

**Isa. 64:1–9**

**Ps. 80:1–7, 17–19**

**1 Cor. 1:3–9**

**Mark 13:24–37**

# Opening to Holy Hope

## **Goal for the Session**

*Stirred by Isaiah’s intercessory pleas, adults will affirm the grounding of Advent’s hopes in God’s holy and sometimes hidden purposes.*

## ■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

### Focus on Isaiah 64:1–9

#### **WHAT is important to know?**

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” William P. Brown

These final verses establish the ties that bind God to God’s people. God is “our Father,” equated earlier with “our Redeemer from of old” (63:16). To claim God as paternal is to assert God’s familial claim upon Israel and Israel’s claim upon God, a kinship that necessitates continued recognition and care for Israel. The community is also God’s handiwork, pottery, no less, shaped by loving hands (cf. Jer. 18). God would not let a people slide into destruction any more than a father would sacrifice his son or a potter would destroy her prized bowl. The bottom line is that “we are all your people,” whether God likes it or not, for the covenantal bond is indissoluble. God, thus, is bound to act.

#### **WHERE is God in these words?**

— From “Theological Perspective,” Scott Bader-Saye

Isaiah calls on Israel to be malleable in the hands of God, and he reminds God to fulfill the task of forming Israel into a people of blessing. In the season of Advent, Christians imaginatively enter a time of waiting for the Christ child, who comes as God hidden in human form, who comes not to inaugurate an apocalyptic cleansing but to reveal the power of the powerless in his self-giving on the cross. In so doing, he reveals the will of the Father who is eternally, patiently molding and shaping the clay of creation into the New Jerusalem.

#### **SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?**

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Patricia E. De Jong

At Advent, God’s people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy breaks into the daily. In tiny ways, we can open our broken hearts to the healing grace of God, who opens the way to peace. May that peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation. As a friend has said, this is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope.

#### **NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?**

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Donald Booz

Yet recognizing God’s presence may be a daily task, especially given the world in which we live. Like Isaiah, we need to remember when God has been visible in our midst. Waiting with hope that God will be visible once again is the call of Isaiah to God. Watching with eyes to see is the call of Isaiah to the people of faith. To hear the voice of Isaiah is to proclaim that Advent is more than a time to hear promises about God. Advent becomes a season of attentiveness to the presence of God already among us.

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

*Isaiah 64:1–9*

## Focus on Your Teaching

What reasons for hope and despair might the participants in your group bring with them into this session: about these weeks leading to Christmas; about your congregation and wider community; about your nation and world? Today's session will explore a challenging text on hope's possibilities and hurdles.

*God of all hope, weave your purposes through my preparations for this session and the entire Advent season. Amen.*

## LEADING THE SESSION

### YOU WILL NEED

- Advent wreath with candles
- matches or lighter
- index cards
- pens
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 6, 2020

### For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: banner-making materials (felt blocks, glue gun, scissors, 3 x 3 backing cloth)
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 1

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, arrange the Advent wreath in front or at the center of your meeting space, depending on the seating arrangements. Decide whether you will choose the Advent banner-making activity (option 2 in Responding), which will be a four-week project.

Welcome the participants. Introduce any guests or visitors.

Give each participant an index card and a pen. Ask individuals to consider what hopes they bring with them today. Clarify that the hopes may be for the world and/or for their personal life. Have them write the two or three most important hopes on one side of the index card.

Next, use the other side of the index card to write both reasons for holding those hopes and reasons for wondering whether they will ever come to pass.

Affirm that today is the first Sunday in Advent, and that the first candle you will light on the Advent wreath represents hope. As you light the first candle, invite participants to be mindful of the hopes they have identified. Afterward, say that today's session will explore a text from Isaiah on hope.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

*Holy God, open us to your presence in word, in community, and in hope.  
Amen.*

Many scholars date Isaiah 56–66 to the years after the return to Israel after exile in Babylon. The yearning in Isaiah 64 thus arose not from the hope for the exile’s ending, but rather out of difficulties experienced after the return.

## EXPLORING

Introduce today’s focus scripture by reading and discussing the sidebar information in preparation for engaging today’s text.

Lead the participants in the following meditation. Have them find a comfortable position, close their eyes, and take three deep breaths. Use the following script to guide the meditation, rewording as you see fit.

*Imagine you are one of those who returned from exile in Babylon to Israel. You had been buoyed by prophetic promises of restoration to make the long journey. As you first entered the land, you saw fields and orchards that had been destroyed or suffered from lack of tending. You saw houses fallen into disrepair. And you saw Jerusalem, its walls broken down and the temple destroyed. Three years have passed. You have made headway in restoring the home in which you live. But the walls of the city remain down, leaving you vulnerable to raids by enemies. It will still be several years before the olive trees you tend will once again bear fruit. And with all the work to be done, the temple remains in ruins. You gather with others in a synagogue this day because a new scroll bearing the name of Isaiah will supposedly be read. What feelings do you carry with you into the synagogue that day: about the lack of progress and hard work of restoration; about the presence of God? You listen as the rabbi unrolls the scroll and reads these words (read Isaiah 64:1–9). When the rabbi finishes, he rolls up the scroll and closes by asking these two questions:*

- ✻ What will you pray this evening because of these words?
- ✻ What will you do tomorrow because of these words?

Allow time for participants to reflect on the questions. Then invite participants to take three deep breaths and open their eyes. Form small groups for participants to discuss their responses to the rabbi’s questions.

Have four volunteers read portions of today’s passage aloud to the group. Assign the volunteers the following verses from Isaiah 64:1–9: 1–2, 3–4, 5–7, and 8–9. Read each set of verses. After the reading of each set, discuss the following questions based on that set of verses alone:

- ✻ What hope does this section lift up?
- ✻ What does this section reveal about those to whom Isaiah wrote it?
- ✻ What does this section reveal about God?

Bring the discussion of the previous three questions into the context of today’s being the first Sunday in Advent. Encourage participants to identify what they hear Isaiah saying about God’s purposes, both “holy” and “hidden,” in this passage. Ask: How might Isaiah’s words shape our observance of Advent and what it could mean to live in its hopes?

EASY  
PREP

The banner-making option is offered each session in Advent. Choose this option only if you will do so in the other sessions. The intent is to create a single composite banner or series of four to reflect the whole season.

## RESPONDING

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

- 1. Advent's Hope: Let's Be Clear** Separating the hopes of Isaiah and Advent from shallow optimism is a critical task for people and communities of faith. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Signposts on the Way to Advent's Hopes) and have participants silently read it. Invite participants to identify what they found most challenging about these readings, and most helpful, in terms of the hopes associated with Advent. Challenge individuals to use this resource sheet in the coming week to reassess one of the hopes (and reasons for holding it and wondering about it) identified on their index cards.
- 2. Crafting Hope** As Isaiah used visual imagery to craft his message, the group may express Advent hope by crafting a visual symbol. Discuss ideas for a visual symbol of the hope evoked by Isaiah and explored in this session. Reach a consensus on one. Direct participants to the banner-making materials, and have them work together to create an Advent banner of hope. Decide whether the group will eventually create a single banner for Advent or four separate banners. Encourage participants to remember the visual symbol in their prayers and personal Advent preparations this week.
- 3. A Season of Attentiveness** Observing Advent and affirming its hopes involve attentiveness to the needs for and signs of God's presence already among us. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Isaiah 64:1–9) and read the "Now What?" excerpt. Brainstorm ideas on practices that might help participants be more attentive and responsive to God's presence in this season of Advent. Encourage participants to consider service-oriented as well as reflective practices. Urge each person to commit to one reflective practice and one congregational Advent mission project through the season of Advent as part of their attending to God's presence among us.

## CLOSING

Gather the participants around or in front of the Advent wreath and remind them that the first candle was lit to symbolize "hope." Ask them to reflect on ways this session has witnessed to hope, as well as challenged us to dig deeper into hope's meaning or hiddenness. Invite participants to call out a word or phrase that speaks to that hope or challenge.

Introduce the following litany prayer, noting that Isaiah's passage is largely a prayer. Ask participants to identify a hope they would pray for, whether on their index card or something evoked through this session. After each person states their hope, lead the group in a litany response that uses the final sentence in the first paragraph of Resource Sheet 2 ("We pray for the hope of Advent: that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of peace, hope, and restored life.").

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 6, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

## Focus on Isaiah 64:1–9

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## Signposts on the Way to Advent's Hopes



It (Isaiah 64:1–9) is a strange way to begin this time of Advent. Beginning Advent with weeping and a lament? That is unusual! And powerful. This is where we need to begin. The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness. . . . Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended. . . . We pray for the hope of Advent: that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of peace, hope, and restored life.

—Patricia deJong, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 4

God's refusal to replicate a Red Sea-type deliverance does not mean that God has abandoned Israel or the church. Our hope does not rely on God's acting today in the same ways God acted in the ancient stories, but it does rely on God's being the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow—a God who hears our cries, a God who does not abandon us, a God who will finally redeem all that is lost in a new heaven and new earth (Isaiah 65:17). The tradition of biblical lament does not invoke the past as nostalgia, nor does it dismiss the present in despair; rather, it draws on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future.

—Scott Bader-Saye, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 6

Too much that passes for hope among us is little more than wishful thinking disconnected from action taken in response. Too much that passes for hope is self-centered daydreaming about what would be nice for me and mine to the exclusion of any concrete consideration for you and yours. Too much that passes for hope wants to let go and let God, even in those matters where our gracious God waits and waits on us to act. To term such hope wishy-washy is a gentle understatement. Such a parody of hope leaves us spiritually homeless, stripped of the calling and direction so vital in Biblical faith. . . . Hope involves finding where and to whom we and all creation belong and then having the trust and courage to start living in that direction.

—John Indermark, *Hope: Our Longing for Home*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2007), 11–12