Lesson Plans That Work: Lesson Plans for Older Children
1 Christmas
Old Testament: Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3

BACKGROUND
The presents are all unwrapped. We've feasted, celebrated, visited, worshipped and enjoyed – yet, Alleluia, Christmas is still with us. The season of Christmas stretches on for 12 whole days as we absorb the wonder of Christ's incarnation and as we wait with expectancy for the Magi to arrive. However, just as we were being hurtled through Advent by a society that wanted Christmas too soon, we are similarly being pushed to take down the tree and move on towards a Happy New Year by a society that is done with this season and ready for the next. As Christians, we know that the rejoicing has only just begun and so we steep in the wonder of the incarnation a bit longer – our New Year, that of Advent, has already passed and so we can walk these 12 days with joy, awe, and thanksgiving for the gift of God with Us.

A NOTATION FOR THIS WEEK'S READING
Much of Isaiah focuses on a people who have been banished from their homeland and lived in exile for decades. We hear in earlier sections of the book of the prophet Isaiah as the people long for the sweet deliverance of God allowing them to return home. In the section of Isaiah we read today, we hear part of a song of praise sung to God in thanksgiving for their long-awaited homecoming. The first half of the passage (verses 61:10-11) is delivered from the perspective of the community singing to God while the second half (verses 62:1-3) is turned around as God sings to the people. In the first half the people use imagery of both a wedding and a garden being prepared for fruit to spring forth. In the second half of the passage, God is promising the people that although they have returned to a land that is damaged after their time in exile, God's will is that the land will be redeemed along with the people. God is promising to restore Judah to its former glory.

THEME
Praise Will Spring Up Like Flowers

BEFORE CLASS
Learn the chorus to Go Tell it on the Mountain. You may want to bring a recording to sing along with if you would like support leading the song. Write the lyrics on the board before class begins (or provide a music sheet if no board is available). Print the page of Memory Lines and cut them out so each child may have one. Photocopy the "Paperwhites Instructions for Home" so each child can take 1 copy home

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Materials Needed:

- Music Player and Music for Go Tell it On the Mountain (if your are using a recording)
- Bibles for Story
- 3-4 inch deep glass/plastic jars or bowls for each student. Transparent containers work best. (This is a great use for recycled jars! Raid your church recycle bin and give new life to an old container. *Alternatively, a Solo plastic drinking cup could also work.)
- Paperwhite Bulbs (These can be purchased online or at a local garden center. You will need 2-3 bulbs per student)
- Crushed stones, pebbles, or decorative rocks
- Watering can or pitcher full of water
- Memory Lines (cut in advance)
- Crayons/markers
- Scotch Tape
- Instructions for Home
- Plastic Wrap (optional)

BEGINNING

Welcome the children back to church for this first Sunday after Christmas. Ask them about their holiday and how they celebrated. Allow each child to check in about the thing they are most grateful for this Christmas season. After they have checked in, remind them that Christmas isn't over yet. Talk a bit about Christmas as a season versus simply a day – this will build well on the work you've done with them during the season of Advent. Today our lesson is all about gratitude and rejoicing in the gifts we receive from God.

OPENING PRAYER

First, sing the chorus of the hymn, Go Tell it on the Mountain. After singing the chorus pray together: We thank you God for coming to be born among us in the person of Jesus. Help us to share the good news of that gift with everyone we meet. Amen.

THE STORY: ISAIAH 61:10 - 62:3

Ask the children if they have ever wanted something very important. Perhaps they have hoped for a bedroom of their own, a sibling, a new friend at school, or a new job for their parent? The key is hoping for something larger than general material gifts – we want them to imagine receiving the gift of something larger than gift-wrap or Christmas trees can contain.

After helping the children to imagine their "big gifts" talk to them a bit about the people of Israel and their desire to return to their homeland. For years and years, and generations these people have been living in exile. Ask the children how they think it

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would feel to be told they have to leave their home and not knowing if they could or would ever return.

The people who are speaking in the beginning of our story this week are people who have finally been able to return to the home God promised them after years away. Their home looks different and needs some sprucing up, but they are so grateful to be home that they sing this song to God. God likes their song so much, God answers with a song back to them in the second half of the story.

Divide the class into two groups. The first group will be the people of Israel and the second group will be God. The first group will read 61:10-11 aloud followed by the second group reading 62:1-3 aloud.

See the vocabulary list below to help with the class' understanding of the passage.

- Exult – to show or feel triumphant happiness Synonyms: rejoice, be joyful, be happy, be pleased, be glad, be delighted
- Salvation – to save from harm, ruin, or loss Synonyms: save, help, lifeline
- Righteousness - the quality of being morally right or justifiable. Synonyms: goodness, decency, integrity, justice, honesty, honor
- Vindication – The action of clearing someone of blame or suspicion.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- I wonder how the people felt when they returned home.
- I wonder what images in the passage you liked best.
- I wonder what you would do if you were one of the people in this story.

ACTIVITY

Today we'll be planting flowers to take home to remind us, "God helps thankfulness to grow in my heart like a flower."

Show the children the bulbs before you get started. Tell them that the bulb is a seed and it is like a promise of something special to come; Like God promising the Israelites they would eventually get to come home. Today you will plant the bulbs. They are kind of dirty looking, but they are a promise that something beautiful is coming. The key to growing bulbs is taking good care of them and being patient while you wait for the promise to come.

Memory Line: "God helps thankfulness to grow in my heart like a flower." Isaiah 61:11

1. Give each child a 3-4 inch deep glass or plastic jar or bowl (using clear containers will allow the children to see the roots as they grow!)
2. Fill the container with crushed rock, pebbles, or decorative stones.
3. Put 2-3 paperwhite bulbs at the top of each container and push them down into the stones so the tips stay upright.

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4. Add water until it just covers the bottom of the bulbs. Keep the bulbs watered throughout the growing cycle.
5. Invite each child to color/decorate the memory line and to tape it to their container.
6. If you would like, you can put some plastic wrap over the top of the container and bulbs for the children's trip home.

Growing tip: Paperwhites grow best when they spend the first few weeks in a cool (around 65 degrees Fahrenheit) space away from direct sunlight. After they form shoots they can be moved into the sun and a warmer space.

GETTING CLOSURE

The Israelites were very glad to return to their homeland as God had promised for so long. They were so grateful they sang out to God in praise. Sometimes, we are so overcome with joy at a gift we receive we can't help but cry out. If you ask, I bet at least some of the children will say they called out in joy over one (or more!) of the gifts they received for Christmas this year – ask them! Now remind them that the physical gifts we receive on Christmas are ways our families (and Saint Nicholas) help us to mark the day our world received the greatest gift of all time – the gift of Jesus. The birth of Jesus was foretold in the book of Isaiah just as the homecoming of the Israelites was foretold. This song of celebration is being sung to mark that promise from God coming true. As Christians, when we celebrate Christmas each year we are singing our own song of praise and thanksgiving to God as we mark the birth of our Lord.

When these flowers bloom in a few weeks they can be a reminder to sing out in praise to God. The white of the flower reminds us of the white liturgical banners and vestments that decorate the church at Christmas. The flower reminds us of the joy and praise expressed by the Israelites who got to return home. And the flowers will remind us that joy comes after long awaited promises are realized: like the promise of a savior.

When we remember the gift of Jesus in our lives we are reminded to share that news with a song like the Israelites sang in our passage this morning.

CLOSING PRAYER

First, sing the chorus of the hymn, Go Tell it on the Mountain. After singing the chorus pray together: God, thank you for bringing the Israelites home, just as you promised. Thank you for bringing us Jesus, also as you promised. We trust in your promise and praise your name. Amen.

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Memory Lines

God will cause praise to spring up in our lives like flowers spring up in the garden. – Isaiah 61:11
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Paperwhites Instructions for Home

Today we planted bulbs to take home to remind us, "As the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." Isaiah 61:11

Environment: Paperwhites grow best when they spend the first 2-4 weeks in a cool (around 65 degrees Fahrenheit) space away from direct sunlight. After they form shoots they can be moved into the sun and a warmer space.

Watering: Keep the bulbs watered up to the bottom of the bulb at all times. Perhaps you and your child can offer a prayer each day as you check the water level together. We sang "Go Tell it on the Mountain" as part of our prayer today, this could be a great song to sing as part of the ritual of watering the bulbs.

Purpose: When these flowers bloom in a few weeks they can be a reminder to sing out in praise to God. The white of the flower reminds us of the white liturgical banners and vestments that decorate the church at Christmas. The flower reminds us of the joy and praise expressed by the Israelites who got to return home. And the flowers will remind us that joy comes after long awaited promises are realized: like the promise of a savior.