

Jer. 33:14–16

Ps. 25:1–10

1 Thess. 3:9–13

Luke 21:25–36

Fulfilling Promises

Goal for the Session

Adults will review God's promises, reaffirmed in Jeremiah 33, and proclaim these promises today.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Jeremiah 33:14–16

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Angela Bauer-Levesque

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WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Jennifer Ryan Ayres

Here we meet the God who promises to protect and restore the people, even as they are in the midst of great suffering and at the edge of despair. It is in precisely this context that God speaks the promise, and it is in precisely this context that despair opens the door to creativity and hope. Calvin acknowledged that the promises of God seem to disappear, but that with faith and patience, we look forward to their fulfillment.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Deborah A. Block

This text insists that covenantal life in all its expressions is characterized by justice and righteousness, allowing no dichotomy of “prophetic” and “pastoral.” Life together is to embody the nature of God, “The LORD is our righteousness.” Jeremiah uses the name first for a promised person (23:6) and again here, intentionally, for a promised place (33:16). The vision of the time to come impugns the time at hand. What leader and what community could claim “The LORD is our righteousness”? The promise challenges our reality, and drives a reappropriation of “righteousness.” The word is uncommon, if not pejorative, in common parlance and unwelcome in the lexicon of many faithful because of its frequent companionship with “self.”

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

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Gary W. Charles

As I listen to the cries of Jeremiah throughout the scope of his prophecy, I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future will be a reality beyond the violent boastings of the ruling Babylon of the day. I long for the day that is surely coming when in God's future the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future has no space for violence, when we will stop producing body bags—because there are no dead soldiers to fill them. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future affords no room for rancor, a day when our world is no longer torn asunder by racism and sexism and homophobia.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Jeremiah 33:14–16

Focus on Your Teaching

Are your participants already in the consumer Christmas rush? Or are they preparing and ready to participate in the season of Advent? The four weeks of Advent allow time to anticipate the promise of Jesus' coming. Today's focus scripture from the prophet Jeremiah offers ideas about what this promise is about.

Advent wreaths provide focus and meaning for many during this season. Older adults will surely know what this is about. Younger adults may welcome an explanation.

Slow my pace, O God, so I may hear the voices of those who long to know your Good News. May I point to your fulfilled and unfailing promises. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ Advent wreath
- ☐ Advent candles; 3 purple, one pink (*suggested*)
- ☐ matches or lighter
- ☐ newsprint or board
- ☐ marker
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: newsprint, marker, paper, pens
- ☐ option 2: card stock in variety of colors, colored pencils, pens
- ☐ option 3: newsprint, marker

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, set the Advent wreath on a table to light during Gathering. For option 1 in Responding, prepare newsprint or a board by writing the common format for biblical prayers of lament listed in option 1.

Greet participants and invite them to think about promises they have kept and have not kept. Form pairs and have participants tell each other one example of a kept and a non-kept promise as they feel comfortable. Encourage pairs to discuss what they have learned about making and keeping promises. Gather the entire group and invite brief comments on what people have learned about promises. Explain that in this session they will explore Jeremiah's message of God's promise to a despairing people.

Explain that on this first Sunday in Advent, they will begin a weekly candle-lighting ritual that extends through the four Sundays of the season.

Before lighting the candle, say: "On this first Sunday in Advent, we light the first candle of hope. A lone candle shines the light of God's promise to God's people."

Light one purple Advent candle and say this prayer or one of your choosing:

We light one lone candle to shine in the world. Help us pause to ponder the promises you fulfill in Christ, whose coming we await. Amen.

EXPLORING

Before reading the focus scripture, distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Jeremiah's Context) and have participants read the information silently. Briefly discuss any questions for clarification that participants raise.

Righteousness: right actions, conduct that aligns with or displays God's purposes, doing the good thing and doing the God thing, the ethic of living toward others in ways that show justice and love.

Prophecy: revelatory statements of what God is doing, uncovering what is hidden. In Israel, prophets of the Lord revealed God's will and purpose, calling people to live by the instructions received from God.

Have participants imagine they are in exile with Jeremiah. Use a *lectio divina* method to read Jeremiah 33:14–16. Explain that you will read the text aloud three times, giving instructions before each reading. Read the focus scripture one time, slowly and deliberately. Before the second reading have participants listen closely to the text, noting particular words or phrases that stand out for them. Pause briefly before the third reading for people to think about the text. For the third reading, have participants listen to Jeremiah's words for a message of hope to a struggling people. Ask:

- ✠ How were Jeremiah's words in 33:14–16 good news for God's people?
- ✠ How do you imagine Jeremiah's prophecy unfolding?
- ✠ When you return from exile to find a new government characterized by justice and righteousness, what might this look like?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Jeremiah 33:14–16), and read the "Where?" excerpt. Discuss where God found in Jeremiah's words.

Read the "What?" excerpt from the resource sheet. Ask:

- ✠ What does the promise of a "righteous branch to spring up from David" mean?
- ✠ What does the promise of God executing "justice and righteousness on the land" mean?
- ✠ What is hopeful in the promise that "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety"?

Read the "So What?" excerpt from the resource sheet. Christians believe that Jesus was the eventual savior and righteous one. Discuss:

- ✠ How did Jesus' leadership exemplify righteousness and justice?
- ✠ What does a righteous community look like?

To transition to Responding, read the "Now What?" excerpt from the resource sheet. Ask:

- ✠ How do Christians suffering today take solace in promises made in Jeremiah?
- ✠ How does the church work to fulfill the promises?
- ✠ How will people know when God's promise is fulfilled?

EASY PREP

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Lament and Promise** In this activity, participants name examples of suffering and injustice present in the world and craft prayers of lament, giving voice to longings for God's promised hope. Refer to the prepared newsprint. Explain that biblical prayers of lament often follow a format:

- ✠ Appeal to God,
- ✠ Description of the suffering or injustice being lamented,
- ✠ Request for God's help or relief,
- ✠ Statement of an expected response from God,
- ✠ Words of thanksgiving.

Distribute paper and pens. Have participants write personal prayers of lament, offering to God their concern for suffering and injustice. Claim God's promises found in

Jeremiah 33:14–16: justice, safety, and righteousness. Then invite the participants to offer the prayers to God, either privately or corporately.

- 2. Create Advent Cards** Participants will create Advent cards with messages of hope and promise proclaimed by Jeremiah. Explain that the message of hope and promise proclaimed by Jeremiah to his exiled community is vastly different from the traditional holiday messages we send to neighbors and friends. Yet his message is a valuable one for our time, especially in places where oppression, displacement, injustice, and fear exist.

Distribute card stock, colored pencils, and pens. Have participants create Advent cards that express a hopeful word to a present longing in our world. Messages may include: God fulfills God's promises; waiting, trusting, and hoping are ways of living with God's promise; God promises justice.

Discuss who the cards might be sent to — in your community or in the world. Designate a volunteer to address or deliver completed cards, or have participants take their cards home as a reminder of God's Advent message.

- 3. Listen and Act** In this activity, participants identify local examples of need or suffering and plan to offer a concrete service of hope to those in need. Explain that the holidays are often a season of service, when many are stirred to offer gifts and services to people in need. For example, many churches and groups help refugee centers, food and clothing banks, and other social services. Many also go caroling at nursing homes and hospitals. Ask:

- ✧ What cries of longing go unnoticed in our community? List these.
- ✧ How might you reach out to support or serve these people?
- ✧ What message of hope or promise might you give?

As a group, make a plan to offer a message of hope and engage in a concrete service with one or more persons identified on the group list. Follow through with your plans before the close of Advent.

CLOSING

Gather participants and discuss God's promises that they can hold on to during Advent.

Offer a group prayer, inviting each person to name a promise from God. Use the following words to open and close your prayer:

Righteous and merciful God, we rejoice in the good news you hold out to your people. Thank you, God for your words of promise:

(Invite participants to name God's promises.)

Let us cling to the fulfillment of your promises. May these give us hope as we go into the world. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week to allow time for reading and reflection.

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Jeremiah's Context

Before Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, the nation of Israel was split into northern Israel and southern Judah. Jerusalem remained the capital in Judah. Shortly after the split, Israel fell to Assyria. Jeremiah was a prophet in Judah, which was eventually conquered by Babylon and many of its leaders exiled.

The book of Jeremiah contains a mix of historical material regarding the changes and challenges God's people faced before and during Judah's fall to Babylon. Jeremiah was a frustrated prophet who often complained that his message fell on deaf ears and his work was for naught. He warned that the sinfulness and injustice of God's people would result in punishment by God. He interpreted the Babylonian invasion, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, and the exportation of the people to Babylon as consequences of turning away from God.

Questions plagued the people while in exile in Babylon. Had God abandoned them? Would God remain faithful to the promise to be their God? How could they show their faithfulness to God after having been removed from the land God gave to them? Was there hope of ever returning home to Jerusalem? Of rebuilding the temple?

In the middle of the book are four chapters, called the "Little Book of Comfort/Consolation." The tone of these chapters turns from struggle and lament to prophetic messages of promise and hope. In chapters 30–33, Jeremiah's readers find comfort to sustain them during a desolate period in their history.

