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ISAIAH, SON OF AMOZ

BACKGROUND FROM THE AUTHOR

In one congregation I served, there was a faithful member, and a dear friend, who felt compelled to change the words in the hymnal from those she felt excluded certain people to words that included them. Often she could be seen writing in the hymnals at the beginning of worship. Eventually there were some in the congregation who caught on to what she was doing and I would see them leafing through the hymnals at their pew and applying their erasers. The phantom writer and the random erasers became a part of the crucial discussion of the ways our words either included or excluded people. Forming a welcoming, inclusive community was a priority for that congregation and they were sensitive to the power of words.

A church in our community has edited all their hymnals—officially!—by crossing out and changing a word in one of the most popular hymns sung within worship. In the contemporary hymn based on Isaiah's commissioning as a prophet, "Here I Am, Lord," the original verse reads "I will go, Lord, if you lead me." One word has been crossed out and another added so that it now reads, "I will go, Lord, as you lead me." One little word, and yet it makes such a significant difference.

Unless we read the text in the original Hebrew, the words of Isaiah come to us in translation. Today, the reader of Isaiah in English is given the opportunity to choose from between close to nine hundred translations and paraphrases! Each of the translations is the result of choices made to best communicate what is expressed in the ancient texts. The Resource Book under

"Further Research" for session 3 compares five recent translations of Isaiah 7:14, pointing out both similarities and differences. That particular verse has been the focus of intense theological debate over the centuries. And it has to do with words. What happened when the Hebrew language of Isaiah was translated into Greek for the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint? What happened when the writer of Matthew's Gospel quoted Isaiah's prophecy as he wrote the gospel of Jesus? What happens when we believe that the Bible read by one individual or church is the definitive and authoritative translation of the ancient text?

The variety of translations used by the members of your group will be beneficial in listening for the word of God. But remember, the word of the Lord came to Isaiah in visions and prophecies filled with the sensations of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. The word of the Lord was proclaimed by Isaiah using metaphors, everyday images, and pictorial language that targeted the imaginations of his listeners. The challenge is to move away from merely reading words on the page to contemplate the powerful experiences that breathed life into them.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

- 1. Expand upon the meaning within the image of God's vineyard as it finds expression throughout the Scriptures.
- 2. Enter into God's call and commissioning of Isaiah by visually interpreting the story.
- 3. Witness to God's ancient call to Isaiah as God's contemporary call to us.

Resources You May Need

- Copies of Focus 3, "I Saw the Lord!"
- Copies of worship bulletins
- Hymnals with the hymns "God the Sculptor of the Mountains" and "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
- Christ candle, lighter

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Leadership Strategy

You will note that in some sessions there will be an abundance of images to see and discuss. This is one of them. Any one of the readings could be discussed at length.

Depending upon the energy around the tables or in small groups, there will be times you may choose to continue the discussion in the larger group. Many of the group members will be interested in knowing what some of the other groups are discussing. Focus on one or two of the questions in the large group, rather than trying to summarize all that was discussed in the groups.

For the discussion of Isaiah's commissioning, the small groups will be comparing the prophet's experience with the congregation's current worship experience. Provide copies of recent worship bulletins.

For the closing, instead of reading or singing together, you may wish to play a recording of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." A variety of interpretations are available for download from the Internet.

SETTING THE STAGE

- Project slide #32 (Frederick Buechner quote) to be viewed as participants are gathering.
- Project slide #33 (session number and title) to signal that the session is beginning.
- Project slide #34 (salutation and sentences from Isa. 30:26).
 If you have chosen to include the lighting of the Christ candle, do so at this time.

Begin with a salutation and sentences of scripture from Isaiah 30:26 (CEB):

One: The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

One: "The light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the

sun will be seven times brighter—like the light of seven days—on the day that the LORD bandages the people's brokenness and heals the wounds in

flicted by his blows."

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- 2. Open the session with the following prayer or by offering a prayer of your own.
 - Project slide #35 (opening prayer), or provide copies, and invite everyone to pray it in unison.

Loving and Gracious God, there are times when we hear your word and feel as if we are standing on holy ground.

We approach with humility and anticipation

to hear what you will say to us and do among us.

Awaken in us a sense of wonder and awe

as we hear and see the visions of Isaiah.

In these familiar stories, surprise us with new understandings.

Span the time between then and now

with the gift of your energizing Spirit.

In the name of Jesus, we offer our prayers. Amen.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Read **Isaiah 5:1–7**. ■ Project slide #36 (cover illustration; Isa. 5:1-7). Revisit the vision of the vineyard to consider the importance of the metaphor in the faith of Israel. Read one or more of the following passages from the prophets and the teachings of Jesus:

Isaiah 27·2-6

Jeremiah 12:10-11

Ezekiel 19:10-14

Matthew 20:1–5

Luke 20:1–8

- 2. Invite the group to picture themselves walking within the "vineyard" of your congregation.
 - Project slide #37 (discussion questions). Use this ancient metaphor of God's vineyard to engage their imaginations:
 - What is the condition of the fields?
 - *How healthy are the vines?*
 - Where may pruning and tending be needed?
 - What is the outlook for the harvest?
 - How are the workers within the vineyard recruited, inspired, and encouraged?

You may want to consider reading or singing together the hymn "God the Sculptor of the Mountains" or "We Plow the Fields and Scatter."

and

3. Project slide #38 (illuminated manuscript; Isa. 6:1-13). Enter into the vision of God's call and commissioning of Isaiah to be a prophet. Hand out Focus 3, "I Saw the Lord!" to participants. Invite them to read and discuss **Isaiah 6:1-13** guided by the questions.

and/or

If your time is limited, you may simply wish to read **Isaiah 6:1–13** while viewing the ways this passage has been interpreted by artists over the centuries. Show the slide presentation, "Here I Am; Send Me!" provided on this disk. **D** Project slides #39 (stained glass) through 46 (engraving).

and

- 4. Project slide #47 (discussion questions). Either within the small groups or for the entire group, direct participants to reflect upon the Lord's call to Isaiah: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
 - What may have led Isaiah to say, "Here am I; send me?"
 - What may have prepared Isaiah for saying yes to God?
 - Where is God calling you?
 - *In what ways may you be sensing the call of God?*
 - *Is there a place or situation to which God is sending you?*

Encourage sharing within the small group and indicate that there will be time for sharing within the entire group at the close of the session.

CLOSING

1. Gather as a group. Assign parts for the reading: narrator, the Lord, Ahaz, and Isaiah. Read **Isaiah 7:10–17.** ■ Project slide #48 (altarpiece; Isa. 7:10-17. Notice that the image on the left is an enlargement of the figure of Isaiah which appears in the upper left of the picture of the

altarpiece on the right.). This reading is regularly heard in worship during the season of Advent. Express the vision by singing or reading the Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Ask:

- How does the hymn interpret God's ancient word to the people then as God's current word to us now?
- What do the various titles of God—Wisdom, Lord, Rod of Jesse, Key of David—reveal about the hope for Immanuel?

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- 2. Conclude the session by encouraging the group to share responses to the following:
 - Where has God called you?
 - Where may God be calling you?
- 3. Join together in a prayer expressing gratitude, joys, and concerns.
- 4. If you included it at the opening, extinguish the Christ candle.

Looking Ahead

The next session looks at the Jesse Tree. To prepare, select various names from the Gospel of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (1:1–16) that participants will share information about during the discussion of Jesus's family tree and create simple name tags for them. If you decide to play the selection from Handel's *Messiah*, you have a variety of video and audio choices.

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"I SAW THE LORD!"

Isaiah 6:1–8	Let Us Worship God!
In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.	
And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.	
And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"	
Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."	
Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"	

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In many ways, the experience of Christian worship today shares elements of Isaiah's profound vision in God's heavenly temple.

Using a recent worship bulletin, compare the order of worship and elements of the service to the vision of Isaiah.

Imagine you have been invited to visually interpret the passage for the cover of the bulletin.

- What do you see in the vision? Where is your attention drawn?
- What aspect of the vision will be your central focus?
- What response would you like to elicit from the viewer because of your interpretation?

Reflect on what happens following Isaiah's enthusiastic response to God's call.

Read Isaiah 6:9–13.

- What do you hear in the words "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand"?
- *In what ways may this indicate the success of Isaiah's prophetic ministry?*
- Jesus quotes these words in answering the question from the disciples, "Why do you speak to them in parables"? (Matt. 13:10–15) How might Isaiah respond to the question, why do you speak to us in visions and metaphors?