

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.

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Words of Comfort

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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.