

**Isa. 61:1–4, 8–11**

**Ps. 126 or**

**Luke 1:46b–55**

**1 Thess. 5:16–24**

**John 1:6–8, 19–28**

# Strong in the Spirit

## Goal for the Session

*Tweens will prepare for Christ's coming by claiming the Spirit's power to act for justice, as described by the prophet Isaiah.*

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” William P. Brown

The originating context of the lection comes from the aftermath of exile (586–538 BCE) and the historically modest beginning of Israel's restoration in the land. God's comfort of Zion is inextricably tied to Zion's restoration. It is the comfort of new creation. And the result is so extraordinary that it must be described in lush botanical terms. Zion shall become the new garden of Eden, populated with “oaks of righteousness,” cultivated by God's salvific work. The garden is nothing short of miraculous; it is the garden of God's glory as well as the nursery of a nation. And how does God's garden grow? Genuine restoration is cultivation in righteousness.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Scott Bader-Saye

Theologically, these verses from Isaiah center around the themes of salvation and mission. Isaiah challenges readers to name salvation as a quality of life here and now that reflects God's desires for human community. Though we must be careful not to read Isaiah through the lens of the New Testament, a Christian reader cannot help but note the significance of Isaiah 61:1–2 as a description of Jesus' mission in Luke's Gospel (Luke 4:14–21). Jesus declares himself to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, the one to bring good news, healing, and release. As we walk through the last days of Advent, we remember not just *that* Jesus came but *why* Jesus came—to usher in a jubilee celebration that would have no end.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Cynthia A. Jarvis

The God who can build up ancient ruins is also the God who can redeem the ruin a prodigal son believes he has made of his life; the God who shall raise up the former devastations is also the God who means to pick up a daughter's brokenness; the God who shall repair the ruined cities and the devastations of many generations is also the God who can repair even the ruined nation that has forgotten its way in the world.

#### NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Donald Booz

The two questions of Advent always seem to be the same; “How is the advent of God trying to come into my life/our world?” and “What do I need to do to prepare for God's advent?” Another way of asking the same questions is, “What do I need to change in order to allow God's transformation to take place in me and ultimately the world?” What activities beside the hanging of the greens and singing of Christmas carols follow from the prophet's words?

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11**

**YOU WILL NEED**

- ☐ blue or purple cloth
- ☐ 4 votive candles
- ☐ matches, if allowed
- ☐ Color Pack 1, 7, 33
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ construction paper, crayons, markers
- ☐ copy of Resource Sheet 1 on card stock
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ recent newspapers and magazines
- ☐ olive oil

**For Responding**

- ☐ option 1: newsprint, markers
- ☐ option 2: recording of “My City of Ruins” by Bruce Springsteen, music player
- ☐ option 3: white T-shirts or fabric, fabric paint

## Focus on Your Teaching

Tweens can be keenly aware of injustice. They know stories of “robbery and wrongdoing” (Isaiah 61:8) and worse from the headlines, and perhaps from their own experience. Instead of surrendering to cynicism or despair, however, many youth stand firm in the belief that things can change for the better, and that they can be agents of such change. Today’s reading affirms that belief, setting it in theological context: God calls God’s people—including your learners—to “build up” and “repair” devastated situations (v. 4) with the Holy Spirit’s power.

*Sovereign God, may a fresh passion for seeing wrongs made right move my learners and me to live out Isaiah’s ancient words, during this Advent and beyond. Amen.*

## ■ LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before learners arrive*, use slips of paper to mark Isaiah 61:10a–b (through “. . . exult in my God”), Mark 1:3b (begin with “Prepare the way . . .”), and 1 Corinthians 1:9 in a Bible. Cut out the cards on Resource Sheet 1 (Bible Review Cards).

As you greet tweens, invite them to arrange the blue or purple cloth on the table, using the same color your church uses during Advent. Place Color Pack 1 on top of the cloth, and arrange four votive candles on top of the candles in the picture. (If open flames are not allowed, use battery-operated votives.)

Gather the group by playing “God, We Sing” (Color Pack 33; track 8 on *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024). Welcome learners to the third Sunday of Advent. Ask a volunteer to light three votives as another volunteer reads aloud 1 Corinthians 1:9, Mark 1:3b, and Isaiah 61:10a–b. Have the group sing the first three stanzas of “God, We Sing.”

Offer this prayer or one of your own:

*God, may your Spirit strengthen us to remember Jesus’ coming as a baby, to welcome him when he comes again to rule, and to receive him in our lives today. Amen.*

Begin a conversation by asking:

✠ What is something that makes you want to yell, “It’s just not right!”?

### EXPLORING

Display Color Pack 7. Ask:

✠ What words would you use to describe this scene?

### God, We Sing

God, we sing with praise  
to you,  
Light the flame of *hope* anew;  
Light this candle, light the  
way,  
Bring *hope* into our hearts  
today.  
Jesus, near us as we pray,  
Let *hope* be in our hearts  
today.

God, we sing with praise  
to you,  
Light the flame of *peace*  
anew; . . .

God, we sing with praise  
to you,  
Light the flame of love  
anew; . . .

As the location of the temple in Jerusalem—the place above all places where ancient Israelites believed God dwelled—Mount Zion was so important its name was often (as in Isaiah 61:3) synonymous with the Promised Land as a whole.

Isaiah 61:3 evokes the ancient custom of donning sackcloth (a coarse, rough garment, originally made of goat's hair) and ashes as a sign of mourning and repentance. The speaker promises a "garland" instead, symbolizing joy and restoration to God.

EASY  
PREP

Invite tweens who've had experience building or repairing homes or other buildings to talk about what it takes to do that (for example, resources, time, strength, teamwork). Ask learners to imagine they have been given unlimited resources to fix the ruin shown on Color Pack 5. How might they transform it for future use? Encourage tweens, working individually or in pairs, to draw their visions for the ruined building. Display the drawings around the poster.

Tell learners that today's Bible reading speaks of transforming ruins. Explain that this text originated about 530 years before Jesus, when Jews who had been living as exiles in Babylon were finally able to return to Jerusalem. The temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the center of ancient Israel's religious life, was in ruins. Recalling the words tweens used earlier to describe Color Pack 5, comment that the former exiles must have felt much the same way about the ruins of Jerusalem and the temple.

Ask learners to find Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 in their Bibles, helping one another as needed. Recruit a volunteer to read the text aloud as the others follow along. After the reading, play the matching game on Resource Sheet 1 (Bible Review Cards). Once all the cards are matched, discuss:

- ✠ Who do you think is speaking in this passage? Why?
- ✠ What wrongs does the speaker say will be set right? Which of these promises grabs your attention the most? Why?
- ✠ Do you imagine the former exiles paid close attention to the speaker's words? Why or why not?

Tell learners that, while we do not know for certain who originally spoke these words in Isaiah 61, we do know these words mattered to Jesus. Read aloud Luke 4:16–21. Isaiah 61 describes not only the prophet's mission, but also Jesus' mission.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Insights). Ask for reactions to the optical illusions. Comment that while we might find new insights in these illusions, we know for certain that the Holy Spirit gives God's people, including the speaker in Isaiah 61, new insights into their lives.

Discuss the Jubilee year, using the information on Resource Sheet 2. Provide current newspapers and magazines, and form pairs to look for situations of oppression and injustice. Have pairs tell about the examples they find, and then discuss:

- ✠ What would God's favor look like for these victims of injustice?
- ✠ What can we do to proclaim God's favor for people who are in these situations? (For example: tell others about the situation, write to elected officials, raise money for aid, offer hands-on help.)

## RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **Spirit-Sighted Servants** Invite tweens to name people in their local communities and in the world to whom they think the Spirit gives ability to envision a better world and work toward making it a reality. You might also wonder together whether the Spirit

gives such visions only to Christians. Work together to write a litany of thanksgiving for these individuals' Spirit-filled visions. Use the following or a similar form:

**One:** We thank you for *(Name)*, who saw/sees a world where *(brief description of the person's vision for change)*.

**All:** Thank you, God, for sending *(Name)* to us with good news!

Pray this prayer during Closing, and offer it to your church's worship leaders.

- 2. Oil of Gladness** To further imagine the setting of Isaiah 61, play Bruce Springsteen's song "My City of Ruins." The lyrics are available at Springsteen's official site, [bruce.springsteen.net/songs/my-city-of-ruins](http://bruce.springsteen.net/songs/my-city-of-ruins). Tell tweens this song was released shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Ask: What thoughts and feelings do you have when you listen to this song? Connect your thoughts and feelings to the experience of the Jews returning from exile. What does the song say about rebuilding? What is our role in rebuilding lives and places that seem to be in ruins? Option: Visit your denominational Web site to learn about disaster relief programs of your church.
- 3. Garments of Salvation** To explore further Isaiah's imagery, use fabric paint to decorate white T-shirts or fabric squares to be used as bandannas. Use words, phrases, symbols, and images that communicate God's good news in Isaiah 61. (You may want to contact tweens ahead of the session and ask them to bring a white T-shirt with them, or you might ask several adult members of the congregation to donate a shirt.) How will they explain these words and images to those who ask about them?

## CLOSING

Gather around the Advent wreath and light three votives. Invite tweens to tell what they have learned about God's promises.

Read aloud Isaiah 61:1. Recall that anointing—or rubbing with oil—is an ancient way of indicating that a person has been chosen by God for a holy task. Invite tweens to use olive oil to anoint one another with a cross on the forehead or back of the hand, saying: "May God's Spirit use you to proclaim good news, in word and action."

Offer the prayer written in Responding or this one:

*God, do not leave your people in ruins, but restore us and all creation to glory.  
Send us, in your Spirit's power, to show your favor to others and to rejoice greatly  
in the Lord Jesus. Amen.*

**Teacher:** Go and reach out into the world with words and deeds of God's love and blessing.

**All:** Amen! *(All clap.)*

Tell learners that you will be praying for them throughout the coming week, and ask them to pray for you, as well.

## Bible Review Cards

### Instructions

1. Before the session, photocopy this page on card stock and cut out the cards.
2. To play, arrange the cards facedown in a grid—three rows of four.
3. The object of the game is to find pairs of cards that belong together, based on Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11. For example, “garland” and “ashes” belong together (see Isaiah 61:3).
4. In turn, players turn over two cards. If the cards form a matching pair, the player picks them up. If they don’t, the cards are turned facedown again. Have players check each other’s matches against the biblical text.

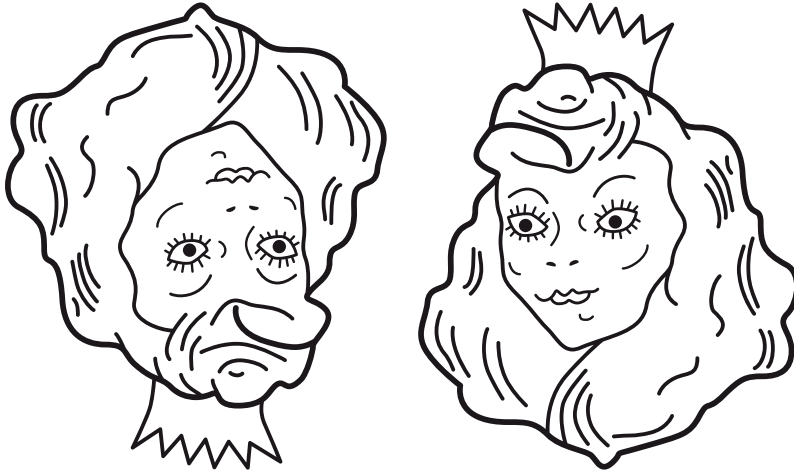


good news	oppressed	bind up
brokenhearted	liberty and release	captives and prisoners
comfort	all who mourn	garland
ashes	mantle of praise	faint spirit

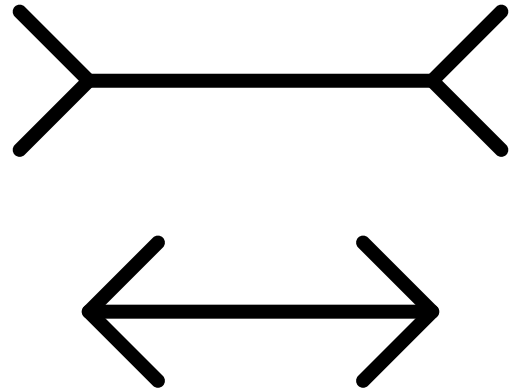
## Insights

### Optical Illusions

Do you see an old man's head or a princess?



Are the lines the same length?



What do you see here? Do you see two faces or a tree?



### The Year of Jubilee

The “year of the LORD’s favor” (Isaiah 61:2) refers to the Jubilee year, which was to take place every 50 years. During this year, debts would be forgiven, slaves would be freed, and land would be given back to its first owners and allowed to lie fallow. The Jubilee year was to be a reminder that everything, including land and people, ultimately belongs to God, who said: “The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. . . . To me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 25:23, 55).