Lesson Plans That Work: Lesson Plans for Younger 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

On your piece of banner paper, write WELCOME HOME in big, hollow block letters. Leave the letters hollow so the children can decorate them.

Materials Needed:

- Copy of the story
- Large piece of butcher block or banner paper
- Markers/crayons
- Stickers
- Other craft/decorating items
- Glue
- Thumb Tacks

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

God said to the people:

Sing out your joy to Jacob,
The father of your people
Give thanks to God
and pray for your people, the people of Israel, to come home.
I promise to bring all of the people home,
From all over the world I will bring the people home.
Children and Grown Ups, Women and Men,
Sick people and healthy people,

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I will bring them all home.
The people have been sad to be gone from home for so long.
I will show them happiness again
Israel has been scattered like a flock of sheep,
God will be like the shepherd and bring them home.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- I wonder how the people feel.
- I wonder where the people have been.
- I wonder how you would feel if you were one of the people in this story.

ACTIVITY

Today we will decorate a "Welcome Home" banner. The people of Israel are preparing to reenter their homeland and God is promising to guide them and welcome them home. When we come home from a long journey it is nice to have someone there to welcome us. What does it look like when someone welcomes you home?

Did anyone in your class go away for Christmas? Ask them what it was like to come back home after being away. Did it feel familiar? Were they happy to come home? Was it a little scary or sad to come home? Coming home can be full of lots of feelings. Having God promise to be there for the Israelites and to help them settle in is a wonderful and important thing.

Today we will decorate our banner to stand with God in welcoming the people home.

Spread the banner paper out on the floor and invite the children to sit on the floor around the paper. Tell the children that it says "welcome home" and ask them what else they think should be on the banner. (A picture of a house? A heart? Etc…) Help the children to decide and then invite them to color/draw on the banner to make it colorful and welcoming.

GETTING CLOSURE

Hang the banner up in the classroom. Welcome the children "home" to Sunday School after their time away. Remind the children that no matter where they go, God promises to stay with them and bring them home. Church can be a home for them – it is God's house and God welcomes us all to feel at home there. No one will be left behind – God promises to bring everyone home. God send Jesus to be with us as a banner of welcome. Jesus is God with Us and was sent to be with us as we journey through the world on a path with God.

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, God, for being with us and helping us to have a home with you. Amen.

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