



...THROUGH THE PROPHETS

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LEADERS' NOTES



“Home” has a massive pull for most of us – and the feelings that would go with being forced away from it because of war or tyranny are almost unimaginable. This is especially so for people who live on land that has been cultivated by their families for generations – or where people have owned a shop or other business for years, building it up over the years. This was the experience that the people Isaiah was prophesying to had endured. They were far from home. Some were lucky to have their families with them. Many would have lost family members along the way – and all had to leave behind the graves of their ancestors. The sense of loss would have been immense.

Isaiah hears the Voice of God promising that this will come to an end. He uses beautiful imagery – about the wilderness blooming. This does happen – not very often – but is spectacularly lovely when it does. In the Reading, it is almost as if it is not water that will cause such a flowering but sheer joy that God is acting to bring his people home. God knows that the people are downcast and lost – but tells Isaiah to tell them to be strong and to have courage – and to trust that God will be going ahead of them – he will guide them – he will work miracles for them – and their hearts will be filled with utter joy as they experience the abundant love and mercy of God.

Suggested Outline for an Afternoon/ Evening of Reflection (1½ hours)

The timings are based on a 7pm start – adjust to your own group’s needs.

- 7pm Welcome and Opening Prayer
- 7.15 Introduction – You may like to use the information and ideas above and/ or the PowerPoint if not used previously. *NOTE – if this is your only session, consider also using the notes about the Year of the Word from Week 1)*
- 7.30 Listening to the God who speaks
- 7.50 Listening with the Heart
- 8.15 Closing Prayer
- 8.30 Departures

OPENING RESPONSES

- Reader We gather in the name of the Father:
**All Whose Creative Word was spoken
and all Creation came into being.**
- Reader We gather in the name of the Son:
**All The Word of God made flesh
who made his home among humans
to help humans discover the divinity with them.**
- Reader We gather in the name of the Holy Spirit
**All Who opens our ears to hear the Word of God;
our minds to know and begin to understand it –
and our hearts to feel the love of our God
spoken to us by the God who speaks.**

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

Have someone read the First Reading- ensuring that they are someone who will read it well – have had chance to read it – and pray with it – first!

Use these or your own words:

We are going to listen to a poetic account of what God bringing his people home will be like. It is not poetry as such – but uses words and images to speak to our minds and hearts and hints at more than the words can say. You might find it helpful to listen to it with your eyes closed and let the words and images speak to your inner self.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Isaiah 35: 1-6, 10

Allow time for people to read it through again for themselves – inviting them to notice any words or phrases – or ideas – that seem to strike them particularly as they listened or read.

Then use these or your own words.

Isaiah was writing at a time when his people were in exile and the obstacles to returning home looked insurmountable. Isaiah again tunes into the Voice of God that affirms that there is no obstacle God cannot overcome. Give God a wilderness – and God will create a garden. Give God a burning desert – and God will transform it into refreshing pool. People who cannot see the way – God will open their eyes. Those who feel too weak and helpless – God will strengthen. It is as if Isaiah is seeing things that prevent the people believing that a home-coming will be possible and saying that God will intervene. When it eventually happened, there is no suggestion of magical road-building or flowers springing up ahead of the people. It happened because a ruler responded to the prompting of God and acted righteously and let God's People go home. This may seem prosaic in comparison – but the joy of the people would probably have been pretty much the same.

- Invite people to ponder any words or phrases that really spoke to them and then to share them with the group. If the group feels a little large for that, suggest people form smaller ones of three or four. Ask them to reflect together on things like:
 - What images did the Reading conjure up for us?
 - Which obstacle seems to resonate with us – as something getting in the way of us living as God wants us to... either as an individual or as a community?
 - Who are the people in today's world who feel that they will never be able to return to their homes? And who could behave righteously to make it possible?
- Point out that there is no right or wrong answer in their conversations – the important thing is to listen to the God who speaks – through his Word and through his Spirit at work in themselves and in each other.

LISTENING WITH THE HEART...

You might use the following ideas in a quiet time in your meeting room or head into church for Adoration.

- Encourage people to pray again with the Word of God. Remind them that the Spirit might speak through the words – or the images that come into their minds – or just a sense in their heart – as they ponder God's Word. All are valid in this kind of prayer.
- Use a candle with barbed wire or model of a fence around it – to symbolise the lights of those exiled far from home – and the barriers that get between them and a safe return to it. Invite people to pray that the power and righteousness of God will prevail.
- Set Prayer Stations around the room or the church for people to sit quietly next to and use their senses or other ways of praying.

CLOSING PRAYER

Use these or your own words – much will depend on what you included in the session. Take it slowly and gently – allow people time to reflect and ponder their own answers to the questions.

Reader As we close our meeting, let's call to mind some of the ways in which we have heard the God who speaks...

Perhaps there was a word or phrase in the Reading that seemed particularly significant...
Why might it have struck you today?
What does it invite you to take away?

Was there something someone said that seemed to come from God through them?
Was there something you received in the silence?

Who are the people far from home whose plight has been highlighted for you today?
Are you being called to be "righteous" and do something to make their exile more bearable?

How did God speak to you today?

Reader God speaks his Word –
**All May our ears and hearts be open
to hear the Voice of the God who speaks.**

Reader God speaks of the power of goodness and righteousness.
**All May we hear God's Word
and be willing to act in the cause of justice and of right.**

Reader God speaks of his power to overcome all that might stand in our way.
**All May we be strong and courageous;
trusting in the God who goes before us –
and beckons us on to change the world.**

Reader And may God bless us this night and all nights (*or today and all days*)
All The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Reader And until we meet again, may God hold us in hope in his promises.
All Amen.