Lesson Plans That Work: Lesson Plans for Older Children
2 Christmas
Old Testament: Jeremiah 31:7-14

BACKGROUND
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
This week, the passage from Jeremiah has a similar theme to last week's Isaiah reading: that of the people returning home after their exile. This theme of exile and returning is prevalent in scripture – especially in the books of the Old Testament. Exile and returning is a theme to which many people can relate. Whether it is a memory of a physical exile (returning home after evacuation for a storm) or metaphorical exile (where we return to the person we know ourselves to be; as the lyrics of Amazing Grace remind us, "I once was lost but now am found") exile is an experience that many have in their walk with God. In this passage from the prophet Jeremiah we hear promises from God of the way things are promised to be now that the people are coming home. Sorrows turning to joy, emptiness turning to bounty, weeping met with consolation – God promises to redeem the experience of God's people. This passage relates to our celebration of Christmas because we are receiving the promised savior, just as the people Israel have received their promised homecoming. This passage allows us to be honest with ourselves about who and what we are at Christmas – rather than the Rockwell-esk perfection, we can have our messy whole lives and trust that God is redeeming all of it in the person of Christ. The people of Israel were not perfect, yet they were restored to their homeland. Modern children are pushed harder than ever towards performance and perfection – this redemptive text breaks into that push towards glory and tells them they are already received and redeemed by God – just as they are.

THEME
Coming Home

THE Episcopal CHURCH

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BEFORE CLASS

Photocopy the appendix labeled "Matching Game" onto cardstock. You will need one copy for each student and one copy for yourself.

Materials Needed:

- Bibles
- A Dictionary and Thesaurus
- Copies of the Matching Game for each student
- Scissors

BEGINNING

Welcome the children to class for the morning. In some ways, today might be a "homecoming" of sorts as this may be the first week back in Sunday School following Christmas. Talk with the children about the many types of homecomings one may experience: home to a familiar place, home to your state/country/town from vacation or travel, home as a feeling ones heart, etc… Ask the children what it feels like when you've been away from home for an extended period of time. How does it feel to come home after that? Now ask the children if coming home is always easy or happy. If not, what can be difficult about coming home? This week the scripture passage is about a group of people who finally get to come home after a long time away from their homeland. This homecoming will be a blessing, but also brings with it challenges. But, as we will learn in today's story, God promises to redeem their situation in exile so that they may feel at home once again.

OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, we thank you for helping us feel at home in our hearts and in our lives. Open our hearts today as we learn about your people in exile and their journey back home. Amen.

THE STORY: JEREMIAH 31:7-14

After the children find the passage in their bibles, have the class read the story in the round with each child reading one verse.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- I wonder why the people are feeling so sad.
- I wonder which promise from God you liked best.
- I wonder how you would feel if you were one of the people in this story.

ACTIVITY

Today we have a matching game to play that matches the words of God's promises to the Israelites. In the passage from Jeremiah we learned of all of the ways God intends to improve the lives of the Israelites once they have returned home. Many of the promises

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are to turn the negative feelings plaguing the Israelites into the opposite, positive feeling, instead. Other promises speak to the relationship God intends to have with God's people.

Give each child a copy of the matching game on a single sheet of cardstock. Invite them to cut out the cards and to refer to the passage to see the relationship between the words. If there are any words they do not know, invite them to use the dictionary and/or thesaurus to work out the meaning of each.

Once they have an understanding of the meaning of the words and how they relate, let the kids pair up to play a round of the game.

The game words the same as the popular game "Memory." Place each of the cards facedown on the table. On each turn the child gets to turn over 2 cards revealing the words on the opposite side. The goal is to get a matching pair. If they do not match the child must turn the two cards back facedown, in the same location. The children should try to remember where they've seen the words previously so they can eventually make a match. The goal of the game is to find all of the matches.

While the children are playing invite them to have a conversation about the journey home for the Israelites and the promises God has made to improve their situation.

GETTING CLOSURE

After each pair has completed their matching game gather the children around to talk more about the feelings associated with the homecoming in today's story.

- Are homecomings always happy?
- Have you every felt like you were out on your own and were then welcomed home? What was that experience like?
- How does this story tie into our Christmas experience? (The answer to this question could be a number of things: Mary and Joseph returning to Bethlehem for the census/ Our families gathering for reunion and celebration/ living into the promise of what was to come and making that now commonplace/ etc…)

Close the lesson with the reminder that in the midst of all of the chaos the Israelites have faced, God has been faithful and promises to redeem their situation. No one will be left behind – God promises to bring everyone home. In the same way Jesus has come to the world for all and the gift of his presence is a gift for the whole world.

CLOSING PRAYER

Holy God, As Jesus made a home here on earth help us to make a home with you at the center. Open our hearts to feel your presence always. Amen.

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Appendix: Matching Game

Weeping (Jeremiah 31:9a)	Consolation (Jeremiah 31:9a)
Stumble (Jeremiah 31:9b)	Walk (Jeremiah 31:9b)
Father (Jeremiah 31:9c)	Firstborn Child (Jeremiah 31:9c)
Scattered (Jeremiah 31:10a)	Gathered (Jeremiah 31:10a)
Shepherd (Jeremiah 31:10b)	Flock (Jeremiah 31:10b)
Languish (Jeremiah 31:12)	Watered Garden (Jeremiah 31:12)
Mourning (Jeremiah 31:13a)	Joy (Jeremiah 31:13a)
Sorrow (Jeremiah 31:13b)	Gladness (Jeremiah 31:13b)