- Read through this Leader's Guide and determine how to best lead the session given the needs of your group.
- Prepare to summarize the Study Overview (see above) for activity 4. You may wish to use the bulleted summary in activity 4.
- Pray for all group members. As much as possible, pray for each person by name. Ask for the Spirit to move among the group and foster a lively, creative discussion.
- Have some options of places that might need letters of hope to present for the Responding activity. You may want to contact a church or pastor in the area ahead of time and look up addresses so that youth can address their own envelopes.
- Think ahead about how you will form small groups for discussion. A small class might have only two groups. Larger classes should have as many as you need to facilitate good discussion.
- Prepare and post the writing prompts needed for the Arriving activity so that participants can begin the activity as soon as they enter the room.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint or board
- Markers
- Pens
- Bibles
- Paper, envelopes, and stamps for each participant to write a letter, **or** whatever materials you might use to make a group card (poster board, construction paper, markers, etc.)
- Copies of the Participant Handout
- Crayons or colored markers
- Blank paper

Teaching Tips

- As your group explores hope, be mindful that some of their hopes may arise out of very painful personal situations. No one should be forced to

share something they aren't prepared to share, and if wounds are uncovered, they should be honored and comforted without trying to "fix" the pain with phrases like "God doesn't give us more than we can handle" or "Sometimes God tests us."

- One of the Exploring activities asks youth to imagine themselves in a displaced situation. Be aware that some youth might be experiencing some form of displacement themselves. They might imagine their own situation for that activity, which is perfectly fine, but be aware of how that might affect the discussion.

Arriving (10 minutes)

1. Words of Hope

Prior to the session, write the following prompts on the board or newsprint: "Hope is . . ." On another board or newsprint write "What do you hope for?"

As youth enter the room, invite them to write a definition or synonym for *hope* under the "Hope is . . ." prompt and to note something they hope for under the "What do you hope for?" prompt. They may give more than one response to both prompts.

Gathering (5 minutes)

2. Sharing Words of Hope

Once all participants have arrived, gather together and tell them that the theme of the session is the Advent theme of hope. Invite participants to share at least one of their answers to the Arriving activity.

Opening (5 minutes)

3. Prayer

Open with the following prayer or a prayer of your own:

God who has always been there,
who will always be there,
who is here with us now,
implant in us your words of hope.

Give us courage to believe you are still at work in
the world,

still coming to us,
still bringing light to darkness.

In Christ we pray. Amen.

4. Introduction to the Study

Distribute the Participant Handout, and, using the “Introduction for the Leader” as your guide, introduce youth to the concept of reading the Advent prophecies in their own context as well as in the context of their relationship to the stories of Jesus.

Read Isaiah 61:1–4 and then give a brief introduction to its context. You might wish to include some of the following:

- All of our Old Testament prophetic writings orbit around the devastating event of the Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of many Israelites to Babylon (586–538 BCE). Almost all of our Old Testament prophecies either warn the people of this impending doom, comfort people as they are dealing with the aftermath, or encourage them as they return to rebuild the temple and their homeland after Persia conquers Babylon and King Cyrus sets the Israelites free.
- While Isaiah was a historical character associated with King Hezekiah of Judah (ca. 715–687 BCE), the book of Isaiah in the Bible can be divided into three parts spanning many years and including at least three different authors. Without their real names, we call them First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah. The selection we are reading today comes from Third Isaiah.
- Third Isaiah is speaking to the Israelites, who are returning home from captivity. The temple has been rebuilt, but it is only a shadow of its former glory. Their cities, homes, economy, and identity are still in ruins. In many cases, they are less financially secure than they were in Babylon, where many families had settled in and made a new life for themselves. The captives are free, but the road ahead is daunting.

Exploring (20 minutes)

5. Isaiah and Jesus

Form small groups among the youth. Make sure each group has at least one Bible. Ask a volunteer from each group to read either Isaiah 61:1–4 or Luke 4:16–22. Try to have an equal number of groups read each passage.

In the Isaiah groups, ask the participants to talk about what these words would have meant to people returning from exile to Jerusalem and a homeland in ruins. In the Luke groups, ask them to discuss how Jesus does or doesn’t fulfill this prophecy. There are questions on the Participant Handout to spark discussion if needed. After a few minutes, have someone from each group give a brief report on something they discussed in their group.

6. Hope for Today

Remain in the same small groups and have them imagine themselves as someone who is displaced in our world today. Have them close their eyes, take a couple of deep breaths, and imagine themselves in a displaced situation (fleeing violence, crossing a border, being homeless after their home was destroyed in a fire, being in prison or just released from prison, being new in a town/school, etc.). Have them picture their surroundings. Where are they? What are the sights, sounds, and smells? Who is with them, and who is missing? Then read Isaiah 61:1–4. Have them share in their small group what their imagined circumstance was and what elements of the reading stood out or spoke to their situation.

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Using *Your Words*

Hand out paper to each participant, and be sure each one has something to write with. Have them choose from a prepared list with addresses of places that might need a letter of kindness, especially places recently suffering from disaster or tragedy. You might also write to new immigrants through a local agency. In some cases, your recipient might be another church or youth group in a community dealing with disaster or tragedy.

Instruct the youth to give encouragement, write a prayer, draw a picture. Let the person or group know that, even as strangers, you support and care about them.

If writing to a church, participants might refer to their shared faith, but otherwise they should stick to general encouragement, love, and hope. You may wish to write one card from the whole group.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Prayers of Hope

Close in prayer together using the following words (printed in the Participant Handout). Then, as the leader, pray for each of the hopes that were written in the Arriving activity.

God of Isaiah, God of Jesus,
God who speaks hope to people in all
circumstances,
thank you for walking with us through every
trouble
and for sending your Son to teach us how to walk
with others in need.
Our prayer is a prayer of hope . . .

Here the leader prays the hopes from the arriving activity.

Teaching Alternative

Isaiah uses imagery—garland, oil of gladness, mantle of praise, oak of righteousness, a rebuilder of ruins—to help his readers imagine hope. Give each participant paper, markers, crayons, or any art supplies you wish to offer. Invite participants to draw their own images of something they consider to be a symbol for hope. Invite

volunteers to share their images with the group. What's hopeful about this image? Is the image something that has brought you hope in a time of trouble?

Key Scriptures

Isaiah 61:1–4

Luke 4:16–22

For More Information

Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

The Working Preacher website is a helpful resource for lectionary-based study of Scripture. Isaiah 61:1–4 occurs in year B of the lectionary cycle. Corrine Carvalho's recent commentary on Isaiah 61:1–4 can be found at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3493, with related commentaries from past years available as well.

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Words of Hope, Restoration, and Peace: A Youth Study for Advent

Isaiah: Words of Hope

Isaiah 61:1–4

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Closing Prayer

God of Isaiah, God of Jesus,
God who speaks hope to people in all
circumstances,

thank you for walking with us through every
trouble
and for sending your Son to teach us how to
walk with others in need.
Our prayer is a prayer of hope . . .

Here the leader prays the hopes from the Arriving activity.

Words of Hope

We always hear from the Old Testament prophets during Advent because these Advent prophecies remind us of Jesus and the Gospel stories. But these prophecies were originally meant to speak to specific people and their life circumstances.

Isaiah 61:1–4 is a word of hope meant to inspire Israelites returning from exile and captivity in a foreign land to rebuild their old cities, communities, and religious identity. Such hope still speaks to us today, from people who flee violence to rebuild their lives in a new place, to families who just move to a new town for work but still struggle with rebuilding their lives in a new place. Jesus later quoted this Scripture in Luke 4:16–22 at the beginning of his ministry.

Isaiah Time Line

733 BCE	Isaiah called by God
586 BCE	Babylonian capture of Jerusalem and exile of Israelites from Judah
538 BCE	Persian King Cyrus freed Israelites and allowed them to return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem
515 BCE	Rebuilt temple was completed
515 BCE and following	Writings of Third Isaiah

There were roughly five hundred years between Third Isaiah and Jesus.

Questions for Reflection

Isaiah 61:1–4

- Think about a time when you comforted someone who mourned or witnessed someone else offering comfort. What does good comforting look like?
- This poem is full of images that are meant to inspire hope, such as “oaks of righteousness.” How is a tree, especially an oak tree, a symbol for hope?
- The last verse says, “They shall repair the ruined cities.” Think about a disaster you’ve seen on the news in the past year. What was the devastation like? What will it take to rebuild in that situation?

Luke 4:16–22

- How did Jesus accomplish “good news to the poor . . . release to the captives . . . the oppressed [set] free”?
- Jesus’ reading of this verse in Luke’s Gospel is a little bit different from Isaiah 61:1–4. Why do you think “recovery of sight to the blind” was added in the version Jesus read? How was recovery of sight to the blind important to Jesus’ ministry?
- What does “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” mean?