

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?

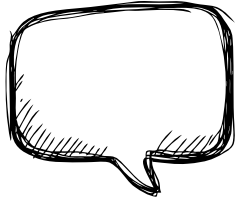
RESPONDING

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.”

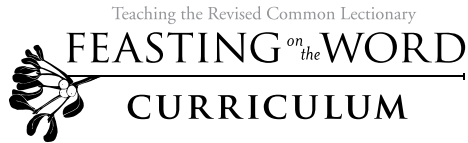
Pray:

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

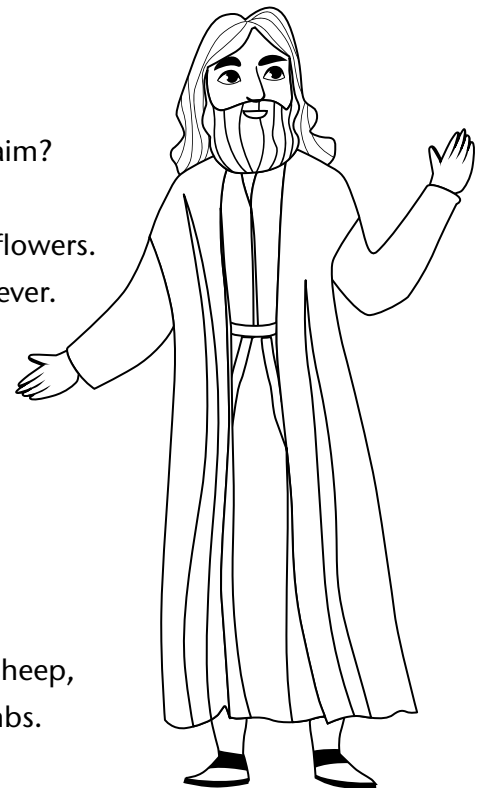
Shepherd with
a Mighty Arm

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.

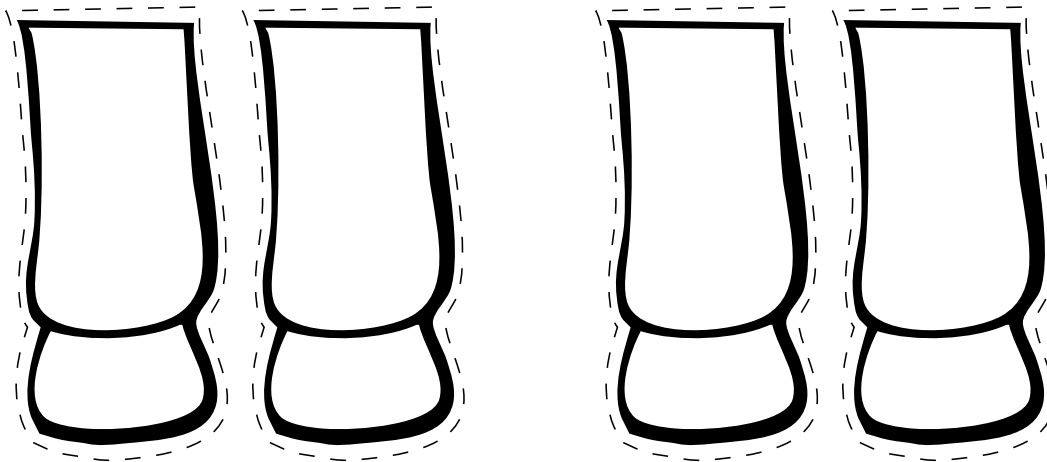
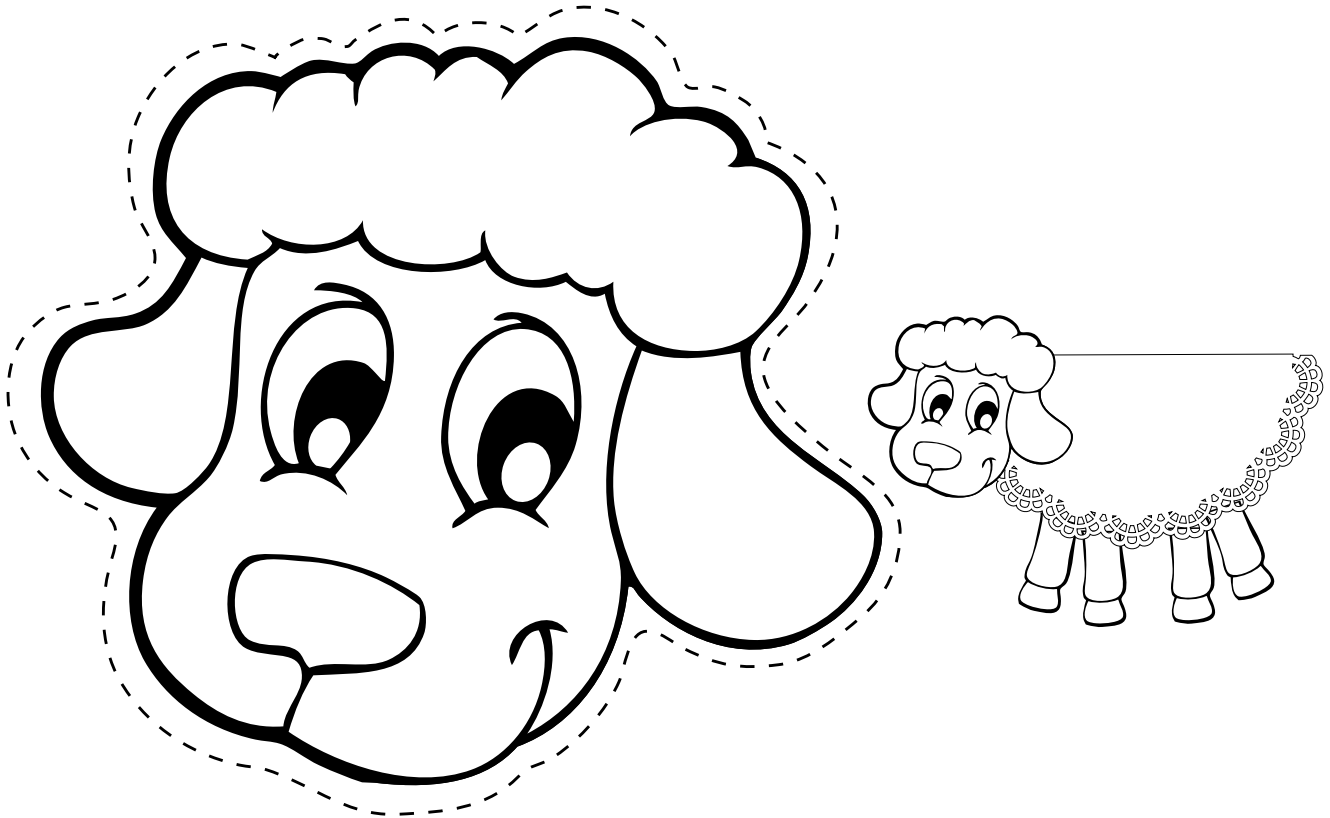


December 6, 2020

Shepherd with
a Mighty Arm

Multi-Age
Resource Sheet 3

Doily Sheep



Like a shepherd, God will
tend the flock.

—Isaiah 40:11, CEB

**Conversations on
Isaiah 40:1–11**

Discuss this passage in light of the commentary below.

Idea! Explore Advent Conspiracy (www.adventconspiracy.org), which aims to help Christians experience Advent and Christmas in a simpler, less commercialized way.

WHAT is important to know?

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(Kathleen M. O'Connor)

- ✠ What is the key word or words in these verses?
- ✠ What has happened in the life of the people of God that leads to this new announcement?

WHERE is God in these words?

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). *(George W. Stroup)*

- ✠ What does God do in these verses?
- ✠ What reasons are given for what God does?
- ✠ What do God's actions tell us about God's nature and intentions?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

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.

(Cynthia A. Jarvis)

- ✠ What parts of this passage bring you comfort? Why?
- ✠ What parts do you find unsettling? Why?
- ✠ Where have you seen God work in your life, or the lives of others, in the ways described in these verses?

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

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.

(Richard F. Ward)

- ✠ What does it mean for you or your congregation to make a smooth and easy way for God and God's glory to be revealed?
- ✠ How do our worship and our daily lives proclaim, "Here is your God!" (v. 9)? What more can you do?

Loving God, 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.

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.

■ 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.

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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

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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

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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.