

Advent Study 2017

Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

This study is divided into four weeks which correspond to the four Sundays of Advent. The passages from Isaiah below are the same ones we will read as we light the four Advent candles. Each week also includes a psalm at the end of the lesson which will be read or sung in worship. You're encouraged to use this psalm as part of your prayer time, or for further reflection/discussion.

Week 1 - Longing

Isaiah 64:1-9

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
2 as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
3 When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
4 From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
5 You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
6 We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
7 There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
8 Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
9 Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.*

This passage begins with a desperate plea to God: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..." It expresses a longing that God would dramatically appear, descend to Earth, and reveal himself one more. They don't just want to hear about God - they want to see God! The people remember the stories of God's awesome deeds in the past (v3), but now it's as if God has hidden his face (v7). By their sinfulness, they have turned away from God, and God has turned away from them. And now they feel distant from God; will he return to save us? Or have we been abandoned?

It's easy for us 2500+ years later to wonder the same things, to have the same longings. Where is God? Why doesn't he show up and do the the kind of things we read about in the Bible? Why doesn't God make things right? O that God would appear! Is it our fault? Have we turned away from God? So much seems wrong in the world; does God not care? Has he abandoned us? Will he come and make it right?

Although we live on the other side of Christ's coming, we still find ourselves in a similar position to the Israelites. We hear that God acted in the past, but we wonder if God will act in the future. One of the things we celebrate at Christmas is that God did indeed tear the heavens and come down in a way both more dramatic and more subtle than anyone could've imagined: he became incarnate and was born of a virgin. Isaiah's plea was answered. During Advent we return to these passages from the OT because they help prepare our hearts and minds to once again receive the Good News of Christmas, that God heard our cries, that God has come to us. We recall what it was like to walk in darkness so that we can rejoice in the light. By remembering what Jesus meant for people on that first Christmas, we see what he means for people now. And we are reminded that God is faithful.

And at Advent we remember that Christ will come again. Traditionally Christians have begun Advent by focussing on Christ's second coming, not his first. We begin at the end, completing the circle, as it were. Christ has come and Christ will come again. Once more we anticipate the day when Christ will indeed tear open the heavens and come down, not as a humble baby, but as the King of Glory. And as we wait it's only human to wonder if God is really going to act. Why the wait? If God were going to do something, why didn't God do it already? Why are we still left here mired in sin? When will things be as they ought to be? Like Isaiah, we implore God, "Now consider, we are all your people." Like the Israelites, we wait.

- 1. When you read/hear the prophets like Isaiah - especially the passages we read in Advent - what kind of mood or atmosphere does it bring to mind? Is it more dark or light? Hopeful or despairing? Positive or negative? Etc....**
- 2. In what ways are we like the Israelites awaiting Christ's coming? And how is our situation different?**
- 3. Do you ever want God to do the kind of dramatic things you read about in the Bible? Do you ever wonder if this is only something that happened in the past?**
- 4. Does God hide himself? (v5) Or does it only appear so from our perspective? What role does our sin play in whether we see God?**
- 5. How do we know that God is faithful? Is it obvious - or does it require the eyes of faith to see?**
- 6. Why must we wait? (v4). What role does patience play in the Christian life?**
- 7. Do you look forward to Christ's coming again?**

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
3 Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
4 O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
6 You make us the scorn[a] of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.

7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.

18 Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

19 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Week 2 - Preparation

Isaiah 40:1-11

*40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.*

*2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her*

*that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.*

3 A voice cries out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.*

*5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

*6 A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"*

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.*

*7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.*

*8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

*9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;*

*say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"*

*10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;*

*his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
11 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.*

One of the major events in the Old Testament is the Exile. In the 6th century BC the Babylonians conquered the Israelites, sacked Jerusalem, and destroyed the temple built by Solomon. The Babylonians exiled many Israelites over the course of a few decades. If the people were spread out, they could not resist and would be easier to subjugate. The Israelites were utterly humiliated and left with many difficult questions. If they were defeated in battle, did it mean that their God wasn't strong enough to help them? Had God abandoned them? Or was God punishing them? These are difficult questions to answer, especially when the Israelites, like most people at the time, thought that their God was tied to a particular place. They believe that their God was better than all the other gods, but still they understood that God dwelt in the temple, in the city which he'd chosen as his royal city, in the Land he'd promised his chosen people. But how were the people to worship while in Babylon? Did God go with them? Did God even have authority there?

It was during the exile that Israel came to realize that their God was not just one god among many, not just the most powerful god, but the one, only, true God. And if that was true, then God's chosen people must be in exile because God wanted them to be there. The people had been repeatedly unfaithful and God had been patient, but there came a time when they had to be taught a harsh lesson. It was difficult time.

Isaiah was sent to preach a word of comfort. The people have served their time, their penalty has been paid (v2). God hasn't forgotten about them; in fact, God is coming, and they must prepare the way of the Lord (vv 3-5). People and nations come and go, but God's word will stand (vv 6-8).

This passage reminds us of God's faithfulness. God did indeed deliver the people from captivity and back to the Promised Land, and centuries later, John the Baptist arrived preparing the way for the messiah, the Christ, God in the flesh:

*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.*

On another level, this passage (and many like it) help us to think about our present situation. We are like people exiled in the world, spread out amongst places that aren't really home. We wonder if God is going to deliver us, or if perhaps God is slow to fulfill his promises. Of course, our Promised Land is not a particular place, but a new heaven and a new earth, when Christ will come to us again. And just as John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord, so too does God call us to prepare way for others to follow Jesus.

- 1. Can you imagine how faith would've been difficult for the Israelites in exile?**
- 2. What is it like to be in exile? Do you ever feel like you are exiled? Who are the exiles in our world?**
- 3. Do you ever wonder if God is really going to keep His promises? Does it sometimes seem like God is waiting too long?**
- 4. When something bad happens to us, might God be teaching us a lesson? How do we know when something is God's positive action versus just the negative reality of sin?**
- 5. Is it hard to prepare for something when you're not sure when/if it's going to happen?**
- 6. How can we prepare the way of the Lord?**

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

1 Lord, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin. *Selah*

8 Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.[a]
9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
10 Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
11 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
12 The Lord will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
13 Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Week 3 - Expectation**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.*

*8 For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,*

*and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
 and their offspring among the peoples;
 all who see them shall acknowledge
 that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
 my whole being shall exult in my God;
 for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
 he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
 so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
 to spring up before all the nations*

Even following their return from exile, the Israelites were still an oppressed people. They had been allowed to return to their land, but they were not free. In the time of captivity Israel began to long for a great prophet who would deliver them from oppression and make things the way they ought to be. These words from Isaiah (vv 1-4) describe the vision of what the prophet will do. It reflects both the longing of their hearts and God's desire for them. The passage is all about good news to the poor, to a poor people who have been driven from their land brokenhearted, held captive in prison, mourning all that was lost, their old homes lying in ruins. But God will restore his people. God will restore them in every way, mind, body, and soul. God will transform their suffering into joy. God will make all things new.

God loves justice and will ensure the people receive it (v8), establishing an everlasting covenant with them. All nations will see them and know that they are blessed, to the glory of God (v9). Therefore "I" will rejoice in the Lord who has lifted "me" out of the ash heap to be adorned in splendor. The Lord brings new life, and all the nations will see it.

It's important for us first to understand how the Israelites would have heard and received these words in their particular situation. And, over time, as they waited longer and longer, the words became, at times, more urgent or more unlikely. The degree of their oppression would increase or decrease, but it never stopped. What seemed like it was on the horizon was pushed out of sight. When will one finally come who will declare, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me"?

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth, read this passage from the scroll, and declared, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-21). The people in his hometown were perplexed. Isn't this Jesus, the carpenter's boy? How does he fulfill this Scripture? And as they looked around, they didn't see it coming true - yet. Jesus didn't look like what they expected.

Even so, Jesus came to deliver Israel. First and foremost, he was their messiah, but he was also the messiah for the whole world. As we consider who Jesus is for us, for the world, we should also take a moment to consider who Jesus was to his own people. What he did for them, he did for all.

- 1. Have you ever felt exiled or oppressed? Have you ever felt like everything is wrong and it will never be right again?**
- 2. How might the experience of exile have turned the Israelites back to God? And how might our own "exile" - our own experience of being away from where we're supposed to be - make us turn to God?**
- 3. What kinds of things did the Israelites expect God's anointed you do for them? And what kinds of things do we expect Jesus to do for us?**

4. Similarly, when we read about Christ setting free the oppressed, releasing the captives, etc., do we imagine this literally? Or do we think of it more spiritually? Or is it both? What did the Israelites expect? And how did Jesus meet - or defy - their expectations?
5. How is God's love of justice connected to the messiah's mission? And how do the nation's perceive God's justice? (vv 8-9)
6. Who is the "I" in verses 10-11? Why does this person rejoice?
7. How has the good news led to your own rejoicing? Do you find hard to rejoice? Do you ever feel like you're still in exile, still in captivity, still in need of savior?
8. What do you expect God will do in your life? In the church? In the world?

Psalm 126

- 1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,[a]
we were like those who dream.
- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."
- 3 The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
- 5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
- 6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Week 4 - Restoration

Isaiah 9:2-7

- 2 *The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*
- 3 *You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.*
- 4 *For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.*
- 5 *For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*
- 6 *For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;*

*and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

That this passage speaks clearly of Jesus seems evident to us. One of the difficult (but also wonderful) aspects of the words of the prophets is that they often work on more than one level. These words probably originally referred to an earthly king. Although most of the kings of Israel and Judah were judged negatively, a few, like Hezekiah, were worth celebrating. But, over time, these words of Isaiah transformed from a past description into a future hope. They looked forward to one who would truly fulfill these words, not only in part, but in total, not just an earthly king but a heavenly king. They longed for the partial restoration to be made complete.

When we read, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;" or "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;" we now hear these words as describing past events (not least because they are in the past tense). Indeed we do celebrate at Christmas that all those years ago, in a particular place at a specific moment in time, a Son was born to us, that the light shined in the darkness. We remember what God has done, becoming Emmanuel, God with us, intervening in history, changing all of history. The life of Jesus is the most important event ever. In a sense, all that comes afterward is mere postscript.

But in another sense, these words of Isaiah are not only in the past but speak to a longed for future for us as well. We still dwell in a land of deep darkness into which the light needs to shine. Christ has changed history, but history marches on - and much of it is grim. We struggle to see how the realities of which this passage speaks are real in our world. In Jesus the kingdom has come, but there are still so many places where justice and righteousness do not reign. We still have to pray that the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

We still live in a world that needs Jesus. We are still people who need Jesus. And this is why, strange as it may seem, Christians look to Christ's coming again at Christmas. We look forward to time when he returns in final victory, when there is no darkness but all is light, when there is a new heaven and a new earth. Come Lord Jesus.

- 1. When you look at our world, do you see more darkness or more light? How has the light already shined in the darkness? And how does it need to still?**
- 2. Similarly, does this passage seem to describe more the past or more the future?**
- 3. How is the world now different than before Christ came? How does it remain the same?**
- 4. What is it like to live in this "time between the times" - the time between Christ's coming and his coming again? What has already happened? And what is yet to come?**
- 5. How is Christ's second coming like his first?**
- 6. In what ways is Christmas a celebration? And in what ways is it an expression of longing?**

Psalm 96

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth!
2 Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
3 Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
4 For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.
5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols;
but the Lord made the heavens.
6 Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
7 Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength!
8 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
9 Worship the Lord in holy array;
tremble before him, all the earth!
10 Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns!
Yea, the world is established, it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
12 let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy
13 before the Lord, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.