



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 1

The Hebrew prophets, especially Second and Third Isaiah, introduce us to the season of Advent.

Goal for the Session

The prophet Isaiah, the most read book of the Hebrew Scriptures during Advent, provides a Hebrew understanding of the Messiah through the writings of Second and Third Isaiah. We listen to them carefully for help in understanding the world and people who waited for the One sent from God. While these writings do not identify Jesus as the Messiah, they point the way to the Holy One from God. From them, we hear a range of emotions as the Israelites suffer defeat and eventually return to a ruined Jerusalem and a fallen temple.

Preparing for the Session

- Read the introduction to Isaiah in a study Bible. Then read the texts for this session: Isaiah 40:1–11; Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11; and Isaiah 64:1–9. Which verses are familiar to you? How do you know them? Which ones surprised you? Which ones comforted you?
- Read the Participant Handout for this session. Jot notes in the margin or underline ideas that you might want to discuss with the group. Read the handout a couple times so you have the information firmly in mind as you plan and adapt this session plan.
- Pray for the participants and for your leadership. Be open to the presence of God's Spirit as you plan the time with the group.
- Read the entire session plan so you have a sense of the overall plan before you adapt it to your group, time, and setting. Look over the Participant Hand-

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Overview

EXPLORING

- The three Isaiahs
- Second Isaiah
- Third Isaiah

RESPONDING

- Isaiah for today

CLOSING

- Advent wreath
- Preparing for the next session

out and your notes to see how the plan and your ideas fit together. Review the suggestions in "Teaching Alternatives."

- E-mail the Participant Handout to those expected to come to the study. Print out extra copies for any who cannot access it this way and to have on hand at the session.
- Print the opening prayer litany on newsprint, large enough for all to see. Use two contrasting dark colors or underline one set to indicate the two parts.

- Arrange the room so the participants can move easily. Set a small table at the front of the room or in the middle of the circle for the Advent wreath. The wreath can be as simple as four blue or lavender candles (whichever color is used by your congregation) with a few greens (artificial or real) around them to form a circle.

Materials Needed

Newsprint

Markers

Easel or masking tape

Information about programs for refugees or released prisoners in your community

Advent wreath, candles, and matches

Optional Materials

Christmas cards with art and messages inspired by Isaiah texts

Hymnbooks with “Comfort, Comfort You My People”

Recordings of *The Messiah* and/or *Godspell*



Teaching Tip

As you plan, pay attention to how you will begin and end each session. These moments set the emotional tone for the session and help the participants enter the study and take a major point from it when they leave.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Welcome

Greet the participants with a “Happy New Year” as they arrive. If there are participants new to the congregation and people who may not know many in the group, introduce them to two or three participants.

2. Prayer

When everyone has gathered, begin the session with the prayer below, based on the hymn “Comfort, Comfort You My People” that you have printed on newsprint. One person can read the regular type and the group read the bold.

Comfort, comfort you my people,
Tell of peace, thus says our God.
 Comfort those who sit in darkness
Bowed beneath oppression's load.
 Comfort, comfort you my people,
Heed the prophets' cries of old.
 Let us listen now together
For strength and comfort in God's Word. Amen.

3. Overview

Introduce this Advent study by reading the second paragraph of the Participant Handout or describing this four-week study in your own words. If your congregational worship is focused on the lectionary passages (and this is year B, that is, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017, etc.), note that these studies may help the participants participate in the liturgy and listen to the sermon more intently.

Exploring (25 minutes)



Teaching Tip

These sessions are designed for discussion within the group, not lectures by a leader. To that end, feeling at ease is important. Welcoming newcomers and helping them get to know a couple regulars is good hospitality. For a brief time of getting acquainted, invite each person to name a favorite Advent tradition. Anyone who wishes may pass. Head off any explanations for the choice or long descriptions of it, suggesting that they can talk about their choices following the session. This will add some time to the opening, and subtract time from another part of the session. However, the benefits can be worth it as the participants relax.

4. The Three Isaiahs

Begin the study of Isaiah with a brief look at how scholars divide this long book. Point out the section “Not One, But Three Isaiahs” and the chart in the Participant Handout. Invite their comments and open any questions participants have to discussion in the group. This will help establish the teaching role of the group.



Teaching Tip

If the participants are not familiar with this theory about the various authors of the book of Isaiah, take sufficient time for the group

to talk about it. This explanation of how Isaiah is put together is not meant to shake the foundations of one's faith, although hearing it for the first time might feel like that for some people. Rather, this critical look at the oldest texts helps us understand more about the times and the people, giving us a context in which to read the words.

5. Second Isaiah

Before reading and discussing Isaiah 40:1–11, invite the group to imagine what life was like for the Israelites living in Babylon. Stimulate their thinking with these statements and suggest that they take identities for themselves:

- Perhaps you were in the first wave of captives in 597 BCE, one of the leadership strata in the city of Jerusalem.
- Or you may have come with a wealthy family as one of their servants.
- Maybe you were born after your family was taken captive. You have only heard stories of Jerusalem and the temple.
- Suppose you are one of the priests who served at the temple in Jerusalem. Each day you think of it, but the huge temples to other gods in Babylon overwhelm you.
- You may have come in a later wave of captives in 587 BCE. Life was more difficult after each group of captives left. Life in Babylon seems better than it was in Jerusalem.
- You could be a later arrival in Babylon, having been included in a third wave of captives in 582 BCE after the Babylon-appointed head of Jerusalem was assassinated. Many of your friends fled to Egypt, but you were not so fortunate.

Give the group a moment to take on their personalities in Babylonian exile. Read Isaiah 40:1–11 aloud. Then invite their reactions by asking: *You have heard the prophet speak these words to you. What is your reaction? What do you think about being punished doubly for your sins and that now God is forgiving you? What images of God do you take from these words?*

6. Third Isaiah

Invite the group now to imagine that they are among the Israelites who chose to return to Jerusalem after the edict by Cyrus allowing them to rebuild the temple. Ask them to think about this question for a moment or two: *Based on the readings from Isaiah 61 and 64 and the information provided in the Participant Handout, what do you think the returnees found?*

Not all Israelites chose to return to Jerusalem, being content with their lives in Babylon. Provide file cards and pens for each participant to write a post card message to someone who stayed in Babylon, telling them about life in Jerusalem. When everyone is finished, have the participants exchange post cards and read them aloud to the group. If that will take too long, form groups of six or eight and exchange and read the messages in the small groups.

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Isaiah for Today

In the introduction to her book *Getting Involved with God*, Ellen Davis suggests that we read the Hebrew prophets, indeed all the Hebrew Scriptures, “for what they tell us about intimate life with God” and that we search these words for the good news or gospel message in them.¹ The Participant Handout provides a story of leaving home under difficult circumstances and an account of returning home after many years of wrongful imprisonment. Ask volunteers to read them aloud, if people might not have read them. Ask: *How might the words of Isaiah 40 comfort refugees today? How might the words of Isaiah 61 and 64 connect with the wrongfully imprisoned men who are now adjusting to lives outside of prison?*

Encourage the group to look for news of refugee resettlement or released prisoner help in your community. If you have information about any programs, provide it for the group.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Advent Wreath

Ask a volunteer to read “Advent and the Prophets” in the Participant Handout. Have another volunteer ready to light one Advent candle as the last sentence is read.

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

God of Hope, open our hearts to the abiding hope of the Prophets as we begin this season of Advent. Open our eyes to those around us who live with little hope and struggle each day to survive. Be with us now as we go our separate ways until we meet again. In Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

9. Preparing for the Next Session

Depending on your custom, either hand out copies of the second Participant Handout or promise to e-mail it as an attachment to members the next day. As a group, commit to reading it prior to coming to the next session.

Teaching Alternatives

- Bring in Christmas cards based on Isaiah texts: peaceable kingdom, swords into plowshares, young woman with child, comfort ye. Display them on a bulletin board or tabletop for the participants to browse through as everyone gathers.
- Play recordings of "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord" from *Godspell* or "Comfort Ye, My People," the tenor aria that opens *The Messiah*, as the signal that you are about to begin the session. You might do this at the beginning of each session during this study.

- Conclude the session by singing together "Comfort, Comfort You My People," a hymn based on Isaiah 40:1–11 and found in many hymnbooks.
- Discuss "the year of the Lord's favor" in Isaiah 61:2. Read verses 1–9 and the explanatory passages in Exodus 21 and 23 and Deuteronomy 15. There is no indication that such a jubilee year was ever celebrated. However, ask: *For whom is "the year of the Lord's favor" good news? What would be good news in this passage to the people who returned to Jerusalem? What do you think they expected to find?*

For More Information

The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 1, A–C (Doubleday, 1992), "Babylon," and Volume 3, H–J, "Israel, History of."

Key Scriptures

Isaiah 40:1–11

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Isaiah 64:1–9

Endnote

1. Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Productions, 2001), 2.



Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

SESSION 1

The Hebrew Prophets, especially Second and Third Isaiah, introduce us to the season of Advent.

Introduction

Happy New Year! This Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, begins the church year, a cycle that takes us through the life of Jesus the Christ annually. The lectionary readings begin with this season of Advent too. During Advent, the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament texts, come from the Prophets. The Prophets introduce us to waiting and to preparing for the Messiah, our work for these weeks of Advent. This is not a simple task as our culture (both the church and the community) pushes us to prepare in bigger ways each year, even though the preparation often takes us away from the waiting and preparing for the Messiah. So look at your calendar now and set aside time to experience Advent differently this year by meeting figures prominent in the lectionary readings.

During these weeks, the people of the Advent texts will guide us on our way to the coming of the Messiah. First we meet with the Hebrew prophet Isaiah (actually two Isaiahs will be with us). Then we go to the Jordan to encounter the Jewish prophet John the Baptist. During the last two weeks, we sit in the company of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. These two women, one very young and the other beyond child-bearing years, encourage us to slow down and attend to the wonders of the coming Messiah.

The prophets quoted in the Revised Common Lectionary during the three years for Advent are Isaiah, 2 Samuel, Jeremiah, Malachi, Zephaniah, and Micah. Isaiah is the most prominent with a selection for each Sunday



The prophets introduce us to waiting and to preparing for the Messiah, our work for these weeks of Advent. This is not a simple task as our culture (both the church and the community) pushes us to prepare in bigger ways each year.

during Advent in Year A¹ and three of the four Sundays in Advent for Year B.² Perhaps this is not surprising, given the length of the book of Isaiah with its 66 chapters. And if you look up these texts, many phrases in them will be as familiar to you as nursery rhymes from your childhood. The words are sung in Handel's *Messiah* and more contemporary music, they have been

lectionary—lec' shun ary—is a selection of four readings from the Bible for each Sunday to be used in worship and proclamation. The Jews in antiquity created a system of readings to be read on the Sabbath from the Torah. Early Christians adopted these readings and later expanded them to include writings of the apostles and evangelists. Today, many Christians use the Revised Common Lectionary. Each year of the three-year cycle begins on the first Sunday of Advent and the years are called simply Year A, B, and C since they repeat themselves over and over. Advent Sunday of 2007 began year A which ends late November 2008.

interpreted in art throughout the ages, and they are emblazoned on Christmas cards each year. Isaiah is also the prophet most quoted or alluded to in the New Testament. Therefore, the book of Isaiah will represent our prophet figure for Advent.

Not One, But Three Isaiahs

As we read Isaiah, it is helpful to be alert to the setting and people to whom the words are addressed. The prophets spoke to a people in a particular situation. They kept the covenant with God before them as they dealt with powerful kings and conquering armies. God gave each prophet a message specific to the time and situation. In his commentary on Isaiah, Paul Hanson writes:

The prophets viewed the welfare and destiny of their people firmly within the context of world events. God's deliverance of Hebrew slaves from Egypt was a call to historical existence as a family within the family of the nations. The covenant that God concluded with the people entailed living in accord with divine commands amidst the day-to-day business of society and affairs of state. The welfare of Israel was thus tied up with economics, law, and international relations as well as with more explicitly religious matters.³

When we read the ancient words of the Hebrew Prophets, we are obliged to search for the context in which they were first spoken. Therefore, we will not immediately connect their words to a baby named Jesus, although ignoring that will not be easy as we begin the season of Advent.

Careful reading of the book of Isaiah in its earliest manuscripts has led most biblical scholars to conclude that these words come from not one prophet, but from at least three, and in different eras. Therefore, when reading these passages, keep in mind the context of each one. Below is a common way of dividing the book of Isaiah.

First Isaiah—Chapters 1–39

This Isaiah, the son of Amoz, spoke for God during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah—the kings of Judah (1:1)—from about 742 to 687 BCE. These were years of revolt and turmoil for the nation of Judah. Isaiah of Jerusalem records his call from God in chapter 6, one of the most vivid descriptions of God's majesty in Scripture. His message, though, is strongly flavored with God's judgment for the sin of the people, some-

Brief Chronology of Biblical Israel

1250–1020 BCE After the exodus from Egypt and wandering in the wilderness for many years, Moses dies and Joshua leads the Israelites to conquer the land and inhabit it. The twelve tribes form a loose federation and judges unite them in times of disruption or crisis. Thus, this is the time of judges.

1020–932 BCE Under constant threat from the Philistines, whose land they had occupied, the twelve tribes drop the loose federation and choose a king named Saul. During the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, the country prospers.

932–722 BCE The ten northern tribes rebel against Saul's heir to the throne and the kingdom divides in two. The northern ten tribes belonged to Israel, the two southern tribes (where Jerusalem and the temple are) to Judah. These stories are found in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

722 BCE After Amos and Hosea warn the northern tribes of their doom, they are indeed conquered by the Assyrians, who exile and disperse them.

587 BCE Isaiah and Jeremiah write to Judah, which is soon conquered by the Babylonians, who exile the upper classes to Babylonia.

*Dates are approximate

times expressed in the form of a parable (see the parable of the vineyard in chapter 5). The readings for Advent, Year A, are all from this Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Second Isaiah—Chapters 40–55

Second Isaiah is a compilation by one or more prophets who were taken into exile with the Israelite captives by the Babylonian army. His "call" opens chapter 40, but is tame in comparison to the call of Isaiah of Jerusalem. It is also thought that chapters 34 and 35 can be attributed to Second Isaiah. These speeches are approximately forty-five years after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, placing them about 540 BCE. A distinct change from the message and tone of

MAIN MESSAGE OF THE THREE ISAIAHS

- 1st Isaiah (742-687 BCE) God's judgment for the sin of the people
- 2nd Isaiah (540 BCE) Consolation for a destroyed and exiled people
- 3rd Isaiah (537 BCE) Lament for reality found upon the return from exile in Babylon.

Isaiah of Jerusalem, the major theme of Second Isaiah is consolation, evident in the beginning verses which are included in one of the readings for Advent, Year B.

Third Isaiah—Chapters 56–66

This prophet or prophets returned to Jerusalem with the people who chose to leave exile in Babylon, beginning about 537 BCE. They must rejoin those Israelites who were not deported. As we will discover later, memories of home and the temple were tarnished by reality upon their arrival. Some must have wondered why they left what was a pretty good life in Babylon, and we discover a return to hopelessness as we read this lament. Portions of it are in the readings for Advent, Year B, as well.

The focus of the rest of this session will be on the lectionary readings for year B from Second and Third Isaiah.

Second Isaiah

The reading from Second Isaiah for the Advent lectionary is Isaiah 40:1–11. These verses represent God's call to Second Isaiah. As noted above, a very different tone from Isaiah of Jerusalem begins Second Isaiah. This section of Isaiah may be best known for the Servant Songs (Isa. 42:1–9). The setting has changed too. The people to whom the prophet is to speak are in exile in Babylon as a result of their sin and turning away from God. The prophet doesn't have to travel to them for he is in exile with them.

Read Isaiah 40:1–2 with an ear to the emotional tone of these verses. No introduction to this prophet is provided, as found in Isaiah of Jerusalem, nor is the audience named. The twice-repeated "comfort" in verse 1 is plural in the Hebrew, indicating that it is addressed to a group, not one person. Generally, commentators see in

this opening section of Second Isaiah a meeting of God with the heavenly council, much as we find at the beginning of Job or Ezekiel. They are present for the commissioning of the prophet. In verse 2, the judgment against the Israelites, so strongly pronounced by Isaiah of Jerusalem, is lifted. The people have paid their dues, doubly. However, this double portion of judgment was nothing new; in Exodus 22:1, the penalty for thieves is that they pay double or more what they have stolen.

With the prophet commissioned, we hear a voice in the council speak additional words to the prophet. Read verses 3–5. Listen as though you are the prophet they are addressing. You probably recognized these words as John the Baptist's commission, found in all four Gospels. For the time being, try to read these words without referencing them to John. This directive, with its covenantal language ("our God"), repairs the breach in the covenant caused by the Israelites. The highway is to bring God to the people, rather than the people to God. In ancient times, a highway for easy travel was constructed for the conquering king or general to return home. The highway in Second Isaiah is God's highway.

In the final section, verses 6–11, still another voice urges the prophet, "Cry out!" Read these verses, and try to identify the speaker, paying attention to the text because the punctuation is of little assistance. In verses 6b–7, the prophet states his case for *not* providing comfort to the people. But the answer to this objection comes in

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, announced in June 2008 that at the end of 2007 there were 11.4 million refugees outside their countries.⁴ An additional 26 million people were displaced internally by conflict or persecution. Among the latter, in the statistics for 2008, may well be the people in Georgia who fled their homes when Russian troops attacked in August 2008. One family, living in a single room, talked woefully of the brick home they left behind, a house they built themselves when their previous home was destroyed by an earthquake. Others left so quickly that they have no identification, making resettlement and assistance more difficult. However, none of these new refugees want to be like the woman who was forced out of her hometown by war 15 years ago and is still waiting resettlement. Some can only lament, while others hold fast to whatever hope they can find.

verses 8–11, which conclude with a dual image of God, a mighty warrior and a loving shepherd. This is the message the prophet is to give to God’s people in captivity. Thus they, and we, are faced with the sovereignty of God, a God who can do all things, a God who judges and forgives, a God who is both strong and gentle.

Third Isaiah

The texts from Third Isaiah used during Advent, Year B, are Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11, and 64:1–9. The hopeful message about returning to Jerusalem is no longer a dream for the future. King Cyrus, in 538 BCE, issued an edict that permitted the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. Some chose to return to their city, but many stayed in Babylon where they had established themselves and were satisfied with their lives. Perhaps they remembered the murmuring of the people during the exodus, when they longed for the life of slavery with its food in every kettle. But those who returned did not find things as they had left them. The people left behind weren’t all that hospitable and had changed their ways. The returnees discovered how hard it is to go home again after a long absence. Too many years had passed to pick up where they left off.

The other Third Isaiah text read in Advent, 64:1–9, is a lament, a continuation of the one in chapter 63. This passage is traditionally read on the first Sunday of Advent, a reminder of the need for the Messiah. The people, once so filled with hope at the return to Jerusalem, now question the presence of God. Throughout these verses, the prophet decries the status of the people, of Jerusalem, and even of the temple. The people who returned have lost their way. Now they wonder if God is silent and punishing them forever. The prophet lists all that has gone wrong. As you read this passage, make note of the many ways the people have aggrieved God.

Isaiah 61:1–4 and 8–11 is the portion of the Isaiah scroll that Jesus read in his home synagogue in Nazareth, when he is basically run out of town, though perhaps not on a rail. In this account in Luke, we find another example of the difficulty of returning home, but for different reasons. If possible, stand and read these verses aloud. Imagine how you might hear them in Jerusalem where your high hopes upon return are dashed day after day. Hold the lament of chapter 64 in your heart as you read this passage.

The good news pronounced by Third Isaiah in chapter 61 turns everything upside down. God favors the

You Can’t Go Home Again

Wrongly incarcerated prisoners who have served years behind bars probably understand the difficulty of returning better than anyone else.

When Kerry Max Cook walked out of prison after more than 20 years, he knew his future was uncertain, although he had supportive friends to greet him. Once a paralegal, he must now decide what to do with his life.

Timothy Howard was fortunate that he could go to the home of his sister after spending 26 years on death row for a murder he did not commit. Once in her home, he was often puzzled and awed by the changes around him, including a cell phone.

Walter Lomax spent 39 years behind bars on death row. He has children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to get to know.

Each of these men found freedom because of the work of Centurion Ministries in Princeton, NJ. Imagine both the joy and the difficulties they faced upon returning home.⁶

oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the underclass, and those who are down and out. One commentator calls this preference for the poor “perhaps the most significant contribution of the Hebrew prophets to the moral tradition of Judaism and Christianity.”⁵

“The year of the Lord’s favor” refers to the jubilee year described in Exodus 21 and 23 and Deuteronomy 15. Every seven years debts are forgiven, help is given to those in need, slaves are set free, and fields are permitted to lie fallow. In this year of our Lord, all manner of things are freed; God’s covenant with all creation is renewed. This is the good news that Third Isaiah brought to the bereft and hopeless in Jerusalem, another acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty.

Advent and the Prophets

During Advent we remember that we are waiting, just as the exiles did in Babylon, for the arrival of the Messiah. The Prophets, Second and Third Isaiah, beckon us to begin our Advent experience with their messages. They have been called to keep hope alive in bad times as well

as good times. Third Isaiah's recitation of the grievances against God push us to make our own list and remember that Advent waiting is not passive, but active. Second Isaiah's comforting words help us look at our lives honestly.

As we light the first candle of the Advent wreath, may this candle of hope lead you into the season with the Prophets' message of abiding hope.

About the Writer

Carol Wehrheim is a freelance educator, writer, and editor. She lives in Princeton, New Jersey, where she teaches sixth-grade church school and is clerk of session at Nassau Presbyterian Church.

Endnotes

1. Isaiah 2:1–5; 11:1–10; 35:1–10; 7:10–16.
2. Isaiah 64:1–9; 40:1–11; 61:1–4, 8–11.
3. Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1995), 2.
4. For more information about refugees, go to www.who.int/globalatlas/dataQuery/default.asp
5. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 223.
6. For information about Centurion Ministries, go to www.centurionministries.org