

Adult Teaching Resources

March 24, 2019



Epiphany (January 6-March 3) Not Your Typical Teacher

Luke 9:28-43 – “Climbing Higher”

Lenten Season (March 10-April 14) Deliberate Devotion

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 – “A Joyous Confession”

Genesis 15:1-21 (RCL 1-12, 17-18) – “A Hair-Raising Prediction”

Isaiah 55:1-9 – “A Stunning Invitation”

Joshua 5:1-12 (RCL 9-12) – “A Cutting Reaffirmation”

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A Stunning Invitation

Isaiah 55:1-9

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

“Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.” Isaiah 55:6

As people of faith, we’ve been taught to do everything we can to please God. Some days we succeed. Most days, we fall short.

When we fall short, we often turn to God and ask for forgiveness. As we explore today’s passage, we read beautiful words about God hearing our pleas and wanting us to continue to be in a divine relationship.

Opening

After everyone arrives and is ready for class to begin, ask everyone to break into small groups of 3-4 in a group.

Ask each group to share their experiences with apologies.

How often do you find yourself apologizing?

For what do you apologize? For what do you “let slide?”

When is it easy for you to apologize?

When is it difficult for you to apologize?

How do you apologize?

What do you need to happen so that you know your apology was heard and accepted?

Give each group time to share, then open the floor with the large group for volunteers to share their answers.

Reading the Bible

With what does Isaiah say the exiles are to buy wine and milk? (without money and without price)

What question does Isaiah ask? (Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?)

Why are the exiles told to listen to Isaiah? (so that they might live)

Reading the Bible *continued*

What does Isaiah say he is? (a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples)

Why will the nations that do not know the exiles, run to them? (because the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, has glorified them)

When should the exiles seek and call the Lord? (while he may be found, while he is near)

What will God do if the wicked forsake their ways and return to God? (God will have mercy on them and will abundantly pardon them)

What does God say about his ways and thoughts? (vv 8-9)

Making Connections

Have you ever spent time listening to a street preacher? When did you do it? Where was it? What was said? How did you respond to it?

What religious message seems “too good to be true?” Why do you say that? What have you learned to be good and true?

What does God offer you that world can’t? What have you done with that offer?

Our Lesson Writer says, “The prophet believed that if the exiles would trust God promise and return to build up Jerusalem as a people fully committed to God’s way, they would become such an inspiration that other nations would “run” to them in search of the secret to success and life that they had discovered in “the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you” (v. 5b).” How are you living your life so that others will run to you and find your secret to life?

What are the ways you seek God?

What does mercy mean to you? What does forgiveness mean to you? How do you live those out?

Our Lesson Writer reminds us, “Human minds are limited, but God’s knowledge knows no boundaries: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (v. 9). As much as we may like the idea of understanding everything, we have to acknowledge that God remains far beyond our full comprehension, always shrouded in mystery.” Share a time when your knowledge was limited and you had to totally rely on faith to get through. What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about God?

What is your understanding of God’s purpose for you? What is your understanding of God’s purpose for your group? What is your understanding of God’s purpose for your church?

When, with God by your side, have things gotten worse before they got better? How did that experience affect your relationship with God?

So What?

Ask everyone to gather back with their small group from the beginning of the class.

Share what our Lesson Writer says...” There is a future for us, and the prophet declared it to be bigger and more beautiful, happier and more peaceful than the Jerusalem we know will ever be. Despite the best prophetic efforts, from Ezekiel’s visions to John’s apocalypse, we cannot know exactly what that future will be like, except that it will be with God, so it must be good.

The one thing we can hang our hopes on is that we serve a God who wants to be known, and who wants to bless us. As we “seek the LORD while he may be found,” we embark upon a journey through valleys and hills that may be more stressful than musical, but we do not travel alone – and when we can be confident that the end of the road brings us closer to God, every step will be worth the effort.”

Ask each group to share their answers to these questions:

What do you think God has in store for your future?

What do you think God has in store with your family?

What do you think God has in store with your work/vocation?

What do you think God has in store with your friends?

What do you think God has in store with your church?

What are some specific ways we can remain faithful to God in uncertain times?

Give each group time to share, then open the conversation to the larger group.

The Challenge

This week, pray daily for the faith you will need to remain faithful to God. Ask for forgiveness, confessing your sins.

Prayer

Loving God, here we are, your servants. Lead us, guide us, and direct us in the ways you desire. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Growing the text—The Old Testament lectionary text for this week encompasses only Isaiah 55:1-9, but the oracle extends through v. 13, the end of the chapter, so we’ll consider the entire chapter.

Isaiah 55 is such a meaningful text that portions of it appear several times over the course of the lectionary’s three-year cycle.

Isaiah 55—Isaiah 55 concludes the second of three major sections in the book of Isaiah: chapters 1-39 belong mainly to the pre-exilic period of the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE, calling Israel’s people to repent and trust God lest they be carried into exile. Chapters 40-55 belong to a later period, and are addressed to the sixth century exiles, living in Babylon, paying the price for the people’s ongoing failure to worship Yahweh only. The final section, chapters 56-66, appears designed to encourage those exiles who returned to Jerusalem and surrounding areas after Babylon was defeated and the Persian king Cyrus allowed the captives to return home.

While the namesake of the book was Isaiah of Jerusalem, at least one and possibly two later prophets contributed to the book during and following the exile, about 150 years after the original Isaiah’s death.

Today’s text may belong to the period immediately following Cyrus’s edict of 538 BCE, which gave the exiles permission to return home and rebuild Jerusalem. Today’s text may best be understood as a call for Israelites to leave their homes in Babylon and undertake the arduous journey back to Jerusalem. Many Hebrews wondered why they should do so: the Babylonians had allowed the Israelites a considerable amount of freedom to carry on their business and even to accumulate property. Few remained who remembered Jerusalem, and apparently there was no great rush of people anxious to leave what they had worked for in Babylon and return to an uncertain, hostile existence in a new Persian province consisting of Jerusalem and its immediate environs.

Come to the table—Isaiah’s free offer of food and drink is not unlike Jesus’ parable of the great supper, in which God invites all people to come and eat at the heavenly table (Luke 14:15-24, John 7:37-38, Rev 22:17). Both are freely offered, yet many are hesitant to accept. Why do you think this is so?

Digging Deeper *continued*

God's promises—God's offer in v. 3 promises nothing less than life, continuing a long string of imperative verbs: "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live" (v. 3a). In Hebrew thought, the concepts of "listening" and "obeying" were closely linked: to truly hear was to obey. Here, the repetition of "incline your ear" and "listen" implies that the hearers must not only hear the prophet's words, but obey his teaching, if they are to experience the life he promises.

The latter part of v. 3 is difficult to translate, though it clearly refers to God's promise to David described in 2 Samuel 7:8-16, 23:5; 1 Kings 8:23-26; and Psalm 89. Literally, the text says "I will cut for you (plural) a covenant everlasting, my steadfast love (to) David confirmed." The word behind "confirmed" is a reflexive participle from the verb *'aman* (English "amen"), meaning "to confirm" or make sure. Thus, it could be translated as an adjective such as "sure." NRSV renders it "I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David."

The awkwardness comes from the lack of any preposition or comparative associated with the name of David, which stands alone. Most scholars believe the intended sense is that the promised covenant is to be "like" God's sure promises to David. In essence, then, Isaiah promises that God's everlasting covenant with David has been transferred to the people, who are now free to return to Jerusalem in hopes of building a new and lasting kingdom.

It's imperative—Notice the piling up of imperative verbs in this text. Isaiah calls on the people to "come" (twice), "buy" (twice) and "eat" (v. 1); to "listen carefully," "eat," and "delight yourselves" (v. 2); to "incline your ear," "come to me," and "listen" (v. 3), to "see" (vv. 4-5), to "seek the LORD" and "call upon him" (v. 6). What does the use of imperative verbs suggest about the need for human response in God's offer of redemption?

Seeking God by seeking justice—Perhaps Amos, a contemporary of the eighth century Isaiah, put it most clearly, calling on Israel to "seek me and live" by practicing true justice rather than by going to the temple while mistreating others (Amos 5:4-12).

Micah portrayed a court case (Mic. 6:1-8) in which God found fault with Israel, but the people argued that they already worshipped faithfully, and sarcastically asked if God wanted more and more sacrifices, even human sacrifices. Micah replied that God's expectations were for the people do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8).

Later, Jeremiah challenged Israel to call upon Yahweh, promising "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart ... and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations ... and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile" (from Jer. 29:12-14).

Digging Deeper *continued*

Seeking God by repenting—To “return to the LORD” (v. 7) means to repent. Indeed, the Hebrew word for “turn” or “return” is the very same word used for “repent.” To repent is to turn about, to turn away from a self-oriented life to a God-directed life, from a sinful life to a righteous life.

Memorial trees—The Haas Promenade, a memorial park overlooking Jerusalem, features trees reminiscent of Isaiah’s promise.



The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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How can “word” and “deed” be the same thing?

We mentioned above that in Hebrew, the same term can be used to mean “word” or “deed.” It can, for that matter, also mean “thing,” though generally in the sense of a thing that is done. The word is *dabar*, and it can be used for words and deeds of humans or of God.

Isaiah 55:10-11 makes maximum use of this dual meaning: God’s promised word and God’s actions are interconnected. As Claus Westermann has put it, “God’s word is a word that does things.” (*Isaiah 40-66*, Old Testament Library [Westminster Press, 1977], 289).

This thought dominates prophecy in both the Old and the New Testaments. Hebrews 4:12 declares “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ...” John’s gospel likens not only Christ’s work, but Christ himself, to the word of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things came into being through him ...” (John 1:1, 3a).

The prophets’ declaration of God’s word was risky, because it was not grounded in tradition or in the temple: it had nothing to stand on but the word itself, and its fulfillment. The very nature of this risk, however, made its pronouncement a bold and meaningful act.

The authentic declaration of God’s word, by its nature, will be fulfilled. It may not always be fulfilled in the way we expect: Isaiah’s promise of a rose-garden reception for the returning exiles did not happen, but the point of the prophecy was that Israel would be delivered from their bondage in Babylon, and that promise was fulfilled.

As Westermann notes (p. 290), we must be careful not to get the wrong idea and assume that God’s word is on some sort of autopilot, to be fulfilled with or without our cooperation. Isaiah proclaimed a word of deliverance and restoration to Israel, but they had the responsibility of hearing and acting upon it: God would not set them on a magic carpet and whisk them off to Jerusalem without their cooperation and consent.

Nor would God’s fulfillment of the word necessarily follow the precise pattern envisioned by the prophets, who often spoke in metaphorical language. We have no record of mountains singing or trees cheering as the exiles made their way home, but they got there.

“The only thing that is absolutely certain is that prophecy inevitably results in fulfillment,” Westermann writes. “The word never returns void.”

“But,” he reminds us, “the God who fulfills his promises is always one whose thoughts and ways are immeasurably greater than those of men” (p. 291).

The Hardest Question *continued*

God's words and deeds are inextricably bound together, and our response is a third strand in the rope. As we work together, God's word is accomplished and sure. As the author of Ecclesiastes said, "A three-ply cord is not easily broken" (Eccl. 4:12).