

Advent Lesson Two: Waiting with Patience for the Coming King

Objective: To read through traditional Advent readings about the coming King and Kingdom. Today we acknowledge the suffering that we witness and experience in the world as we wait for the return of Jesus. We know that we live in a kingdom that has already come where God reigns - yet the kingdom has not been fully realized and won't be until Christ's return.

Some Ideas for teachings these classes:

1. Read through all the scriptures in class. You could ask four different people in the class to read each scripture. This will take up a lot of time, but since this is built on the Advent readings, I think it's good for everyone to read/hear all of them even more than just talking about them – it is okay to cut the discussion short because you spend so much time reading. Do not feel like you have to fit in all the discussion points.
2. I have written this in a question and answer format, but you can use whatever format you would like. Some questions are based directly off of the scripture and others are ones for people to think about and give their own thoughts based on the passage and reflection on their own experience and knowledge. I have written questions that might work well, but you may have better ones! Don't feel like all the questions need to be answered, the most important thing is to read the scriptures and talk about the hope that we have that God will make all things right.
3. At the end of each lesson there is a short, written prayer that goes with the Advent readings. You could use it to close out your class, or you can disregard it.

Opening Question: Tell about a time when you “went home” for the holidays or after a long time away. What was it like?

Introduction

In the texts we read today the idea of suffering is either implicit or explicit. In Isaiah 35, we glimpse a “daring vision of hope *on the other side of loss and suffering*.”¹ In Psalm 146, we are reminded that our joy is not based on circumstances but on God. In James 5, we encounter a church that is struggling with waiting on the return of Christ. In Matthew 11:2-11, we see a faithful person doubt because of the suffering that he is in. In the midst of this, we remember that we are a people being restored and that God will bring us home.

Sometimes we believe that if we are hopeful and joyful, then we must not have any suffering - or at least not acknowledge any suffering. But, the truth is that there is much suffering in the world. One of the reasons that we **need** hope is because the world is not as it should be. During the holidays, in our context, this suffering can seem more extreme. We miss our loved ones who have passed away – we mourn lives that have been cut short. We mourn for those who do not have enough. We do what we can do to alleviate the pain, but it feels impossible. We mourn over those who cannot physically enjoy the holidays in the ways they used to be able to enjoy them.

In the days of ancient Israel, there was much suffering. As we would expect, illnesses and physical ailments were more extreme due to the lack of modern

¹ David McLain Carr, “Light in the Darkness: Rediscovering Advent Hope in the Lectionary Texts from Isaiah,” *Quarterly Review* Vol. 15, no. 3, (Fall 1995): 295-320. *ATLASerials PLUS, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost* (Accessed November 20, 2019), 295.

medicine, knowledge, and good nutrition. Those who were sick or disabled were often marginalized – we know this to be true in the many stories of Jesus healing the sick in the gospels. Poverty was rampant, and the people were under the oppression of the Romans. They did not have the freedom that they wanted. They were in desperate need of hope.

Read Isaiah 35:1-10:

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus,² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.

The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.

But only the redeemed will walk there,

¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will return.

They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.

Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Isaiah is prophesying about the return of the exiles from Babylon – the dispersed, those who have been in captivity, will return to Zion, and the world will be transformed! It is like the Exodus when the people were delivered from slavery and taken to the Promise Land. But it is even better because God is bringing his people back home!²

What images are given of what will happen in the wilderness when the exiles come home?

²Carr, “Light in the Darkness,” 305-307.

We are given the image of a parched land rejoicing and blossoming like a flower. The arid land will be full of vegetation like Lebanon, Carmel and Sharon.³ The land will be transformed with gladness! Imagine thinking of the South Plains during a drought year, blooming with flowers and vegetation. This is the reversal and healing to the land that the prophet is expressing. The exiles will see the glory and splendor of God as they travel through the wilderness to go back home.

In 35:3-4, we get an idea that the exiles have been gone a long time because they have grown old (their hands are feeble, their knees give away). Some are afraid. We don't know why they are afraid – could it be they are afraid they will have to go back to Babylon? Could it be because they have never been “home” – it's their first time back?

Why do you think they may have been afraid? Why should they not be afraid?

There is no right answer on why they may have been afraid – it is all up to our imagination...Maybe they had never lived in Zion, maybe they were unsure about what would happen. But we know that they should not be afraid because God is going to come and save them. He will deliver them.

What reversals do you read about in verses 5-7?

Eyes of the blind – opened

Ears of the deaf – unstopped

³ Gene M. Tucker, “The Book of Isaiah 1-39: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” Pages 26-305 in *Introduction to Prophetic Literature, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel* Vol. 6 of *New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 281.

Lame – leap like deer
Mute – shout for joy
Water – gushes forth in the
wilderness
Streams in the desert

Burning sand – becomes a pool
Thirsty ground – bubbles springs
Haunts where the jackals lay –
grows vegetation

What do these images signify?

God’s coming brings restoration – there is a dramatic restoration of creation, both the land and humanity.⁴ The desert will have water – where all was dry, there will streams. The blind and deaf will be healed, and the lame will not just be able to walk but be able to leap! God’s restoration will not only mean bringing his people home but making it possible for them to come home.⁵ His restoration will bring abundant and full life.

David Carr puts it this way, “God is bringing back God’s broken people from slavery; God is making the desert bloom; God has built a safe highway through it; and God is equipping all—no matter how hurt—to walk on that highway toward Zion.”⁶ God is taking care of his people, liberating and restoring them!

When people saw Jesus performing healings, they probably thought of this prophecy.⁷ Jesus himself will refer to it in Matthew 11.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God in Christian Origins and the Question of God* Vol. 2, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 429.

⁵ David McLain Carr, “Light in the Darkness: Rediscovering Advent Hope in the Lectionary Texts from Isaiah” in *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 15, no. 5 (Fall 1995), 306-307. ATLASerials PLUS, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed December 2, 2019).

⁶ Carr, 307.

⁷ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God in Christian Origins and the Question of God* Vol. 1, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 430.

The people will enter Zion with singing and will be overcome with joy and gladness. Their sorrow and sighing will flee away. What feelings are evoked in you as you think of deliverance?

Read Psalm 146:5-10

Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.

⁶ He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.

⁷ He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets prisoners free,
⁸ the Lord gives sight to the blind,
the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,
the Lord loves the righteous.

⁹ The Lord watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

¹⁰ The Lord reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord.

Psalm 146:5 reminds us that happiness is not in our circumstances. We are not happy because we are pain and trouble free; we are happy because we trust and hope in a God who is present and who cares for the afflicted and oppressed.⁸ God reigns even

⁸ J. Clinton McCann, Jr, "The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Pages 640-1280 in *1&2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms*, Vol. 4 of *New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 1264.

when the world does not look perfect, even when things are not as they should be. We will not attempt to explain why things are not how they should be but trust in the Lord who is present with us even when the world is not right.

How is the Lord described here?

Creator, faithful, helper of the oppressed, feeds the hungry, gives freedom to prisoners and sight to the blind, one who lifts up, one who helps the helpless (foreigner, fatherless and widow), one who frustrates the ways of the wicked, the King

What must happen for God to be our helper and deliverer?

In order for God to do good things for us – for him to be able to help us and deliver us, then we must need his help. Pain has been a part of the world since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. The world is not perfect – there are those who desperately need God’s help, and if we are honest with ourselves, we are some of those people.

What are some messages you might hear in church or in general Christian teachings about suffering?

(Is it good or bad? Is it part of life? Is it ignored? Is it wallowed in? Is it the fault of the one who suffers? Is it God’s fault?)

Is it difficult to have hope if we do not acknowledge our suffering? Why or why not?

Why do we know that we can hope in God?

He is the Creator and Deliverer, and he is faithful forever. He defends those who can't defend themselves, and he takes care of the poor. He gives freedom to prisoners and sight to the blind. He lifts up the humble; he loves the righteous. He takes care of those on the outside and those who have no one else. He undermines the wicked. He will reign forever.⁹ We also know based on Isaiah 35 that he is a God who rescues, delivers, and restores his people. We can hope in him.

In what ways did Jesus fulfill this Psalm? Can you think of stories about Jesus that show him being a healer, restorer?

Jesus came into a world that was oppressed, proclaim the good news of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news" (Mark 1:14-15).

Jesus does all of the things that Psalm 146 praises God for doing. Here are just a few examples of what we see Jesus doing – mostly in the first part of Matthew! (There are MANY more examples.). (Teaching Note: I would let people tell stories that they remember about Jesus from scripture rather than listing out all the specific instances.)

Creator/Part of Creation: John 1:2-4

Heals the sick: Matthew 4:23-24, 9:20-22, 9:35

Proclaims the kingdom: Matthew 4:23, 9:35; Mark 1:14-15

Heals Lepers: Matthew 8:1-4, Luke 17:11-19

⁹Tremper Longman III, *Psalms* Vol. 15&16 in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2014), 470.

Heals a Paralytic: 9:2-8

Heals the blind: Matthew 9:27-31

Heals the mute: Matthew 9:32-34

Casts out demons (helps the oppressed) – Matthew 8:28-1

Brings back to life: Matthew 9:18-26

Feeds the Hungry: Matthew 14:13-21

Read James 5:7-10:

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹ Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

The church is expecting the return of Christ, and they are growing disgruntled. In James 5:1-6, James gives a warning to the rich oppressors, then moves into saying, "Be patient, then," (In the NRSV, "Be patient, therefore,..."). It makes us think that the Christians who are waiting for the coming of the Lord are the ones being oppressed by the wealthy. As the Christians wait, they grumble against each other and argue. James reminds them to stay focused and be patient.

Why do you think James uses the image of a farmer waiting on rain and waiting for the land to produce crops as a metaphor for waiting on the return of the Lord?

Just the farmer feels out of control and like he has no idea when it will happen, so we have no idea when Christ will return – and no ability to control it.

Who else does James remind them to use as an example for how they should wait patiently?

James reminds them to think of the prophets as examples of “patience in the face of suffering.” The prophets underwent much suffering – and even more, they saw much suffering. They knew exactly what things looked like when the world was not right. They witnessed people not following God. They witnessed and were the recipients of oppression. But they also knew and proclaimed that God was a God of everlasting love and kindness and that he would make things right.

When is it hard for you to have patience for God to make things right?

Read Matthew 11:2-11

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A

prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

In the middle of prison, in the middle of unfair suffering, John wonders – could this be the Messiah? Was I wrong? Is this not the one who is to come? Think about a time you were discouraged – did you ever feel like the things that you thought you had *known* and had been *excited about* might not be true? It is hard to feel like God is the reigning King when it doesn’t seem as if things are the way they should be. This is how John felt – after all, he is in the middle of a prison!

And Jesus knew that he was not meeting the expectations of the Messiah.¹⁰ The Jews were expecting someone who would deliver them from their oppression under the Romans, who would return their land and temple to them. John may have been expecting someone who looked and sounded more like Elijah and who dealt with the oppressors the way Elijah dealt with the prophets of Baal.¹¹ Instead, Jesus comes teaching about loving one’s enemy, eating with tax collectors and sinners, healing, and raising the dead. He knew he was different from what they expected, and he knew it

¹⁰ Tom Wright, *Advent for Everyone: A Journey Through Matthew* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2016), 62.

¹¹ Tom Wright, 63. Also see I Kings 18.

might be difficult for people to accept him as the Messiah – that must be why he says, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

Jesus refers back to Isaiah 35 - In what way is Jesus saying that he is a fulfillment of the prophecies?

Jesus tells John about the restoration that is happening with people - the blind can see, the lame can walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. The land may not be restored to the nation of Israel, but human lives are being renewed and restored through the coming of the kingdom!¹² The exile is ending and restoration is occurring – what is happening looks more like Isaiah 35 than it looks like Elijah calling down fire from heaven.¹³ This is the time of healing after the suffering. It is the time of restoration.

In this season of expectation, we might should re-examine who we expect Jesus to be. Are there ways he does not meet our expectations just like he was not meeting the Jewish expectations of his day that said a Messiah who would come and return their land to them, make them a great nation again? Like John, we should readjust our expectations for who Jesus really is.

How is Jesus different from who we might want him to be?

¹² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 429.

¹³ Tom Wright, 64 and see 2 Kings 1.

Jesus' contemporaries were not the first, and we will not be the last – to want Jesus to be more of an earthly king, or an exalted Messiah, than one who eats with tax collectors and sinners, who heals the sick, and who will be crucified. Paul writes in I Cor. 1:23 that “Christ crucified” is a “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” He adds in I Cor. 1:24-25 that to those who are called, Christ is the power and wisdom of God, “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” We may want Jesus to be a Messiah who shows his power in big ways or speaks harsh words of judgment against our enemies. But, Jesus is a Messiah who came as an infant born in a stable, who loved his enemies and ate with the poor and immoral, and who died a criminal’s death on the cross for our sins.

What has/What does Jesus deliver us from? How does he bring healing to us?

With Jesus’ reference to Isaiah 35, we are reminded again of the exodus, and we know that this one will be greater than any that have come before it – greater than the Exodus from Egypt, greater than the return from Babylon. In this exodus, all people will be restored and liberated. To all those who have been afraid and weak – God brings restoration after suffering!¹⁴ He will make everything right.

Since we know that Jesus envisioned the kingdom as a place of healing and restoration, how can we be a part of that? How can we be a part of showing God’s mercy to the world?

¹⁴ Carr, 308.

Prayer:

God of hope,
you call us home from the exile of selfish oppression
to the freedom of justice,
the balm of healing,
and the joy of sharing.
Make us strong to join you in your holy work,
as friends of strangers and victims,
companions of those whom others shun,
and as the happiness of those whose hearts are broken.
We make our prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.