



From Longing to Receiving: An Adult Advent Study

Session 1—Isaiah 64:1–9 and Mark 13:24–37
Longing for God's Saving Help

Goals for the Session

- Explore Scriptures in Isaiah and Mark that express faithful longing for restoration.
- Reflect on how we, in a similar time of war, chaos, and disorientation, can respond with faithfulness.

Preparing for the Session

- Decide how you will distribute the Participant Handouts during this study. Options include:
 - Distribute copies for the following session at the end of each session.
 - E-mail the next week's handout at the start of each week.
 - A combination of the first two, especially if some members do not have Internet access or cannot print the studies and do not want to read them on a computer.
- Have a few extra copies of the handout available for unexpected participants.
- Read Isaiah 63:7–64:12.
- Begin a timeline that can stay up for the entire study by drawing a horizontal line on a chalkboard or by putting up a length of clothesline to which you can attach cards with dates and events. About three-quarters of the way along the line, print "Birth of Jesus." Divide the remainder of the line into even

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Sing an Advent hymn
- Read the psalm responsively
- Pray

EXPLORING

- Introduce the study
- Explore a prayer of longing in Isaiah
- Explore a vision of the future in Mark

RESPONDING

- Write remembrances of the past, visions of the future

CLOSING

- Share psalms
- Prepare for the next session

intervals. After the mark for Jesus' birth, indicate the first and second centuries CE. In reverse order, mark off the first through sixth centuries BCE.

- Make a copy of the appendix, "Psalm 80," for each participant.
- On two sheets of newsprint, print "Save the Date! The Rapture, May 21, 2011" and "Mark 13:32: That Was Awkward."

- Gather copies of a hymnal with the hymn “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” or another Advent hymn expressing longing for God’s salvation.
- Each participant will need a Bible. If possible, use the NRSV, but one or two other translations, such as the Common English Bible, would be helpful.

Materials Needed

- Participant Handouts for this week and next
- Copies of the appendix
- Bibles
- Hymnals
- Prepared sheets of newsprint (see preparation)
- Timeline (see preparation)
- Paper and pencils or pens

Teaching Tip

Although your pastor may preach from the lectionary, it’s possible that some in the group may not know what a lectionary is or how it functions. Briefly explain that a lectionary is a plan to preach or study the Bible over a three-year cycle, using readings with common themes from the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles each Sunday. Because many denominations have embraced the Revised Common Lectionary, congregations from many traditions will be reading, studying, and hearing the word preached from the same Scriptures on any given Sunday.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Sing an Advent Hymn

Sing together “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” or another Advent hymn expressing longing.

2. Read the Psalm Responsively

Divide the group into two groups and read Psalm 80 from the appendix responsively.

3. Pray

Pray the following opening prayer:

Redeemer God, as the season of Advent opens, we long for your presence. By your Spirit, make your-

self known to us as we explore these Scriptures, both in your word and in our relationships with you and with one another. In the name of the one who comes, your son Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Exploring (25 minutes)

4. Introduce the Study

Invite the group to refer to the introduction in the Participant Handout. Briefly go over the titles of the four sessions, pointing out the movement from longing to anticipating to recognizing and finally to receiving God’s new gifts to us. Also point out that the majority of the Scriptures the group will discuss are from the prophet Isaiah and the Gospels of Mark and John. Invite participants to mention other points in the introduction, such as the fact that neither Mark nor John tells the story of Jesus’ birth.

5. Explore a Prayer of Longing in Isaiah

On the timeline, add the date the temple was built (957 BCE), the date of its destruction (587 BCE), and the date of its rebuilding in the late sixth century BCE (around 541). Ask the group to scan Isaiah 63:7–19. Point out that verses 7–11 are a retelling of God’s way with the people, recounting how God saved the people in the exodus and how the people rebelled. Those who originally heard Isaiah’s words would have been familiar with this story. Invite the group to consider the following in silence:

- When have you experienced God’s redemptive power?
- When and in what ways have you rebelled, turning away from what God intends for your life?

Ask the group to silently read Isaiah 63:15–19. Call attention to the designations “our father” and “redeemer” in these verses. Point out that in the Participant Handout, the writer notes that this is the only reference to God as “our father” in the Old Testament, and that “redeemer” is also relatively rare. Ask someone to read the definition of “redeemer” in the handout.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Isaiah 64:1–9 as the others follow along in their Bibles.

Point out that here the image is of a divine warrior God. Discuss a few of the following questions:

- The writer observes that both the terms “redeemer” and “our father” reflect human kinship. In your faith life, have you experienced a personal God, or is your understanding and experience more of a transcendent and holy God?
- Have you ever longed for God’s swift intervention as a divine warrior? In what situations? What does the image of God as a potter contribute? In what ways do these contrasting metaphors affect your sense of God’s presence?
- The writer observes that God’s anger was the cause of human failure, that God’s hiddenness had left few to voice prayers. Has there ever been a time when your own sense of failure and a feeling that God is far away hindered your prayer life? In what ways?

6. Explore a Vision of the Future in Mark

Ask the group to respond to the following:

- What do you believe about the end of the world?
- What shapes or informs what you believe about the end time? Scripture? Cultural assumptions?

On the timeline, mark the date of Mark’s writing (64–70 CE), the beginning of the war with Rome (66 CE), and the destruction of Jerusalem’s temple (70 CE). Point out that the writer observed that those reading or hearing Mark’s words were looking both backward at events that had taken place a generation before and forward to the end time, which they anticipated would occur very soon.

Call attention to the two sheets of newsprint and ask participants to picture the captions as billboards. The first phrase, “Save the date!” was on some 1,200 billboards in the United States and 2,000 more in dozens of other countries. A broadcast ministry called Family Radio put up the signs in the weeks before May 21, 2011, supposedly the day the rapture would happen. The second heading, with the verse from Mark and the words “that was awkward,” was widely posted on Facebook and other social networking sites and purported also to be a billboard.

Ask someone to read Mark 13:32 aloud. Note that the writer of the Participant Handout observes that first-century Christians based their vision of the future not

only on their own context, but also on traditions and metaphors from previous times. But New Testament writings do not focus on the details or the timetable for the end of the world. The writings are meant to sustain and comfort Christians living in a difficult time. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the imperative verbs the writer lists. Discuss:

- The writer observes that Jesus’ words are meant to urge his disciples to faithfulness, courage, and attentiveness. In what ways do these imperatives speak to our times?

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Write Remembrances of the Past, Visions of the Future

Call attention to the writer’s observation that a deep correspondence can be seen between the prayer in Isaiah and Jesus’ words in Mark. Say that the times in which we live also show a deep correspondence with these Scripture passages. We, too, live in times of war, chaos, and disorientation (which probably accounts for the reemergence of groups reading these events as signs of the impending end). Like the Hebrews or the first-century Christians, many of us long for a time when divine justice will intervene.

Distribute paper and pencils or pens. Invite participants to write a psalm that recalls God’s acts through history, or in their own past, and expresses faithful longing for restoration. Or they may choose to write a psalm that expresses a vision for the future and offers comfort and trust in God’s sustaining presence.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Share Psalms

Invite someone to read aloud the final paragraph of the Participant Handout, under the heading “Longing for God’s Appearance.” Then invite volunteers to read their psalms aloud as a closing prayer.

9. Prepare for the Next Session

Distribute copies of next week’s Participant Handout or promise to send it in an e-mail early in the week. Encourage participants to read the handout before coming to the next session.

Teaching Alternatives

- **Create billboards.** Invite participants to create billboards that contrast with the messages of May 21 and focus on a vision of hope. Distribute drawing paper, pencils, and crayons or colored markers. Participants may choose to draw or use words. Encourage them to refer to Scripture for appropriate verses.
- **Sing hymns with metaphors of God.** Direct participants to find hymns that depict God as father, divine warrior, redeemer, or potter. Sing these hymns together. Discuss how each metaphor connotes God's presence or otherness. Some possible hymns are "Have Thine Own Way, Lord," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "From All That Dwell Below the Skies."

- **Explore the Abrahamic faiths.** The writer of the Participant Handout observes that the Jewish faith gave birth to both Christianity and Islam. Encourage participants to do some research online about the roots of Christianity and Islam in Judaism: their shared heritage, prophets the three faiths share, and so forth.

Key Scriptures

Isaiah 64:1–9

Mark 13:24–37

About the Writer

Martha Bettis-Gee is associate for child advocacy for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Appendix: Psalm 80

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.

**In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,
stir up your strength and come to help us.**

Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

**O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?**

You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.

**You have made us the derision of our neighbors,
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.**

Restore us, O God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

**You have brought a vine out of Egypt;
you cast out the nations and planted it.**

You prepared the ground for it;
it took root and filled the land.

**The mountains were covered by its shadow
and the towering cedar trees by its boughs.**

You stretched out its tendrils to the sea
and its branches to the river.

**Why have you broken down its wall,
so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes?**

The wild boar of the forest has ravaged it,
and the beasts of the field have grazed upon it.

**Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;
behold and tend this vine;**

preserve what your right hand has planted.
They burn it with fire like rubbish;
at the rebuke of your countenance let them perish.

**Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one you have made so strong for yourself.**

And so will we never turn away from you;
give us life, that we may call upon your name.

**Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.**

Book of Common Worship (Louisville, KY:
Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 700–701.



From Longing to Receiving: An Adult Advent Study

Session 1—Isaiah 64:1–9 and Mark 13:24–37
Longing for God's Saving Help

Introduction

This study explores Advent texts of the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B. We will emphasize the Old Testament and Gospel lessons, and refer to the Psalter readings as well. Your pastor may plan to preach these texts. If so, including the pastor in the discussions may be enlightening.

Primary texts and themes in these weeks are:

- Week 1, Isaiah 64:1–9 and Mark 13:24–37: Longing for God's Saving Help
- Week 2, Isaiah 40:1–11 and Mark 1:1–8: Anticipating God's Presence among Us
- Week 3, Isaiah 61:1–11 and John 1:6–8, 19–28: Recognizing God's Work among Us
- Week 4, 2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16 and Luke 1:26–38: Receiving God's New Gifts to Us

The Gospel lesson for the first week concerns a speech of Jesus far into the book of Mark, a speech anticipating final redemption, a moment called the *Parousia* (Greek for “arrival” or “presence”), often referred to by Christians today as Christ's “second coming.” Readings for the other three weeks come from the beginning of three of the four Gospels. Neither Mark nor John actually tells the story of Jesus' birth. Rather they describe significant first events in the story of Jesus' adult life.

**Even though it is painful to
keep praying when we see
no evidence of God's having
heard, we do not know what
promise lies in the future.**

Each of the Old Testament lessons is thematically related to the Gospel text with which it is paired. The passages from Isaiah and 2 Samuel were originally written for circumstances and times very different from those of Jesus' story, and each is an amazing bit of theological poetry

in its own right. Though the Christian church has not traditionally acquainted itself with the Old Testament as thoughtfully as it has the Gospel stories, our earliest Christian leaders chose to retain Jewish Scriptures as part of the Christian collection (or canon), and to use them liberally in the

New Testament and early church writings, because they perceived that the God portrayed there is the God Jesus worshiped, the same God Christians serve. Exploring these passages in their own scriptural contexts and in their relation to the Gospel passages will broaden and deepen the theological riches available to us.

Please take a moment to read Isaiah 64:1–9 and Mark 13:24–37.

Isaiah 64:1–9: A Prayer of Longing

Both Isaiah 64 and Mark 13 anticipate God's coming in the future and express human longing for circumstantial change, change that only God can bring. The passage from Isaiah is part of a much longer communal prayer that begins with Isaiah 63:7 and extends to the end of

chapter 64. The prayer's contents will reveal the situation of those for whom it was composed, but it begins by recalling God's loving actions toward Israel in the past:

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us,
and the great favor to the house of Israel
that he has shown them according to his mercy,
according to the abundance of his steadfast love.
(Isa. 63:7 NRSV)

The wording of the Common English Bible is especially winsome in the last line, saying, "God treated them compassionately and with deep affection."

The poet goes on to tell how the community came to its predicament. It is a story line often recounted in the Old Testament, a story ancient Israel tells on itself, owning up to failures that beset even the faithful. Its wording sounds much like the corporate prayer of confession in many churches: "But they rebelled and grieved his [that is, God's] holy spirit . . ." (63:10). Recounting Israel's plaintive corporate regret and longing to return to communion with God, the poet says,

Then they remembered the days of old,
of Moses his servant.
Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea
with the shepherds of his flock?
Where is the one who put within them
his holy spirit,
who caused his glorious arm to march at the right
hand of Moses,
who divided the waters before them
to make for himself an everlasting name,
who led them through the depths?
(63:11–13a)

The heart of the prayer follows. The poet first bids God to "look down" upon the suffering community, and then to "tear open the heavens and come down." Verses 15–19 of chapter 63 explicitly state the community's painful situation, the sense of God's distance, and their understanding of the relationship they once had and should have with God. Enemies have destroyed the sanctuary, that is, the temple of God that Solomon built in Jerusalem (v. 18). Directionless, bereft of evidence that the God of their ancestors still cares, they long for signs of divine compassion (vv. 15, 19). Yet they stake their claim upon God as their ancient father and redeemer (v. 16).

WHY BCE AND CE?

Like BC (before Christ) and AD (*anno Domini*, the year of the Lord), BCE (before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) are used with dates of the Western calendar, which numbers from a year close to Jesus' birth. This dating system emerged after 600 CE and was popularized by Charlemagne nearly three centuries later. It was not fully established until the seventeenth century. Unlike BC and AD, which invoke Christian titles (Christ and Lord), BCE and CE are used by Western non-Christians and by Christians engaged in interfaith dialogue.

While the language of God as "our father" is very familiar in the church, particularly from its use in the Lord's Prayer, it is actually quite rare in the Old Testament—in fact, "our father" is found only in this passage. Other passages speak of God as the father of the king (Ps. 89:26) or of orphans (Ps. 68:5; see Job 29:16, where Job claims the same role). Deuteronomy 32:6 speaks of God as "your father, who created you," and comparisons are made between God and earthly fathers in Psalm 103:13; Proverbs 3:12; and Malachi 1:6. Habitual use of familial language for God grew somewhat later, and it can be seen increasingly in some apocryphal passages and in the New Testament.

Calling God "redeemer" is also relatively rare. In its original usage "redeemer," like "father," had to do with human kinship. A redeemer was a relative designated to avenge a wrongful death or to help when close family members experienced economic distress. From this usage arose the metaphor of God's redeeming worshipers from oppression (Prov. 23:11) and redeeming Israel from slavery (Exod. 6:6; 15:13). In Isaiah, God is repeatedly called Israel's redeemer from exile (Isa. 41:14; 43:14; etc.).

Thus the poet invokes terms that were more unusual and creative than they may appear to us to be. While before this time Abraham and Israel (Jacob) as ancestors had been called "our fathers," here the poet bypasses these human forebears ("Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us") and appeals directly to the creator. The language of God as father will return in verse 8.

In Isaiah 64:1, the poet's prayerful passion heightens. Longing is expressed for God not merely to "look down" (as in 63:15) but to "come down" to save them, as God has done in the past. The imagery is extremely dramatic. Underlying it is a tradition of God as divine warrior, who forcefully intervenes against enemies that threaten Israel (Exod. 15:3; Isa. 42:13). When God goes to war, according to this tradition, even the mountains tremble (Judg. 5:5; Ps. 18:7; Ezek. 38:20; Nah. 1:5). In the past God came to rescue the faithful (Isa. 64:4, 5). But, once again contrasting the past with the present, the poet admits that human faithfulness has failed: "But you were angry, and we sinned. . . . We have all become like one who is unclean. . . . There is no one who calls on your name" (vv. 5, 6, 7).

Strength to repair this broken relationship lies not with the community but with God. In fact, according to some translations of verse 5, God's anger was the cause of human failure rather than its result. It is God's hiddenness that has left few to voice prayers (v. 7). Yet the poet goes on to remind God of divine responsibility. In verse 8, God is imagined not only as father, but as potter, forming Israel who, according to the metaphor, can be nothing but what God has made them to be.

Concluding the prayer, the poet reiterates specific evidence of God's abandonment:

Your holy cities have become a wilderness,
 Zion has become a wilderness,
 Jerusalem a desolation.
 Our holy and beautiful house,
 where our ancestors praised you,
 has been burned by fire,
 and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
 (64:10–11)

Beyond Isaiah

Rare is the person of faith who has not wondered where God is hiding. Readers of this passage might be more comfortable if such a plaintive prayer ended in reassurance that God has heard, forgiven, and restored.

But sooner or later we too endure spiritual frustrations, longings for divine reassurance, prayers that seem to go unanswered. Just as it helped this poet to remember the past, it helps us to recall that our scriptural ancestors outlived dire times like our own.

A deep correspondence may be seen between the prayer in Isaiah 63–64 and Jesus' words in Mark 13. Both describe times of war, chaos, and disorientation, and both concern longing for a day when God will, in divine justice, set all to right.

Deep beneath the immediate circumstances, more fundamental than loss of the temple or even distress in the cities, is the question of divine attentiveness and presence. Prayers like these were vehicles of remembrance in which to trace all the outlines of longing for God. They happened fairly often: similar recollections of God's past gracious deeds in the book of Psalms likewise

accompany prayers for restoration in the present (see, for instance, Ps. 80, the lectionary psalm for the day, and Ps. 85, next week's psalm). It is often in the times when God seems distant that we recall how much we have relied on God's reassuring presence before, how much we long for communion with God now. It is through that longing itself that our commitments are made and renewed, and our faith is formed.

Other parts of Scripture indicate that, over time, people saw just how God was answering these prayers. Late in the sixth century BCE, the temple was rebuilt on its original site and worship resumed there. It took years for Jerusalem's devastated community to see prosperity again. When the city eventually reemerged, it regained population and vibrancy. It was forever a changed community, however. Before the temple's destruction Judah had been a more or less independent nation ruled by a descendant of David. The restored community was ruled by empires from outside, first the Persians, later the Greeks, and finally, by the time of Jesus, the Romans. Stripped of political power, Judaism gradually formed its identity around its spiritual riches.

After the temple was destroyed once again in 70 CE, this time by the Romans, Jews were forced to scatter. Through this dispersion, over the course of centuries,

the Jewish community grew to 13 million people living all over the world. Even more amazingly, the Jewish faith that had recovered over the centuries after this prayer from Isaiah was voiced gave birth to a new faith of Gentile believers in the God of Abraham, the Christian church. Six centuries after that, Judaism and its traditions inspired an Arab merchant named Muhammad to found a third monotheistic faith, Islam, which like Judaism and Christianity has also spread throughout the world. In other words, over the course of time, from the tiny community of remembrance and longing from which this prayer originated, came the three monotheistic faiths collectively held by 3.6 billion people today.

This doesn't mean that every human prayer of longing results automatically in stupendous divine response. But it does mean that recalling and voicing our longing for God matters greatly. If we do not notice and do not care, little will happen. Even though it is painful to keep praying when we see no evidence of God's having heard, we do not know what promise lies in the future. If we knew the future, we would have no opportunity to know the intensity of our longing, nor the depth of our gratitude.

Mark 13:24–37: Reassurance in Chaotic Days

Chapter 13 of Mark encompasses an extended discourse given by Jesus to four disciples on the Mount of Olives shortly before his crucifixion. It concerns the future. Some parts concern events that happened a generation after Jesus' death and resurrection (around the time Mark was written): for example, the war with Rome that began in 66 CE and eventuated in the 70 CE destruction of Jerusalem's temple by the Romans. Other parts, particularly in verses 24–27, concern a much larger event than this: the culmination of history on earth. Even before the cataclysmic war, many early Christians expected the world to end in their generation (see 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:15–18). So though today we read Mark 13 looking backward to events in the first century and forward to events that have yet to occur, Mark's earliest readers would have seen these two as standing very close together and perhaps coinciding.

But the world did not end with Jerusalem's destruction, nor has it ended during the many other cataclysms

since. As we read what Mark and other New Testament writers say about the future, we can make certain observations. First, their vision of the future is based not only on cultural understandings of their present day but also on traditions and metaphors emanating from the Old Testament Scriptures. Second, while their comments about the world's end occasion speculation about when and how such things will transpire, emphasis throughout New Testament writings is not on details or timetable—things even Jesus said he did not know (Mark 13:32). Rather, these writings are meant to comfort, to warn, to strengthen, and to guide readers in what faithful preparedness means. By the time of 2 Peter in the late first or early second century, some were beginning to doubt whether Jesus' second coming was truly imminent (2 Pet. 3:4). But the author of 2 Peter draws the same conclusion that Paul, Mark, and others had drawn: anticipation of life's ending should inspire Christians to holiness, godliness, and expectancy.

A deep correspondence may be seen between the prayer in Isaiah 63–64 and Jesus' words in Mark 13. Both describe times of war, chaos, and disorientation, and both concern longing for a day when God will, in divine justice, set all to right. Those praying in Isaiah orient themselves in the direction in which God was last seen, remembering God's acts of old and expressing faithful longing for restoration. Jesus' words in Mark 13:24–37 steady and comfort those likewise seeing tribulation with visions they can hold on to.

What Mark does with Jesus' vision of the future resembles what the poet in Isaiah 63–64 does with remembrances of the past, establishing a mood that, though filled with longing, concentrates on faithfulness. As Jesus makes clear throughout by his repeated imperative verbs (see especially "beware," vv. 5 and 9; "do not be alarmed," v. 7, cf. v. 11; "flee," v. 14; "pray," v. 18; "do not believe," v. 21; "be alert"/"keep awake," vv. 23, 33, 35, 37), the point of his speech is not to demonstrate Jesus' predictive powers, nor to offer explicit details revealing when or how the world will end, but rather to exhort disciples to faithfulness, courage, and attentiveness. Even though Mark records this conversation as having transpired between Jesus and four disciples, his detailed recounting makes it clear that he understands readers to need this advice from Jesus as well.

Longing for God's Appearance

How many times have we prayed something that amounts to "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" (Isa. 64:1)? We long to see a world set to right, peace and stability prevailing, justice reigning, and safety surrounding. Such longing can lead two different ways. It can fester, causing bitterness. Or it can inspire us in faithful hope. The more we are aware of that longing, the more it will structure our visions of tomorrow and our prayers for today. Prayers prayed with integrity will shape the way we live, knowing that even if the end of life as we know it is as distant

from us as the people in 2 Peter were perceiving it to be from them, the end of each of our own lives is not that distant. Each day, each opportunity to live in faith and hope, is unrepeatable. May our longings for redemption structure the decisions that we make each moment of each day.

About the Writer

Patricia K. Tull, professor emerita of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, is the author of several books and Bible studies, including the 2001–2002 Horizons Bible Study Esther's Feast and Isaiah 1–39 in the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series.

SAMPLE SESSION