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PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

BACKGROUND FROM THE AUTHOR

Recently, during the season of Advent, the preaching text for Sunday was Isaiah 40:1–11. Moved by God’s comforting message to those living in exile in Babylon, I sought to help the congregation connect in some way with that ancient community’s experiences. So I asked them to imagine what it may have felt like for the people of Israel to be away from all that they had known, all that had been stable and familiar. As I reflected on some feelings when one is in a place other than home, I told about a phone call with a longtime friend the previous week. In that conversation I was reminded of what it feels like to be away from home. My high school and college friend still lives in Minnesota, my homeland, while I now live in Georgia. Living in the South, and in this particular place, is wonderful and is now truly home. But it is different from my first home, especially during the Advent and Christmas seasons. For one thing, there are no large gatherings of Norwegians to help celebrate the holidays! So when my friend told me about his recent trip to Ingebretsen’s, the Scandinavian food and gift store in Minneapolis, to stock up on such seasonal delicacies as julekake, sandbakkels, fattigmann, and lefse, I felt a pang of separation from my nurturing roots. You betcha.

Two weeks later, when our annual Christmas party took place at the church, it was evident that the congregation had not only been listening closely to my sermon that morning but had also been attuned to my emotions. For during the time of sharing gifts with one another, my wife and I were presented with a large wrapped box. We opened it to discover that it was filled with a variety of Norwegian foods shipped from Ingebretsen’s! There’s nothing like a touch of home to let loose the tears. Many in this congregation of Bath Presbyterian Church live in Hephzibah, Georgia, a town named after the place mentioned in Isaiah 62:4 and 2 Kings 21:1. As we have come to discover about the meaning of the name, it translates “My delight is in her.” My thoughts exactly!

If your church's worship is guided by the Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of scripture readings, you will notice that Isaiah appears frequently throughout the church year. Focusing only on passages from Isaiah Part Two, you will discover two readings for the seasons of Advent and Christmas (Isaiah 40:1–11; Isaiah 52:7–10) and seven readings for the seasons of Lent and Easter (Isaiah 42:1–9; Isaiah 43:16–21; Isaiah 49:1–7; Isaiah 50:4–9a; Isaiah 52:13—53:12; Isaiah 55:1–11; Isaiah 58:1–12). Thus, if you are studying Isaiah Part Two during the season of Lent, you will want to be alert to ways to help participants connect with the good news of Isaiah not only through your learning community but also within the worshiping community.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Preview the scope and sequence of the course.
2. Envision the image of God as gathering and comforting shepherd in Isaiah's visions of hope.
3. Reflect on the journeys ahead and the race set before each one of us.

Resources for Every Session

- Bibles
- The slide presentation, found on the Leader DVD or Leader Flash Drive. The slides provide an important visual element for this study and are intended to enhance appreciation for the many images referenced in the second and third sections of Isaiah. You are encouraged to include them within each session.
- Appropriate equipment (for example, DVD player and TV, or computer and digital projector) for projecting the slide presentation for this session.
- Chalkboard and chalk, whiteboard and markers, or newsprint and markers
- Pens, pencils, paper, and tape
- Bible reference library: Bible dictionaries, concordances, and atlases

Resources You May Need

- Copies of the Resource Book
- Copies of Focus 1, The Shepherd, and Witness 1, Running the Race
- Hymnals with the hymn “Comfort, Comfort Now My People” or “Savior, like a Shepherd Lead Us”
- A Christ candle and lighter, which you may choose to use at the opening and closing of each session, or include in the first and last sessions of Isaiah Part Two

Leadership Strategy

As participants arrive, invite each of them to make a name tag. You may wish to use one of a number of name tags available in office supply stores. If you are seated around tables, tent cards make names easier to see. Make them by folding 8 1/2 by 11-inch sheets of heavy weight paper in half, lengthwise. Direct the participants to write their names on both sides of these name cards and set them in front of themselves on the table or desk where they are sitting. Tent cards can also be designed and printed using various computer software programs.

Some of your time may be taken up with tasks typical of an introductory session. If possible, recruit another person to complete the registration, receive payment for books, and distribute the Resource Books. You are then free to welcome participants and to give the group your attention. It would be ideal to provide participants with Resource Books before the first session. When participants read the Resource Book chapter in advance as preparation for each session, the group learning experience is greatly enhanced.

You may wish to begin each session by lighting the Christ candle, reading scripture, and/or uniting in prayer. Each of the scripture readings mentions light. The readings are from the Common English Bible, a translation published in 2013. Consider enlisting members of the group to share in the readings and, if you choose to do this activity, the lighting of the Christ candle.

As the curtain rises on part two of Isaiah, God’s voice is heard calling, “Comfort, O comfort my people.” It is a startling opening to this chapter and an announcement that life has changed for the people of Israel. “Comfort” is also the first word heard in Handel’s *Messiah*. Reflecting on the impact of *Messiah*’s opening, and possibly listening to it, is suggested for your group as an entry into the new setting of exile.

Remember to pay close attention to hearing and seeing the visions included in Isaiah Part Two. The group will also address some literary features and textual challenges in the book and aspects of the historical settings of the visions.

Isaiah 40 is filled with an abundance of images that could be explored in many directions. You may wish to pursue an image or an aspect of the vision that speaks directly to you and to the needs within your group. The primary focus for this session is on God as shepherd, the one who comes to gather and comfort. Guide the group in discussing the passages related to Joseph, David, Jeremiah, and Jesus and examine the shepherding presence of God in the lives of those individuals.

SETTING THE STAGE

The first slide (slide #1) features an open scroll with images (paper cuttings created by Boyd Lien) from this section of Isaiah, and the title of this six-session course:

ISAIAH, Part Two—Do Not Be Afraid!

■ Project slide #2 (Walter Brueggemann quote; painting of Isaiah) for participants to read as they are gathering.

■ Project slide #3 (title of Session 1; good shepherd sculpture) to signal that the session is beginning.

1. ■ Project slide #4 (opening salutation and sentences from Isa. 62:1). Welcome participants to the first session of this study, *ISAIAH, Part Two—Do Not Be Afraid!*

If you have chosen to include the lighting of the Christ candle, do so at this time.

and/or

Open with a salutation and sentences of scripture from Isaiah 62:1 (CEB):

One: The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

One: “For Zion’s sake I won’t keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I won’t sit still until her righteousness shines out like a light, and her salvation blazes like a torch.”

2. Open the session with the following prayer or by offering a prayer of your own.
■ Project slide #5 (opening prayer) or provide copies, and invite everyone to pray it in unison.

Comforting God, in the simple glory of being alive and the wonders of all that exists, you draw us closer to your compassionate heart. In the love of Jesus Christ, who searches out to rescue the lost, embrace the forgotten, and comfort the hurting, we know your tender care. Through your forgiveness in Christ we are reconciled and made new. May all our words and actions be winsome extensions of your love. In Christ we pray. Amen.

3. If you have not already done so, distribute copies of the Resource Book. Walk the group through the table of contents to provide an overview of the scope of the course, and particularly the sequence in which Isaiah chapters 40-55 will be read and studied.

and

4. Enter into the theme of the session by reading or paraphrasing the following from “Discovering the Prophet in Dublin” in Session 3 of *ISAIAH, Part Three—Your Light Has Come*.

More than seven hundred people were in the audience at the Great Music Hall in Dublin, Ireland, on the night of April 13, 1742, for the first performance of George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*. Imagine the reviews that were written and the stories that were told. Especially fascinating would be knowing what the members of the audience may have felt on hearing, following the overture, the opening words sung by the tenor:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.

Wedded to Handel’s music, the words must have found a receptive home in hearts aching to hear a good word, a word from God. Perhaps the experience was similar to their reception when these words were first heard from the mouth of the prophet

Isaiah. Even now, the inspired blend of words and music has the potential to bring tears to those whose hearts are hurting, broken, and fearful. The cry of the prophet Isaiah continues to hit home as God's comfort embraces its target.¹

You may choose to play the selection from Handel's *Messiah*. Ask the group to reflect on the impact of the text and the music.

Next, ask participants to introduce themselves to each other, giving a short description of the following experience. While few of them may know what it is like to be living in exile, everyone knows something of what it is like to be away from home or away from all that is familiar. In pairs, ask each participant to introduce him- or herself to the other person by talking about an experience of being away from home.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Read Isaiah 40:1–8. ■ Project slide #6 (wheat field; Isa. 40:1-8). Pay close attention to the text. Invite the participants to envision the words of Isaiah. ■ Project slide #7 (discussion questions). Note that the questions below expand upon and clarify the questions as they appear on the slide.

- *What do you hear and see in the vision?*
- *What is the effect of the wilderness and desert as the setting for God's revelation? (A follow up question: Why does the wilderness and desert as the setting for God's revelation have such a powerful effect?)*
- *What is the significance of the wilderness in Israel's history?*
- *What does the wilderness setting anticipate in the ministry of Jesus?*

and

2. Read the insights of Claus Westermann from the section "Have You Not Known? Have You Not Heard?" in the Resource Book:

1 Roger A. Bullard, *Messiah: The Gospel According to Handel's Oratorio* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 7.

He had not been made a prophet because he had some clearer insight into the existing situation than they, or because he kept hoping and trusting that this situation would change, or because of the strength of his faith. The thoughts of his fellow-exiles were his thoughts, too, and he had been every bit as flagging and weary as they. It was a word outside himself, a command, that made him a prophet, as it had done his predecessors. This was the source of all that he was to say, as well as its substantiation. It was “the word of our God,” and it alone, as God guaranteed, would not become void (Isaiah 55:6–11). Since God still spoke it, Deutero-Isaiah [Second Isaiah] was able to preach. This is why Deutero-Isaiah’s preaching is throughout simply the putting forth of this word that was not being spoken. It is also the reason for the complete concealment of himself in its shadow. It was essential that there should be a spokesman for the new word which God was now speaking. But he is merely the voice.²

Consider and discuss the following:

- *What do you think the writer means by “It was a word outside himself, a command, that made him a prophet, as it had done his predecessors”?*
- *In what ways did Isaiah’s eyes, ears, mind, and heart perceive that word?*
- *What does it suggest that Isaiah is “merely the voice”? How are we to listen to his voice?*

If questions are raised by the designation “Deutero-Isaiah,” you may wish to refer to the introduction “Isaiah—the Book, the Authors, and Their Times” in the Resource Book concerning:

Isaiah, Part One—Holy, Holy, Holy

Isaiah, Part Two—Do Not Be Afraid!

Isaiah, Part Three—Your Light Has Come

3. Read Isaiah 40:9–11. ■ Project slide #8 (good shepherd, stained glass, Isa. 40:9-11)
Distribute copies of Focus 1, The Shepherd, to the tables or small groups and ask them to read the passages and discuss as many of the questions as possible within the time available.

2 Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969), 7.

CLOSING

1. Read Isaiah 40:27–31. ■ Project slide #9 (eagle, stained glass, Isa. 40:27-31). Hand out copies of Witness 1, Running the Race. Those running in a race such as a marathon wear bib numbers for identification. Give each of the “runners” (participants) a piece of paper to serve as their bib number; the number refers to a passage from Isaiah 40, such as 40:8, 40:11, 40:31, or the associated texts from the New Testament book of Hebrews (12:1–2, 12–13). You may either print the numbers on the papers in advance or encourage the participants to write their own.
 - *What scripture verse would you attach to your running outfit? What number guides you in “the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1)?*
 - *As you look at the race set before you, what are your anxieties, your delights, your hopes?*

Slide #10 is a blank slide, indicating the end of Session 1.

2. Sing or read together one of these hymns: “Comfort, Comfort Now My People” or “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us.”
3. Join in a prayer expressing gratitude, joys, and concerns.
4. If you have chosen to do this activity, extinguish the Christ candle at this time.

Looking Ahead

In the next session, the appearance of the book of Isaiah’s first Servant Song provides the opportunity to consider how we see and hear the words of Isaiah through eyes and ears of faith in Christ. You will want to preview the slide presentation, The Gospel of Isaiah, and recruit one or two readers for the script found in Focus 2A. It would also be helpful to reflect on the questions found in Focus 2B, Here Is My Servant. You may wish to add, delete, or reframe some of the questions.

THE SHEPHERD

See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

—Isaiah 40:10–11

The promised coming of the Lord as shepherd speaks to the yearning within the scattered flock of God's people. Isaiah's vision revitalizes a major theme within their history.

In the Old Testament story of Joseph, we read that the name shepherd was given to God:

Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. The archers fiercely attacked him; they shot at him and pressed him hard. Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, by the God of your father, who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above. (Genesis 49:22–25)

In the story of David, we read that the name shepherd was given to depict the essence of the God's earthly ruler.

“The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. (2 Samuel 5:2–3)

In the stories of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we read that God's rulers had become unfaithful and evil shepherds.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be

fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 23:1, 3–4)

In the story of Jesus, we read that Jesus identified himself as God’s perfect shepherd.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:11–16)

In your story . . .

- *Where do you yearn for the shepherd to gather and lead?*
- *Where do you see the shepherd’s guidance and protection?*
- *What has caused you to pray, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”?*
- *Who serves as shepherd to you when you wander away from the flock?*
- *Who in your community serve as shepherds?*
- *What characteristics are found in those serving as shepherds?*
- *In what ways are you serving as a shepherd in your spheres of influence?*

RUNNING THE RACE

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . .

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely . . .

The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us . . .

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . .

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

Who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross,
disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees . . .

But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength . . .

Make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint,
but rather be healed.

They shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

—Isaiah 40:28–31, Hebrews 12:1–2, 12–13