

All That We Are

What do we give our strength to? In this Season after the Epiphany, we explore God's call to us. Isaiah is called by God to proclaim the restoration of Israel. Paul encourages those "called to be saints." Jesus calls disciples. Through these accounts, we are invited to consider the ways that God's call comes to us and discover the ways that God equips and strengthens us to live into this call – to be all that we are.

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 49:1–7

The section of Isaiah in chapters 40–48, sometimes called Second Isaiah, was composed during Israel's exile in Babylon, 586–536 BCE. Cyrus of Persia is now ruling over the Babylonian empire. He seems more tolerant of other religions. The Hebrew people begin to see a glimmer of hope after long years away from Judah and Jerusalem. This section of Isaiah has several passages that speak of God's servant and chosen one. Today's focus passage is the second of these "Servant Songs."

The servant here is the prophet or perhaps Israel itself, called to spend its strength for the important task of doing God's will. The prophet Isaiah is called by God to proclaim to a people in exile in Babylon that God is faithful and will restore them. God's faithfulness is a theme repeated in the other readings.

Isaiah describes his vocation – God knew him before his birth and has given him powerful words to proclaim God's message. Isaiah's story follows a pattern common to Hebrew prophets: there is a strong sense of a task God wants the prophet to fulfill, and there is a point when the prophet feels unworthy and despairs that life's work has been in vain.

But life is full of possibility. The call is repeated as God promises to do even greater works. Not only will Israel (called "the tribes of Jacob" in verse 6) be restored and the captives brought back, but it will become a light to all nations. God's salvation will reach to the ends of the earth. The redemption of Israel is one step in God's plan to redeem the whole world. Israel now serves a foreign power, but one day all nations will look to it. This charge to be a light to the nations is too big for an individual – it needs a community to respond. Israel will become such a light when the people, as a community, live out

their call to be compassionate, hospitable, generous, and justice-seeking. When the community devotes its strength to living into the possibilities of this call, God's saving love spreads to many.

Psalm 40 is a thanksgiving for deliverance. Scholar Walter Brueggemann translates the words "waited patiently" as "hoped intensely." God hears the cry of the people, brings them out of their distress (as in the exodus), and gives them a new song of praise to sing in witness to God's faithfulness. To live in the ways of God's life-giving law brings delight.

Paul, in **1 Corinthians 1:1–9**, speaks of his call to be an apostle of Jesus the Christ. He reminds the Christians in Corinth that they are called to be saints – those who follow faithfully in God's ways. God will strengthen them; they will not lack any spiritual gift.

In **John 1:29–42**, the gospel writer tells the story of Jesus' baptism as a prelude to the call of the disciples. Many prophets and teachers had disciples who accompanied them and listened to their teaching. Jesus' first disciples are disciples of John. They are drawn to learn more about the one whom John calls "the Lamb of God." Jesus invites them to "come and see." Andrew finds his brother Simon and brings him to Jesus, a reminder of our call to share the good news with others.

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We are named as members of the Body of Christ in baptism. What does it mean to be called and named by God? The biblical passages raise questions about our own call. How do we identify and confirm that call to be all we are and can be? What does it mean today to be "a light to the nations"?



January 16, 2011

Focus Scripture
Isaiah 49:1–7

Additional Scriptures
Psalm 40:1–11
1 Corinthians 1:1–9
John 1:29–42

Faithful God, you create us and give us life. You know all that we are and can be. Help us discern your call and recognize the gifts you have given. Strengthen us to bear your light in the world, so that your ways may be known to all people. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Now is a good time to read “The Functions of Art and Imagination” on page 132.

The children hear another message from God through Isaiah in this session. It includes the same message that they heard in the story of Jesus’ baptism: God loves you and cares for you. To that message is added God’s call to us to show God’s love to others. Children are eager to help others and the outreach zone in Respond provides additional ways for them to work together to answer that call. Offer such opportunities regularly to the group.

The children in this age group will have differing experiences that help them to determine the talents and abilities that God has given them. As they talk about talents together, they may be able to help each other identify their gifts. Using our gifts is not about how old or mature we are, but how we can help others today.

Pray that the children in your group will be assured of God’s love and look forward to using their gifts for God’s work.

January 16, 2011



Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week’s focus scripture, Isaiah 49:1–7, and biblical background material (p. 59). To what is God calling you?
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see “This Season, So...” on p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 9* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase from www.spiritseasons.com.
- ❑ Bring songs “*I Am Becoming Peace*” and “*Cosmic Hymn of Praise*” and (pp. 4 and 5 in *Music Section*; also #6 and #1 on *Seasons Music CD*).
- ❑ Cut a hole in *large sheet of paper* so that when you place it over the poster “*Christmas*” only the seated man holding the baby can be seen.

Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *green cloth*, *large white pillar Christ candle*, *long fireplace matches*, *offering basket*, and *Bible*. Place *bookmark* at Isaiah.
- ❑ Bring poster “*Christmas*” covered with paper as described above.

Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell the story on *today’s resource sheet* “*Loved and Called by God*.”
- ❑ For Isaiah’s message group, bring *poster* “*Landscape with Tree*,” *today’s resource sheet* “*Loved and Called by God*,” and *sticky notes*.
- ❑ For Bible research group, bring *copies of today’s resource sheet* “*Meeting the Prophets*” and *directions*.

Respond

- ❑ **Art zone:** *beads* and *plastic lacing* or *jute*
- ❑ **Music zone:** *song* “*Be God’s*” (pp. 10–11 in *Music Section*; also #3 on *Seasons Music CD*) Print these words on individual strips of *card stock/heavy paper*: *mercy*, *hope*, *justice*, *joy*, *grace*, *truth*, *strength*, *healing*, *song*, *beauty*, *rock*, *child*, *smile*, *life*, *light*.
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** *list of potential outreach projects* or *ingredients* for a healthy snack
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *copies of today’s resource sheet* “*All That I Am*” and *directions*
- ❑ **Interview zone:** *copies of resource sheet* “*Interviewing Questions*” (p. 127)



All That We Are

Scripture

Isaiah 49:1–7

FOCUS To discover with Isaiah that God loves us and calls us to special work.

GATHER

Welcome Greet the children as they arrive. Welcome back children who have been absent. Introduce yourself to new children.

Call to learning Point out the green cloth for the Sundays during the Season after the Epiphany. Remind the children that the candle is called the Christ candle as you light it.

Sing the song “I Am Becoming Peace” (p. 4 in *Music Section*; also #6 on *Seasons Music CD*) together. During the song, have a child receive the offering.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

God of joy and hope,
we are thankful for your love and
that you are all around us. Amen.

Extinguish the candle as a sign that the opening ritual is over.

Connecting with the focus

Loved and cherished Hold the poster *Christmas* with the paper covering before the children. Invite the children to look closely at the man and baby. Ask:

- **How do you think the man feels about the baby?**
- **What might the man be thinking as he looks at the baby?**

Many parents and other adults think about what the baby will be like when it is grown-up. Ask:

- **What dreams might this man have for the baby?**

Explain that the Bible story for this session is about the dreams one person has for his life and fulfilling God’s plan.

ENGAGE

Preparing for the story

Back to Isaiah Invite a child to get the Bible from the worship table. Before opening it to the bookmark, ask:

- **Just by looking at where this bookmark is, do you think it is in the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament?**

Some children will quickly recognize that the bookmark is nearer the front of the Bible than the bookmarks for the previous stories in the gospels. Simple activities like this help the children figure out the structure of the Bible. Have a child open the Bible and tell what book it marks. Recall with the group that in Advent, they heard about God’s plan for peace for all creation, which was from the book of Isaiah.

The Bible story

Isaiah, God’s prophet Tell the story about Isaiah on today’s resource sheet “Loved and Called by God,” based on Isaiah 49:1–7. If you have invited someone to portray Isaiah, begin with the introduction in the box at the top of the resource sheet.

Exploring the story further

To enable the children to explore the story further, according to interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.

Isaiah’s message group Putting the prophet’s message from God into their own words will help the children make this message their own. Place the poster *Landscape with Tree* on a table. Point to the lone tree in the middle of the artwork. Comment that sometimes God’s prophets

stood alone as they gave God’s message to the people. Review Isaiah’s message from today’s resource sheet “Loved and Called by God” with the children. After each line, have the children say the message in their own words. Print their words on sticky notes and attach them to the poster around the tree.

Meeting the prophets group This group will learn more about the books of the prophets and about Isaiah. Provide copies of today’s resource sheet “Meeting the Prophets,” Bibles, pencils, and these directions:

- 1 Take a copy of “Meeting the Prophets,” a Bible, and a pencil.
- 2 Read the directions on “Meeting the Prophets” and complete the page. You can work alone or with others.



The Bible story and us


Play the song “Cosmic Hymn of Praise” (p. 5 in *Music Section*; also #1 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather together. Invite the groups to report on their activities.

3 RESPOND


Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- ❑ **Art zone: Bracelets** The prophet of Isaiah knew that God was with him and that God helped Isaiah do the work God had for him. The children will make bracelets as reminders that God is with them too. Provide beads and plastic lacing or jute for them to string beads in a pattern that reminds them of God’s care and call for them. Suggest that they wear their bracelets to remind them that they are chosen by God for something special.
- ❑ **Music zone: Motions** The song “Be God’s” (pp. 10-11 in *Music Section*; also #3 on *Seasons Music CD*) names many ways that we answer God’s call. Prepare the cards according to the directions in Prepare. Place the cards, face up, on the table. Check for the children’s understanding of each word. Have the children select two or three words and think of a simple action to represent each one. Play the song and invite the children to perform their actions when the words are sung.

When using the activity with younger children, begin with two or three word cards that they will understand.

- ❑ **Outreach zone: God’s work**  How children answer God’s call is limited, but not impossible. Provide a list of choices for the children to begin to select a new outreach project for the rest of this season. In this session, they might learn more about some of the options.

If you are not ready to select a new project, provide the ingredients for the children to prepare a healthy snack to serve to another group in the congregation.

- ❑ **Quiet zone: God’s call**  In this zone, the children have the opportunity to think about their abilities and gifts today and how they might use them to answer God’s call. Provide copies of today’s resource sheet “All That I Am,” pencils, crayons, and these directions:

- 1 You will need a copy of “All That I Am” and a pencil.
- 2 Follow the directions on “All That I Am.”
- 3 When you finish, think about how you can help others in God’s way.



- ❑ **Interview zone: Interviews** Talking with adult church members about their faith and calling is a way for the children to discover how they can use their gifts. Invite two or three church members to be present in this zone for the

children to interview. Provide copies of the resource sheet “Interviewing Questions” (p. 127) and pencils. Go over the questions with the children in this zone before the guests arrive.



Gather Play “Cosmic Hymn of Praise” (p. 5 in *Music Section*; also #1 on *Seasons Music CD*) as the signal to gather in a circle around the worship table.

Song Play the song “Be God’s” (pp. 10-11 in *Music Section*; also #3 on *Seasons Music CD*) and invite the children from the music zone to show the motions for their words.

Pray this prayer, or one of your own:

God, we are so happy that you love and bless us.

May your delight in us and all that you have created shine in us and through all the world. Amen.

Blessing To a child next to you, say, “(Child’s name), you are loved and called by God for a special work.” That child says it to the next child, and on around the circle.



Think about each child in your group. How does she or he recognize God’s love? Which children seemed to connect with the story of the prophet’s call from God? Which children expressed appreciation for God’s gifts to them? How did they hear God’s call to them?

Which Respond zones are the busiest? What might make the other zones more attractive to your group?



Loved and Called by God

based on Isaiah 49:1-7

If you have invited a church member to portray Isaiah, introduce the actor: "Why, I think this is another prophet of God and gave the people messages from God."

Greetings, I am glad to see you. Many years have passed since God sent the message of hope and peace that you heard during Advent. Since then rulers of another country have conquered the people of Judah. They took us to live far from our homes. It was the saddest thing you can imagine. We thought God had surely forgotten us. We longed to hear words of hope and peace like those from years ago. We were filled with hope by the picture of God's holy mountain where the cow and the bear would eat in the same field, where the wolf and the lamb would live in the same place. Perhaps you remember that story.

Then it happened again. God had a message of hope. God chose me to give the people this important message:

People, no matter where you live, pay attention!

God called me, God named me before I was born.

God got me ready to do a special work.

God is my strength to do this work.

God told me to tell all people this message,

to be a light to all nations.

God's saving power will not stop with the people of Judah,

but reach to the end of the earth.

Even rulers will kneel before God, the Holy One of Israel.

And God has chosen you.

When the people heard this message, they knew that God had not forgotten them. God was calling them to a special work too. Praise God!



MEETING THE PROPHETS

You will need a Bible to find the answers to these questions.

Isaiah is the first book of a prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures. Find it. *Hint: Look in the table of contents to find it faster.* Isaiah 1:1 tells us the name of Isaiah's father. What is his name? _____

Isaiah is one of the longer books of the prophets.

It isn't as long as the book of Psalms, but how many chapters are in Isaiah? _____

The books from Isaiah to the end of the Hebrew Scriptures are called the books of the prophets. What is the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures? _____

How many chapters are in the last book? _____

The book of Isaiah covers many years. Most people who study the Bible day after day believe that many people had a part in writing this book. They named the book after Isaiah, who was a famous prophet. So there is more than one Isaiah prophet in this long book.

Chapter 49, the reading for this session, was to a people who were in exile in Babylon. They had been sent away, banished from their home in Judah to this new land.

Find Isaiah 49:1-7. Read it together. Some of you read the odd-numbered verses and the rest of you read the even-numbered verses. Take turns reading the verses aloud.

- **How did the prophet come to understand that God had chosen him for a special work?**

- **What was the message that God gave Isaiah?**

- **Most prophets were given messages for a particular group of people. Read verse 6. To whom was the prophet to give this message of God's saving love?**

All That I Am

You have unique, God-given abilities. Our whole lives long, God “speaks” to us in many different ways and invites us to use our gifts for the good of others.

In what ways might you have felt God guiding you or “speaking” to you? Use the list below and check all the options that are true in your life:

- I have a strong feeling deep inside about something I like to do
- I have a natural talent or ability for something
- Someone commends me or points out my strengths
- When I do an activity I feel happy and good about myself
- A special opportunity comes along that seems just for me
- I admire and like to be around other people who have this ability
- When I think about the future, I can imagine myself doing this even when I’m older
- I get excited when I have a chance to share this interest with others
- Other: _____

On the inside of the person below, write words that describe who you are: what you are good at, what you enjoy doing, and the talents God has given you.

On the outside of the person, write phrases that describe how you can use your gifts to serve God. Decorate the person to look like you.



Interview Questions

Everyone has their own story about how they have experienced God guiding them in their lives. We can learn a lot about how God might be “speaking” to us through the stories of others.

Use these questions to interview a guest speaker. Add questions of your own. Write down any ideas or words that come to you during the interview that you want to remember.

1. When you were our age, what did you dream about doing when you grew up?
2. Is that what you are doing now? If not, what led you to the work you are doing now?
3. How did you prepare for the work you are doing?
4. What abilities or talents has God given you for the work you do?
5. Who encouraged you to use your abilities for the good of others?
6. In what ways do you experience God's presence in your daily work? Give us some examples.
7. How do you feel you are serving God with your abilities?
8. Do you ever feel inadequate for your job? If so, how is God with you?
9. What do you like best about your job?
10. What is the most difficult part of your job?
11. What difference does it make in your work that you are a follower of Christ?
12. What words of encouragement can you offer us as we explore what God invites us to do with our lives?
13. Other:



THE FUNCTIONS OF ART AND IMAGINATION

By Alan Jones

Alain de Botton describes three ways in which contact with the arts is beneficial to the human spirit, and I think that can be extended to encompass any serious exercise of the imagination.

FEELING AT HOME EVERYWHERE Our imagination is stretched and our sympathies enlarged in our appreciation of art. We are connected to a larger universe. When we “recognize” someone we know in a portrait painted four hundred years ago, our world is transformed. Art can expand the number of places where we can feel at home and widen the range of human experience. De Botton observes that the mind, once activated, is “like a radar newly attuned to pick up certain objects floating through consciousness.” Imagine that we have dormant antennae that need to be reactivated. If we are truly awake to those other frequencies that are always present, “Our attention will be drawn to the shades of the sky, to the changeability of a face, to the hypocrisy of a friend or to a submerged sadness about a situation which we had previously not even known we could feel sad about.”

A CURE FOR LONELINESS When we open the gates of that inner zoo we might let ourselves out, too, by allowing fictional characters to widen our vision of human experience and show us that in both our joy and our pain we may be joined with others. Or we may find images and words that help keep us from feeling estranged from life.

I think of the agonies of adolescent love, and how the power of literature helped me weather them, as well as feeding my nascent love for poetry and symbol. At high school, I was assigned nineteenth-century French poetry and wallowed in it. Instead of the flattened-out emotions dished out by contemporary culture, such literature can furnish the mind and help it imagine what it would be like to receive “the last word, touch, glance, exchanged between two human beings totally in love.” Adolescence is more than raging hormones. It is the initiation into passion, and if it doesn’t have a creative outlet, it turns rancid. We may turn on others and even shed blood, or turn on ourselves and become depressed and flat-souled.

NEW INSIGHTS ON REALITY De Botton calls this the “finger-placing ability” of art. There are moments when we can’t quite put our finger on something – a feeling, an emotion, an intuition – and a work of art does it for us. De Botton uses the French Impressionists as an example of our discovering new vision. In 1872 Claude Monet’s painting *Sunrise* went on exhibit – a scene of Le Havre Harbor at dawn. Viewers found it bewildering, and irritated critics gave its creator and cohorts the intentionally unflattering name “Impressionists,” implying that Monet could not accurately depict what dawn in Le Havre really looked like. But in painting a dimension of visual reality never before captured, Monet shows that our notion of reality is often at variance with reality itself. Think how we domesticate religion and bring God down to our size. We cannot see the difference between our idea of God and the reality of God. We have clichéd ideas about God as small, domesticated, and manageable. Art helps us see what we actually see rather than what we think we ought to see.

The poet W. H. Auden pointed out that the purpose of poetry (and all art) is not to enchant but to disenchant. It delivers a dose of reality never yet noticed until the revelation of the poem, the piece of music, the painting. The genius of the artist, said de Botton, is “to hang on to the original muddle” as he looks at the world and waits until a new pattern manifests itself, and thus “restore to our sight a distorted or neglected aspect of reality.”

Hang on to the original muddle and you will never see the harbor at Le Havre in the same way. Hang on to the original muddle, and an image of God that enables us to be humanly human will emerge. This is the only way we recover the strangeness and wonder of things and escape from the clichéd life of convention.

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