

Isa. 40:1–11

Ps. 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Pet. 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

Hope in the Wilderness

Goal for the Session Youth will explore what it means to meet God in a wilderness and answer God's call to comfort God's people.

■ 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 wilderness that young people traverse today—despite the veneer of urban sophistication, suburban order, or rural wholesomeness—is one of cynicism, unbelief, and hopelessness, even failure. How, then, might youth find a path through their deserts? God’s promises delivered through the prophet Isaiah have an amazingly contemporary resonance. You can help young people embrace the hope and trust embodied in these ancient words and to proclaim them to a weary world.

Holy Spirit, inspire me to discover your truth and share it with the young people in my care. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Advent wreath
- matches or lighter
- newspapers
- newsprint
- markers
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1

For Responding

- option 1: newsprint, markers, paper, pens
- option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 2, Bristol board, oil pastels, masking tape, baby oil, cotton balls, fine-point markers
- option 3: poster board, markers, paper, pen

For Web Connection

- computer with Internet access

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, prepare an Advent wreath by placing four purple (or whatever color combination your church uses) candles on a wreath with a white candle in the middle of the wreath. Note that throughout Advent, the third option in Responding is a mission project. Seek the help of your congregation’s mission and outreach committee to locate an agency that will receive the contributions.

Before the session, select four to six newspaper articles that represent the “wilderness” of contemporary life and culture (for example, articles about war or terrorism, political scandal or corruption, social ills, and so forth). Attach each article to a sheet of newsprint, and post the newsprint sheets around the room.

As participants arrive, invite each person to read or skim the posted articles. Ask the youth to write on each sheet a word or phrase that captures the essence of the attached article. When everyone has had time to reflect on at least some of the articles, gather the group around the Advent wreath and review the lists of descriptive words. Then ask:

- ✪ As a whole, how does this collection of news articles make you feel?
- ✪ Where can hope to face such events/situations be found?

Explain that one of the major themes of the season of Advent is hope. We Christians find hope in the promised coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Have a participant light two of the purple candles and pray:

Loving God, lead us into hope in this holy season. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

If your class is large, form groups of three for reading and discussing the resource sheet. When the groups have finished, invite each group to give brief highlights of their discussions.

Ask one or more youth to locate a map of the ancient near East using their smartphones. Ask them to find Jerusalem and Babylon and show to the group.



Consider making a video of the newscast and showing it to the congregation or posting it online.

EXPLORING

Explain that the ancient Israelites found themselves in a seemingly hopeless situation: the Babylonian exile. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (The Babylonian Exile). Give participants time to read the information on the resource sheet and discuss the reflection questions. After sufficient time, re-gather and invite the groups to report.

Asking the youth to keep in mind what they've learned about the Babylonian exile, give them a few minutes to read Isaiah 40:1–11 silently. Next, invite a volunteer to read the passage aloud. Discuss:

- ✪ How does God promise to be with the exiles on their wilderness journey to their homeland?
- ✪ What do verses 6–8 suggest about God, about people, and about the relationship between God and people?
- ✪ In verses 10–11, how is God described? Do the descriptions of God in these verses conflict with one another, or can God be all of these things? Explain.

Remind the youth that while the ancient Israelites in exile faced the prospect of a difficult journey through a real wilderness to return home and be free, we use Isaiah 40:1–11 in Advent as a way of claiming and proclaiming hope and comfort in Jesus Christ. Ask:

- ✪ Why do you think the message of hope and comfort is especially poignant during the Advent and Christmas seasons?
- ✪ What wilderness journeys are your friends facing right now?
- ✪ In what ways might Isaiah's words provide comfort to them?
- ✪ How can you offer comfort and hope to someone in need?

RESPONDING

Choose one of the following learning activities:

1. Good Newscast Youth will answer God's call to comfort God's people by creating a newscast. Brainstorm and list on newsprint topics and recent events; include news from beyond the community as well as good happenings within the church and participants' schools, and so forth. With a list of stories in hand, draft the newscast, drawing language from the Scripture passage and assigning parts for news anchors and reporters. Afterward, discuss the process of creating and presenting the newscast. Discuss:

- ✪ How does it feel to be a proclaimer of hope and comfort?
- ✪ What have you learned from this activity that could help you comfort people in your daily life?
- ✪ How will you continue to proclaim God's promises of comfort and hope?

2. **Hope and Comfort in Art** Youth will answer God's call to comfort God's people by creating simple works of art. Follow the instructions on Resource Sheet 2 (Words of Comfort) to guide the youth through the creation process, and then help them decide who they'd like the recipients to be. Discuss:
 - ✪ What new insights on God's promises to God's people did you gain from this project?
 - ✪ How will you continue to proclaim God's promises of comfort and hope?

3. **Advent Mission Project** Youth will answer God's call to comfort God's people by sponsoring a winter coat collection. Have the group select a local mission agency to receive the coats and a location where a coat tree will be located in your church building. Then, form three groups. Have one group create publicity posters that can be displayed around the church, have a second group create a short article that can go in your congregation's newsletter or on e-mail blast, and have a third group write a script for an announcement that can be made during worship. After December 21, they will give the coats to people in need.

CLOSING

Ask the youth to name the first thing that comes to mind when they think of the season of Advent. When all who wish to respond have done so, ask how their understanding of Advent is reflected in Isaiah's words to the Israelite exiles in Babylon.

Invite participants to enter a time of silent prayer, encouraging them to break the silence, "popcorn" style, as they feel led, with prayers for those in particular need of God's comfort and hope. Then, offer these or similar words in closing:

Loving God, you brought your exiled people through a desert wilderness, giving them hope for new lives in their own homes. Grant us hope and lead us to offer tidings of comfort and joy in this holy season. Through Christ, who has come and will come again. Amen.

■ ENHANCEMENT

WEB CONNECTION

Explore Advent Conspiracy (adventconspiracy), which aims to help Christians experience Advent and Christmas in a simpler, less commercialized way. Note that there are resources for congregations and individuals who are interested in worshipping fully, spending less, giving more, and loving all.

- ✪ What do you think of Advent Conspiracy?
- ✪ How do you imagine the ministry of Advent Conspiracy bringing hope and comfort to people in need?
- ✪ How might you and your youth group or congregation get involved, publicize, or present some of the root ideas of Advent Conspiracy with others?

The Babylonian Exile

We sometimes think of the Middle East as a place of political turmoil and war. It was no less so during Old Testament times. While there were periods of peace and stability, they were often interrupted by brutal wars. The Babylonian Empire conquered Jerusalem and the land of Judah in 597 B.C.E. Jerusalem was ransacked, and the Israelite people were marched into exile in Babylon, where they lived until 539.



The prophet who wrote Isaiah 40–55 (Bible scholars call these chapters “Deutero-Isaiah” or 2 Isaiah) was at work during the end of the exile. His words promise that God will rescue the Israelites and return them to their home. However, it wasn’t easy to convince the exiles that this was a good idea: by the end of the exile, many of the Israelites living in Babylon had been born there and many of those with memories of Jerusalem had died. Some of the Israelites had built comfortable lives in Babylon, even to the point of adopting the Babylonian gods, and were not inclined to make the long march back through desert wilderness to their war-ravaged homeland under the care of a God they didn’t really know.

Reflection questions:

- How do you think the people felt? Why do you think some wanted to stay in Babylon?
- Why would some people be seeking comfort?
- What situations can you think of that are similar to exile?

Words of Comfort

Directions: Follow these steps to create works of art that offer words of comfort and hope to others.

- Use masking tape to create a design on a piece of Bristol board (a smooth-surfaced paper that can be found in art supply stores).
- Use oil pastels to scribble color between the pieces of tape, allowing colors to overlap.
- Dip a cotton ball in a small amount of baby oil and blend the pastels together on the Bristol board to create a soft color finish.
- Gently remove the masking tape.

Finally, encourage the youth, using fine-point markers, to fill in the white spaces (where the masking tape was) using words or phrases from Isaiah 40:1–11 and their own words of inspiration and comfort. Select recipients and deliver these works of art to them.

