

Adult Teaching Resources

December 1, 2019



Advent Season (December 1-22)

Isaiah 2:1-5 – “When Soldiers Plow”

Isaiah 11:1-10 – “When Stumps Sprout”

Isaiah 35:1-10 – “When Sorrow Flees”

Isaiah 7:10-16 – “When a Son Astounds”

Christmas Season (December 29)

Isaiah 63:7-19 (RCL 7-9) – “When Prayer Makes Bold”

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When Soldiers Plow

Isaiah 2:1-5

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, 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

*“He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.” Isaiah 2:4*

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. The theme for this day is hope.

We hope for a lot in our lives—from finding a prime parking space to the health of a newborn—we hope.

As people of faith, we hope for a time of justice and peace, when wars cease and everyone has enough food. Our passage today gives us that word we need.

Opening

In the large group, ask each person to share one hope they have for our world. As each person shares, write their answer on the board.

Then, ask the group to brainstorm how each hope can be accomplished, following the written example in Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of a time of peace, and that is accomplished by “beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.”

If someone hopes for no more famine, maybe it can be accomplished by “sharing food and access to food across borders, not having money speak loudest, but listening to those who hunger first.”

Have your group think of a tangible way of making all their hopes come true. Write each idea on the board next to the corresponding hope.

Reading the Bible

About which two locations did Isaiah receive a word from God? (Judah and Jerusalem)

What would become of the Lord's house? (it shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and raised above the hills)

How would the people react to the Lord's house? (they would stream to it and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord)

What did they want to happen when they went up to the mountain of the Lord? (the Lord would teach them his ways and they would walk in his paths)

From where does instruction come? (out of Zion)

From where does the word of the Lord come? (from Jerusalem)

What will the Lord do? (He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples)

What will the people do? (they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks)

What will the nations do? (nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more)

Making Connections

When have you experienced a false sense of security? What lulled you? What danger lurked just on the other side? When did you realize your security was flimsy? What ultimately happened?

What, for you, is the presence of God? In our passage, Isaiah speaks of a mountain. What is it for you?

What does it mean to you to know God? What does it mean to you to follow God's teaching? How are both necessary for a person of faith? Or are they? Explain.

Is there a special place where you "go and meet" God? What is that place? Why is it special?

What do you think needs to happen in order for everyone to beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks? Is it possible? Why do you say that?

What do you think needs to happen in order so that nations do not lift up sword against other nations, and they don't learn war any more? Is it possible? Why do you say that?

Our Lesson Writer says, "The covenant people of Israel already knew what God expected of them: what they lacked was the will to act on it." What is holding us back from living these words of Isaiah? What do we need to change? Are we willing to do it?

What is our individual and corporate responsibility to help build the Kingdom of God? What are we doing everyday to help build the Kingdom? What is holding us back?

So What?

Our Lesson Writer asks some important questions at the end of the lesson. Read the questions and ask your group to respond. This goes back to the beginning of the lesson, but now, goes much deeper:

What are your deepest hopes?

How do they fit into what it means to hear God's teaching and follow God's paths?

What are you doing to make those hopes a reality?

Spend time talking and listening to your group share. Encourage your group to take the necessary steps to make their hopes come true. Encourage your group to work with each other to help hope come alive.

Close your session by reading the passage out loud for your group to hear.

The Challenge

This week, work on making your hope happen. You don't have to beat all the swords into plowshares, but you can start with one small act.

Prayer

Loving God, on this day of hope, we pray for a time and day when your Kingdom will come, when our hopes—founded and grounded in you—will come alive. Give us the courage, the strength, and the wisdom to take action so our hopes become real. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, 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.

Hope—December 1 marks the first Sunday of Advent and the first Sunday of the church year, as the Revised Common Lectionary cycles from Year C back to Year A.

The season of Advent, the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, focus on the expectation of Christ’s incarnation. Traditionally, the four Sundays focus on hope, peace, joy, and love, though there are many variations.

This Sunday’s lesson, appropriately, centers on a hopeful vision that is grounded in God.

Isaiah of Jerusalem—Isaiah of Jerusalem, who we believe was largely responsible for much of the first 33 chapters of the book that bears his name, lived an active prophetic life in and about Jerusalem during much of the third quarter of the eighth century, BCE. The long and prosperous reign of King Uzziah came to an end just as Isaiah received his prophetic call, though it is possible that his ministry began before Uzziah’s death if the vision narrative of Isaiah 6 was not the prophet’s initial call.

Uzziah, according to 2 Chronicles 26:1-23, had modernized the army and conquered the Philistines, Arabians, and Ammonites. These victories gave him control over the major trade routes, allowing the collection of taxes from the caravans that used it. He rebuilt the southern city of Elath on the coast of the Red Sea as a center for the manufacture of copper and iron, and also fostered agricultural improvements.

The country’s prosperity, as is often the case, had a downside. With wealth in hand, the rich began to buy up more and more property, often leaving the poor without a home and forcing them to work as indentured servants. As is often the case, the rich grew richer and the poor became poorer. Both Isaiah and the prophet Micah, his contemporary, would have much to say about the poor ethics of his countrymen.

Trouble on every side—Isaiah would have lived through several periods of political crisis that would influence his prophesies. In what scholars call the Syro-Ephraimitic Crisis of 734-732 BCE, Syria (also known as Aram) and Israel (the northern kingdom, also known as Ephraim after the nation split) pressured Judah’s King Jotham to join them in a rebellion against the Assyrians. When Jotham refused, the two nations attacked Judah, causing many deaths. Troops from Edom and Philistia took advantage of the situation and raided Judah, as well. Jotham died during that time and was succeeded by his son Ahaz, who also resisted the alliance and called on the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III for assistance, according to 2 Kings 16, and the Assyrian army halted the enemies’ advance. The situation was little improved, however, as Ahaz was forced to pay tribute to the Assyrians and reportedly adopted Assyrian worship practices.

Digging Deeper *continued*

Twenty years later (715-711 BCE), leaders of the small city-state of Ashdod, just south of Judah, tried to persuade both Egypt and Judah to join in a rebellion against Assyria. Isaiah urged King Hezekiah not to get involved, insisting that security could be found in Yahweh alone, but Hezekiah ignored the prophet's pleas and join the rebellion, which the Assyrians quashed, bringing greater hardship to Judah.

Hezekiah later chose to withhold tribute and thus revolt against Assyria on his own (705-701 BCE), leading to an invasion by Assyrian forces that destroyed a number of Judahite cities and put Jerusalem under siege for a time, but stopped short of taking the city.

The end result of these revolts was great political instability and increasing oppression by the Assyrians, who conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and persisted as a constant threat to Jerusalem.

A different view of Zion—Isaiah's vision of Jerusalem's latter days differs significantly from some found in the Psalms, where nationalistic poets imagined God dwelling in Jerusalem and empowering royal descendants of David to defeat other nations and demand tribute from them (e.g., 2, 69, 89, 110).

Other Psalms of Zion, however, focus on Zion as the dwelling of God and a source of instruction that leads to peace (24, 46, 48, 76).

There is no nationalism in Isaiah 2:1-5: Judah would be one among all the nations coming to Jerusalem to learn directly from God how they could live in peace and prosperity.

Tall mountains—Some readers familiar with world geography may object that if Mt. Zion became the world's tallest mountain, it would be far too elevated for ordinary people to ascend.

Keep in mind, however, that Isaiah's familiarity with mountains extended only to those in and about Israel, all of which could be climbed rather easily. Even Mount Hermon in the north, sometimes snow-capped at 9,232 feet in elevation, would hardly challenge a fit climber. Today paved roads go to a ski resort near the top.

Isaiah knew nothing of Mount Everest, K-2, or any number of other mountains that can only be climbed with special gear, supplemental oxygen, and considerable training, so we needn't hold it against him for imagining that Jerusalem could be the world's highest mountain but still accessible to all the nations.

It is likely, however, that Isaiah's focus is not on the Mountain of Yahweh being the highest of the mountains, but the most important. The word literally means "head" or "chief."

Digging Deeper *continued*

Gods and mountains—Peoples of the ancient Near East typically thought of their gods as dwelling on the tops of mountains, and the higher, the better. In Canaanite theology, for example, the high god El was thought to live atop the mythical Mount Zaphon in the far north. Zaphon appears in Isaiah’s oracle against a king of Babylon who is commonly misunderstood as a fallen angel named “Lucifer” due to a mistranslation in the KJV. Isaiah critiques the king for daring to claim that he would raise his throne above the stars of God and “sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon” (Isa. 14:13).

Not for Israel only—Isaiah’s vision of Jerusalem as the home of God and the highest of mountains is not for Israel (or Judah) alone, but for the whole world. Patricia Tull describes it this way:

This passage, set as the first word following Isaiah’s prologue, offers a clear signal that even though the book spans some of the most violent and painful eras in the city’s history, the relationships among Jerusalem, Jerusalem’s God, and the surrounding nations will not be viewed in a simplistic or nationalistic manner. While most of the authentic sayings of Isaiah do not go as far as this one to envision harmony with surrounding nations, far-reaching visions such as this continue to erupt frequently in the book, and ought to be allowed to condition even the most antagonistic passages about the northern kingdom, Aram, Egypt, Moab, Edom, and even Assyria and Babylon. This passage cuts right through oppositions between nationalism and universalism, emphasizing that Jerusalem’s unique calling comes from God not for her sake alone, but so that in her (to adapt a phrase from Gen 12:3), all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

(Patricia Tull, *Isaiah 1-39*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Smyth & Helwys, 2010], 85).

Images of Peace—One of the more iconic images of unlikely peace in our world is Evgeniy Vuchetich’s sculpture “Let Us Beat Our Swords Into Plowshares,” which Russia gave to the U.S. in 1959, at the height of the Cold War. It is located on the grounds of the United Nations in NYC. The picture below is from Wikimedia Commons (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Swords-Plowshares.jpg>).



The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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Which came first? Isaiah 2:2-4 or Micah 4:1-4?

Compare these two texts, from the NRSV version.

Isaiah 2:2-4:

- In days to come*
the mountain of the LORD'S house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
- 3 *Many peoples shall come and say,*
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
- 4 *He shall judge between the nations,*
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

The Hardest Question *continued*

Micah 4:1-3:

- In days to come*
the mountain of the LORD'S house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
- 2 *and many nations shall come and say:*
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
- 3 *He shall judge between many peoples,*
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;

The texts have slight differences, but are clearly variations on the same oracle. Did Micah copy Isaiah, did Isaiah copy Micah, did they both borrow the oracle from an earlier tradition, or was the vision from a later period, but inserted into both books?

The priority of both Micah and Isaiah have proponents, though the case for Isaiah's oracle being original is stronger because it fits better into his larger scheme and themes. Even so, the arguments for Isaiah's authorship are not wholly convincing.

Many scholars are inclined to believe that the inspiring vision of Jerusalem as the "Mountain of Yahweh" to which all nations would stream derived from a previously known liturgical oracle or "Song of Zion." In this view, both Isaiah and Micah would have made use of the popular image in order to encourage the people of Jerusalem and challenge them to live in God's way.

Yet a growing number of other scholars believe the oracle originated at a later time, perhaps near the end of the exile or shortly thereafter, and that later editors inserted it into the works attributed both to Isaiah and Micah.

The Hardest Question *continued*

Note how the two books use the oracle in different ways. Isaiah uses it as a challenge, laying out a beautiful image and then calling upon the “house of Jacob” to walk in God’s ways in order to make such an image a reality, with the end being that all nations come to Jerusalem to learn from Yahweh.

Micah, on the other hand, envisions a time of universal peace in which each family can rest beneath its grape arbor or fig tree and the people of Israel “walk in the name of the LORD our God” while the other nations follow their own gods (Mic. 4:4-5).