

COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

In this first session we will focus on the pieces from *Messiah* which are based on Isaiah 40. Most of us are used to hearing this biblical text read at Advent. This, in combination with the fact that we are now studying it in the context of a musical composition about the “Messiah,” may make for some resistance to the idea that this passage could be “about” anything but Jesus. I am firmly convinced, however, that some awareness of the original historical context of a biblical passage can only enhance our appreciation of it. With this in mind, our session begins with a rather extensive look at the original historical setting of Isaiah 40. This is not intended to exclude the traditional Christological associations, but only to postpone them.

Another brief word of caution may be in order. You as a leader probably should be prepared for some group members feeling threatened by the implication that one person named “Isaiah” may not have been responsible for the entire book we call Isaiah. A bit of background on the degree to which the ancient concept of authorship differed from our own may help to alleviate these concerns. Just because more than one person may have contributed to a book does not make any of its parts less inspired.

There is a great deal to do in this session. Participants will be introduced to you, to each other, and to this *Kerygma* course. They will encounter Isaiah 40 in some new and perhaps challenging ways. In the face of all this it would be easy to feel overwhelmed! As a leader, you can help by doing three things:

1. Become familiar and comfortable with the subject matter.
2. Be prepared to present it in a clear and concise way.
3. Be sensitive to people’s need to “connect” with the material at an emotional level.

The suggestions in the Leadership Strategy section are designed to facilitate all three of these things. And lest you yourself begin to feel overwhelmed, remember that you do not need to get everything in. If one activity proves to be especially exciting or helpful, make

whatever adjustments are necessary to give it its full due. Whatever happens, try to remain open to letting participants share the ways in which their understanding of the Bible has been enriched and/or altered. After all, that is why we are here!

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Become acquainted with each other and begin to share some of their excitement for learning more about the Bible with the help of Handel's *Messiah*.
2. Describe the historical context of Isaiah 40.
3. Identify (and identify *with*) the major motifs of Isaiah 40.
4. Summarize the ways in which Isaiah 40 has been interpreted musically and theologically by Handel.

Resources You May Need

Note: Your need for these resources will depend on which learning activities you choose to include as a part of your leadership strategy.

A compact disc player and a compact disc of Handel's *Messiah*

Nametags

Participants' Resources 1A, 1B

A chalkboard or newsprint, easel, and markers

Copies of the assignments for journal entries

Lined writing paper and pens

An overhead projector with transparencies and markers

Copies of the musical score for "Every Valley"

Blank transparencies

Copies of the closing hymn

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Begin with an “experiment.” After the participants have gathered, call the group together with a brief word of welcome and/or prayer. Then invite them to participate in an experiment, the first step of which is to listen to a well-known chorus from Handel’s *Messiah*. Encourage them to sit back, relax, and let the music wash over them, but to pay attention to the words, too.

PLAY: “And he shall purify” (I.7; duration 2:41)

At the conclusion of the piece, ask for a show of hands in response to the following questions:

- How many of you have heard this piece before?
- How many of you have sung this piece before?
- How many of you who raised your hands were absolutely sure as to what you were hearing or singing about?

Unless it is an unusual group, there will probably be very few hands in response to the third question. Who were these “sons of Levi?” Why did they need to be purified? Ask if there is anyone who would like to venture a guess, and reassure the group that we will, in fact, be exploring this text in more detail in a subsequent session. People who have sung the piece may point out that the vocal parts are so difficult as to discourage concentrating on anything but all those sixteenth notes!

Point out that this piece was chosen for an introductory “experiment” because it illustrates that *familiarity* does not always reflect *understanding*. Some of us have heard or sung Handel’s *Messiah* for years without being aware that the words were from the Bible. And even if we knew of that connection, we may not have been very clear as to what those biblical texts were all about. If we only appreciate the music to Handel’s *Messiah*, however, we are only appreciating half of it and missing an invaluable devotional opportunity as well. Conclude by observing that the goal of these sessions is to enrich our faith through a deeper appreciation of both the words and the music of this deeply spiritual oratorio.

and/or

If people do not already know each other, it is important to give them the opportunity to begin that process at this time. Nametags may facilitate this process,

but it will enrich the introductions to have participants share their names and one or more of the following items of information:

Why they chose to attend this course

What was their first (or most memorable) encounter with Handel's *Messiah*

What is their favorite piece from Handel's *Messiah*

Note: If you did not begin with the "He shall purify" activity, you may want to conclude this introductory segment with a few comments along the lines of those suggested in the last paragraph of that activity.

2. If the *Resource Books* were not distributed prior to this first session, do that now. Allow time for participants to leaf through them to examine the session headings and format. Invite their attention to the Table of Contents. Then have them turn to page 1 in "Beginning Words" and describe the design of the study. Tell them it is expected that before each session they will have read the appropriate chapter in the *Resource Book* and the Basic Bible References. Indicate that the Scripture references in the *Resource Book* are all taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. Point out the value of comparing several translations of the Bible and encourage those who prefer versions other than the NRSV to share alternate readings with the group when appropriate.

Then ask everyone to turn to the section entitled "Preparing for the Group Sessions." Summarize this material and add comments from your own experience in preparing for this course or others like it.

3. Indicate your excitement about participating in the course with the members of the group and speak briefly about what you hope will happen in the coming weeks. This may be a good time to clarify expectations and to emphasize that the quality of the sessions will depend in large part upon the quality of their own preparation. It may also be appropriate to reassure people that they do not have to bring any special expertise on either Handel or the Bible to be productive participants in these sessions.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURES

1. In order to better appreciate the theological importance of Isaiah 40, it is necessary to have some level of familiarity with its original historical context. You may want to begin with a minilecture which reviews the major events and dates described in the "Setting the Scene" section of the *Resource Book*. To assist you

in preparing for this task consult a Bible dictionary, or books such as *Introducing the Old Testament* by John Drane or *Understanding the Old Testament* by Bernard W. Anderson.

and/or

Use the timeline on Participants' Resource 1A to review and/or strengthen the group members' sense of the historical context of this passage. You may want to let them complete this individually, in pairs, or in small groups. An alternate method of using this activity would be to reproduce the timeline on a chalkboard or on newsprint. Have the participants work together to write the events in the appropriate places on the timeline. After they have completed this task, save the timelines so you can add additional events in Session Two and Session Three.

and/or

Facilitate a journaling activity designed to help participants review the basic historical context and connect with the people of that time emotionally. Begin the activity by making the following statement:

Imagine that you are a 12 year-old girl named Miriam. You live with your parents in Jerusalem. Your brother Aaron is studying to become a priest like his father and grandfather before him. You keep a journal.

Then tell participants they will have a choice of writing one of two entries in Miriam's journal. Read the assignments for these entries aloud.

Entry #1:

The year is 587 B.C.E. The Babylonian army has breached Jerusalem's walls. You and your family are seized by the soldiers and placed in a caravan bound for Babylon. This is the first entry you have been able to make in your journal since these traumatic events began.

Scripture resource: 2 Kings 25:1-12

Entry #2:

The year is 538 B.C.E. You are now about 60 years old and have lived the better part of your life in exile in Babylon. You are married and are soon to become a grandmother. Create your journal entry for the day of Cyrus' famous decree.

Scripture resource: Ezra 1:2-4

These assignments are reprinted on Participants' Resource 1B. Distribute these and indicate journal entries should be one or two paragraphs long. Allow about ten minutes for the journal writing. Conclude the segment by asking for volunteers to read their entries. After at least one person for each option has spoken, ask participants to share how this activity helped them to identify with the people who lived through these events.

2. The major theme of Isaiah 40 is one of comfort and hope. Within that theme, however, are several motifs, all of which work together to drive home this compelling theological message. You will not have time to cover all of the motifs. Make your choices carefully as you prepare to lead the session based on your own interests and the length of time available to your group. Be candid with the participants about the necessity of making these choices.

a. Breaking the Silence

Introduce this section by reminding participants of the 48 year interval between the fall of Jerusalem and the decree of Cyrus. Invite people to enter a time of silent prayer, reflecting particularly on a time in their own lives when they experienced either disillusionment or a sense of having been abandoned by God. If they have just completed the journaling exercise, give them the option of staying "in character" for this time of meditation.

After one to two minutes, play the tenor recitative, "Comfort ye." Do *not* preface this with any comments, since the desired effect is to have the voice of comfort break the silence.

PLAY: "Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people" (I.2a; duration 2:44)
(Press "pause" after the words, "... her iniquity is pardoned.")

Invite those who are willing to share their stories of God's silence. Be particularly alert for stories which may reflect both individual and corporate despair, since these would most nearly parallel the exiles' situation. Ask what broke the silence for them? Be open to the fact that they may still be waiting for the silence to be broken.

b. The Road Home

Before playing the rest of the tenor recitative and air based on Isaiah 40:3-4, you may want to suggest that people listen for the ways in which the music reflects the message. For instance, they may want to listen for:

- the voice of the "herald"

- the way the “mountains and valleys” are reflected in the ascending and descending musical lines.
- the way the instrumental parts help to convey the excitement of the impending announcement

PLAY: “Comfort ye” (I.2b; duration :20)

“Every valley shall be exalted” (I.3; duration 3:37)

and/or

Obtain a copy of the musical score for *Messiah*. Make and distribute enlarged copies of a page from the tenor air, “Every valley shall be exalted.” Hand out blank transparencies for participants to place over this page and have them play “connect the dots” with the vocal line. (Some people may need help isolating the vocal line, but once they have found it they should not have any trouble.) When they remove the transparencies they will observe the valleys, mountains, rough places and plains!

If you prefer, you can make one enlarged copy of the music on a transparency and display it for the group on an overhead projector. Then place a blank transparency over the first one and “connect the dots” yourself. After they are connected, remove the transparency with the score so that all are able to observe how the musical line reflects the words.

c. Setting the Record Straight

The return of the exiles to their homeland also vindicates God’s reputation among the nations. The salvation of God’s people serves to silence all those who had erroneously concluded that the exile was a sign of God’s abandonment or weakness. “All people shall see it together,” announces Isaiah 40:5. In that moment of truth, the taunts of the nations are rendered moot.

This pattern of accusation/vindication is fairly common in Scripture. Divide the group into small groups and assign each small group one or two of the biblical examples listed below. Ask each group to:

- read the passage
- discuss the ways in which it reflects either accusation or vindication (or both)
- be ready to summarize their findings in 3 or 4 sentences

Passages for review:

Exodus 32:1-14
Numbers 14:1-19
Job 2:1-10
Psalm 53
Luke 23:32-38
Acts 17:22-34

After a sufficient amount of time, call the groups back together and have them report on their particular passages.

and/or

Ask for contemporary examples of problematic situations which could lead people to conclude that God is either dead or powerless. In other words, “what are the neighbors saying” about God today? Do their accusations ever give rise to doubt within the community of faith? How should we respond, both to internal doubts and external accusations?

Before playing “And the glory of the Lord” note that the overpowering sense of triumph and victory in this piece has earned it a reputation as the “Hallelujah Chorus” of the first section of Handel’s *Messiah*.

PLAY: “And the glory of the Lord” (I.4; duration 2:42)

d. The Good Shepherd

The depiction of God in Isaiah 40 is one of both strength and gentleness. Both of these characteristics are captured in the metaphor of the good shepherd. Read verses 10-11 aloud. Then discuss the following:

- What does this metaphor tell us about God?
- What does it say about us?

NOTE: Some members of the group with first-hand knowledge of sheep may want to share their impressions as to whether or not this is a flattering comparison!

CLOSING

1. The good news of Isaiah 40 is that the people of God can indeed come home. That message is as comforting today as it was all those many centuries ago. Read

John 10:14-18 to the group and close by singing the first verse of the old hymn, “Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling.”

or

Close by singing or reading the words to the hymn “When In Our Music God Is Glorified” by Fred Pratt Green. This hymn is found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* and other collections. If you cannot locate it select another hymn with the theme of giving glory to God through music.

Looking Ahead

1. Encourage members of the group to work on the items under “For Further Study and Reflection” in Session Two of the *Resource Book*.
2. In activity #1 under Exploring the Scripture in the next session it is suggested a member of the group provide a 4-5 minute summary of the historical events which have transpired between the good news of Isaiah 40 and the time of Haggai and Malachi. The section in the *Resource Book* entitled “Setting the Stage” can be supplemented with material from *Introducing the Old Testament* and *Understanding the Old Testament*.

A Biblical Timeline

Place the following events on the lines next to the appropriate dates. (Hint: For Session One you will use five of the six earliest dates.)

Dates

B.C.E.

1000-922 _____

Fall of the Southern Kingdom

The kingdom divides

922 _____

The edict of Cyrus

733 _____

Fall of the Northern Kingdom

David and Solomon reign over a united Israel

722 _____

587 _____

538 _____

520 _____

475 _____

Miriam's Journal

Entry #1

The year is 587 B.C.E. The Babylonian army has breached Jerusalem's walls. You and your family have been seized by the soldiers and placed in a caravan bound for Babylon. This is the first entry you have been able to make in your journal since these traumatic events began.

Scripture Resource: **2 Kings 25:1-12**

Entry #2

The year is 538 B.C.E. You are about 60 years old and have lived the better part of your life in exile in Babylon. You are married and are soon to become a grandmother. Create your journal entry for the day of Cyrus' famous decree.

Scripture Resource: **Ezra 1:2-4**