

The Dawn from on High

Messianic Prophecy from Isaiah to Bethlehem

SESSION 2: A VOICE CRIES: PREPARE

Isaiah 40:1-11 | Week of the Second Sunday of Advent

PART 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that the way being prepared in Isaiah 40 is a highway for the LORD himself, God arriving in person, and that when Mark opens his Gospel with this passage, he is quietly making the boldest possible claim about who Jesus is.

Catholic Touchstone

St. John the Baptist is the Lord's immediate precursor, sent to prepare his way (CCC 523). Through the prophets, God had long been forming his people in the hope of salvation (CCC 64). And Mark 1:1-8 is the Gospel of the Second Sunday of Advent in Year B in the Roman Rite: the passage your group works inductively this week is the one your parish hears proclaimed at Sunday Mass.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Isaiah 40 opens the section of the book (chapters 40-55) that speaks into a much later darkness than Session 1's. The horizon is no longer Assyria in the 730s but Babylon: Jerusalem destroyed (587 BC), the temple burned, the people deported. Whether Isaiah of Jerusalem was given to see across those centuries, or whether God raised up an inspired prophetic voice within Isaiah's school to complete the scroll, is a question the Church leaves open. Scholars widely hold the second view; the Church affirms without hesitation that the whole book is one inspired word of God. Say that plainly if it comes up, and do not pretend to more certainty than the Church herself claims in either direction.

To that shattered people comes one of the tenderest commands in the Old Testament: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." The Hebrew verbs are plural: God is commissioning heralds. Then a voice cries: build a highway. Ancient kings had roads prepared before a royal visit, valleys filled, hills graded, curves straightened. But look at verse 3 closely: this highway is "the way of the LORD... a highway for our God." The King who is coming is not Cyrus, not a returning governor. It is God himself. Verse 9 gives the herald's one-line message: "Behold your God!" Verse 10 says he comes "with might"; verse 11, in the same breath, that he comes like a shepherd who "will gather the lambs in his arms." Might, arriving as gentleness.

Beginning in 538 BC, after Cyrus of Persia authorized the return, some of the exiles did come home. The temple was not finished until around 516 BC, and Ezra records no episode like Exodus 40 or 1 Kings 8, no visible glory filling the sanctuary, and certainly nothing that "all flesh" saw together (40:5). The return genuinely began what Isaiah promised. It did not finish it. The surplus in verse 5 stayed open, waiting. That open door is where Mark walks in.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The fulfillment text is Mark 1:1-8. Mark opens his Gospel with a composite prophetic citation, filed under Isaiah's name, whose controlling image is Isaiah 40:3: the voice in the wilderness, with John the Baptist standing in the Jordan valley as that voice. (The first line of the citation comes principally from Malachi 3:1; the Dig Deeper box unpacks this, and you should not tell the group Mark quotes all of tonight's passage.) Two

details reward attention. First, Mark opens by naming the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, before a single miracle: the Isaiah citation is his opening argument. Second, and this is the session's summit: in Isaiah, the way is prepared for the LORD, for God arriving in person. Mark applies that verse to the preparation for Jesus. He does not spell out the conclusion. He lets the reader do the arithmetic. Your group will do that arithmetic tonight, out loud, for themselves.

John's clothing preaches too. Mark says John wore camel's hair with a leather girdle (Mark 1:6), which strongly evokes the description of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8, a garment of haircloth with a leather girdle. (Note the difference: camel's hair is Mark's word, not the wording of Kings. The parallel that matters is hairy garment plus leather belt.) Malachi had promised Elijah would come before the great day of the LORD (Malachi 4:5). The group will find both texts in Discovery B.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine

"John is the voice, but the Lord is the Word who was in the beginning." Augustine loved this distinction: a voice sounds for a moment and fades; the word it carries remains. John himself said the same thing in his own way: he must decrease, Christ must increase. Every herald in this study, Isaiah included, is a voice; there is only one Word. That is also a quiet examination of conscience for anyone who serves the Church: are we willing to be the voice and not the Word?

Sermon 293, on the birth of John the Baptist (read in the Liturgy of the Hours for June 24)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard teaches, in substance, that there are three comings of the Lord: the first in flesh and weakness at Bethlehem, the last in glory and majesty at the end of time, and between them a middle coming, hidden, in spirit and power, in which Christ comes to his own here and now and the one who keeps his word receives him within. (The Church's later pastoral shorthand for that middle coming, that Christ comes to us in word, grace, and the sacraments, is a faithful unpacking of Bernard rather than his own list; keep the two distinguishable.) Advent prepares us for all three at once. Keep this in your pocket: it returns with force in Session 4, when the group asks why the world still looks unfinished.

Fifth Sermon for Advent, as read in the Liturgy of the Hours (First Week of Advent)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Gregory the Great

Gregory teaches, in substance, that pastoral care must be adapted to the condition of each soul, the way a physician suits the medicine to the illness, so that the shepherd bends to the weak rather than driving them. He is describing pastors, and the connection to tonight's text is ours to make rather than his: the God who arrives "with might" in verse 10 spends verse 11 gathering lambs in his arms. Strength that stoops is the signature of the God of Israel, and Gregory asks shepherds to imitate it.

The Pastoral Rule, especially Book III (his handbook for shepherds of souls)

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 64: through the prophets God forms his people in the hope of salvation, the expectation of a new and everlasting covenant. CCC 523: St. John the Baptist is the Lord's immediate precursor, sent to prepare his way. CCC 719: John is "more than a prophet"; in him the Holy Spirit concludes his speaking through the prophets, completing the cycle begun with Elijah.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Do not reveal these to the group

THE DAWN. Tonight adds the glory verse: "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (40:5). File it away. In Session 5 the group will read John 1:14, "we have beheld his glory," and this verse will come home. Do not connect it tonight.

THE NAMES OF THE CHILD. Rests this week. Do not resurface it; it returns in Session 3 with a fifth name.

SEALED GUESS. Collect the sealed guesses tonight as people arrive. Keep them somewhere safe and visibly sealed (a basket or envelope at the front is good theater). If anyone asks, they open next week. Anyone who forgot theirs can write and seal one tonight before leaving.

LOOKING AHEAD. Tonight's "the way is for the LORD himself" discovery is the study's hinge. Next week, Isaiah 7 will put a name on how God arrives. Resist every temptation to preview it.

SESSION GOALS

1. Set Isaiah 40 honestly in its exile horizon, including the authorship latitude the Church permits.
2. Let the group discover from the text itself that the highway is built for God's own arrival.
3. Discover Mark's move: the way of the LORD becomes the way of Jesus, and the group does the arithmetic aloud.
4. Present the return-from-exile reading at full strength, then press it with Isaiah 40:5 and the actual post-exile history.
5. Hold might and gentleness together (40:10-11) so the room meets a God who is strong enough to be tender.

TIMED PLAN (90 MINUTES)

0:00 Opening prayer, collect sealed guesses, Win questions (15 min). 0:15 Read Isaiah 40:1-11; Questions 1-3 (25 min). 0:40 Steelman chain (15 min). 0:55 Discovery B: Mark 1:1-8 with 2 Kings 1:8 and Malachi 4:5; Questions 4-5 (20 min). 1:15 Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer, distribute Take-Home 2 (15 min).

CUTS FOR 60 MINUTES: pre-chosen cut order is (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper box, sent home, (3) Question 4. Do not cut Question 2, the steelman, or Discovery B. Question 2 is the session's hinge discovery, and folding it into leader framing would hand the group the very thing they are meant to find.

MIXED-AGES NOTE: children understand road construction; open the Build section by asking the youngest present what a road crew does to flat ground before a highway goes in. When 40:11 is read, ask a parent holding a small child to stand for a moment; the room will see the verse. Confession is commended in Live It This Week: frame it for all ages as clearing the road, and mention your parish's Advent penance service date if one is scheduled.

SESSION 2: A VOICE CRIES: PREPARE

PART 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Father of all comfort, your people sat in exile and you did not forget them. Speak tenderly to us tonight. Where our road to you is crooked, straighten it; where it is blocked, clear it; and give us the courage of the voice in the wilderness. Through Christ our Lord. All: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

WIN

W1. What is the best homecoming you have ever had, or ever witnessed? What made it so good?

W2. When you are getting ready for an important guest, what do you actually do around the house? What does the preparation say about the guest?

BUILD

Before reading, set the horizon in two sentences: this oracle speaks into the Babylonian exile, after Jerusalem was destroyed and the people deported (587/586 BC). The group cannot find that in verses 1-2, so give it to them. Then read Isaiah 40:1-11 aloud. Use three readers: verses 1-2, verses 3-8, verses 9-11. Ask the group to listen for who is speaking and who is coming.

1. Given that setting, look at verses 1-2. What does God command his heralds to do, and what does the tone tell you about how he regards this defeated people?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

(Confirming the frame you gave: Jerusalem destroyed, the temple burned, the people carried to Babylon, 587/586 BC, a darkness even deeper than Session 1's.) The verses themselves give warfare ended, iniquity pardoned, the sentence served. And God's first word into that is not a rebuke but a command to heralds: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Speak tenderly. Before God says what he will do, he tells his people how he regards them: still "my people," still "your God."

2. Verses 3-5 describe a construction project. What is being built, and here is the key question: who is the road for? Read verse 3 word by word.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A royal highway through the wilderness: valleys filled, mountains graded, crooked places made straight, the way ancient kingdoms prepared roads before a royal visit. And verse 3 names the traveler: "prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Not a road for the exiles to walk home on, first of all: a road for God to arrive on. Verse 9 hands the herald a one-line message, and it is not "behold your freedom." It is "Behold your God!" The comfort of Isaiah 40 includes real changed circumstances, the exile ended and the people brought home, and then reaches deeper than any of them: the LORD himself comes.

3. Hold verses 10 and 11 side by side. What two pictures of the arriving God do they give, and how can both be true at once?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Verse 10: he comes "with might," his arm ruling, like a conqueror with the spoils of victory. Verse 11: the very next breath, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms." The arm that rules is the arm that carries lambs. This is not a contradiction; it is a signature. Only real strength can afford to be that gentle. Remember Session 1: the answer to an empire was a child. The pattern is holding.

STEELMAN: BUILD, THEN PRESS

BUILD (full strength): "This passage was fulfilled five centuries before Jesus. In 538 BC Cyrus of Persia decreed that the exiles could go home, and they did. The 'way of the LORD' is the road back from Babylon; the comfort is the end of the exile. It is beautiful poetry about a real historical event, and Christians have no business relocating it to the Jordan River." Let the group feel it: the return really happened, and this reading takes the Bible's own history seriously.

PRESS (from the text): Do not answer by denying the return; grant it fully, because it happened and Isaiah meant it. Then invite the group to test it against verse 5: "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." Ask what the return actually looked like. They came home to ruins; the temple was not finished for another twenty years; and Ezra records no episode like Exodus 40 or 1 Kings 8, no visible glory filling the sanctuary, and nothing that all flesh saw together. So the honest verdict is not that the return failed. It is that the return did not exhaust the oracle, and the surplus is not small: a universal revelation of glory is still owed. Be fair here, and say so out loud: the first coming of Christ did not produce a moment when all flesh simultaneously saw the glory either, which is why the Church still prays for his return. Isaiah 40:5 has a horizon in the return, a deeper fulfillment in Christ, and a consummation still ahead. And notice one thing the return never claimed at all: the highway was not said to be for the exiles. It was "for our God." When does God himself arrive? Hold the question; the next discovery answers it.

LIVE DISCOVERY B

Say: "Someone eventually opened his book with a line from this passage, joined to another prophetic promise. Find Mark 1:1-8. Read it, and tell us: who is the voice, and, look carefully, whose way is being prepared?" Then, when the group has answered, add: "John's clothes preach too. Find 2 Kings 1:8 and Malachi 4:5 and tell us who John is dressed like, and why that matters."

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Mark opens by naming the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and immediately gives a prophetic citation whose controlling line is Isaiah 40:3: the voice in the wilderness is John the Baptist, and the way being prepared is the way of Jesus. Now do the arithmetic aloud with the group: in Isaiah, the highway is for the LORD, for God arriving in person. Mark takes that verse and lays it down in front of Jesus of Nazareth. Without a single argument, in his opening lines, Mark has claimed that in Jesus, God himself is arriving. And the clothes: John wears camel's hair with a leather girdle (Mark 1:6), which closely evokes Elijah's haircloth garment and leather girdle in 2 Kings 1:8, and Malachi 4:5 promised Elijah before the great day of the LORD. Mark is presenting John as the promised Elijah-like precursor. (Luke 1:17 gives the Church's precision: John comes in the spirit and power of Elijah, not as Elijah returned in person.)

4. Mark never says out loud "Jesus is the LORD of Isaiah 40." He just quotes the verse and lets you conclude it. Why might he teach that way, and what happens in you when you reach the conclusion yourself?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A truth you discover lands deeper than a truth you are handed; Mark writes inductively, the way this study runs. He sets the texts side by side and trusts the reader. His arrangement invites the reader to identify Jesus with the LORD whose way Isaiah says must be prepared, and it does so without ever stating the conclusion. That is also the Church's claim about Jesus in miniature: not merely a great teacher on the road, but the LORD the road was built for.

5. Verse 8: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever." A road home came within a lifetime, but the full weight of this promise, God arriving in person, waited centuries longer. What does that long wait say to you about waiting on something God has actually promised?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The text says all flesh is grass; empires are made of people, so they wither too, and the application is fair: Assyria fell, Babylon fell, Persia fell, and the promise outlived them all. God's word does not expire while we wait; waiting is where it proves itself. One pastoral distinction worth making gently if it comes up: this promises God's fidelity to what he has actually said, which is not the same as a guarantee that every particular thing we hope for will arrive in the form we picture. Christian hope rests on him. Let the group answer personally, and let the leader go first about a long wait of their own, held in hope.

Dig Deeper

For groups that want more

Mark 1:2-3 is actually a blended citation: it opens with a line that comes from Malachi 3:1 (with an echo of Exodus 23:20) before quoting Isaiah 40:3, yet Mark files the whole thing under "Isaiah the prophet." One common explanation is that a composite citation could be identified by its principal prophetic source. Read that way, far from being an error, the blend works like Mark's thesis statement: the messenger of Malachi and the voice of Isaiah converge on one figure, John, and one arrival, the LORD's.

SEND

S1. If God is preparing to arrive in your life this Advent, what is the crooked place he would want straightened first? You do not have to say it aloud; name it to yourself honestly.

S2. Who in your life needs a herald of comfort this week, someone to "speak tenderly" to them? What would that actually look like?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Clear the road: go to confession this Advent. If your parish has a penance service scheduled, put it on the calendar tonight. Prepare by praying tonight's passage.
2. Be the voice once this week: one deliberate act or message of comfort to the person you named in the second Send question. Speak tenderly.
3. Keep the candle practice from Session 1, now with two candles, and add tonight's memory verse on the second night of each evening.

MEMORY VERSE

"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" (Isaiah 40:3)

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: God of all comfort, you built a road across the centuries to reach your people, and in Jesus you arrived in person. Make our hearts a straight highway for you. Give us tender voices and shepherd's hands this week. All: The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

SESSION 2: A VOICE CRIES: PREPARE

PART 3: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE USED, IN ORDER

Isaiah 40:1-11: session text, three readers.

Isaiah 40:5: steelman press, the glory all flesh will see.

Mark 1:1-8: Live Discovery B, the fulfillment text (also this Sunday's Gospel, Advent 2, Year B).

2 Kings 1:8: Discovery B, Elijah's clothing.

Malachi 4:5: Discovery B, Elijah promised before the day of the LORD.

Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20: Dig Deeper, Mark's blended citation.

Isaiah 40:8: Question 5 and closing prayer response.

John 1:1: alluded to in the Augustine Voice (the Word who was in the beginning).

John 3:30: paraphrased in the Augustine Voice (he must decrease).

Ezra 1-6: leader background and steelman press, the return and the second temple.

Luke 1:17: Discovery B answer, John in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Isaiah 40:3: memory verse.

ANSWERS AT A GLANCE

Q1: comfort commanded into the exile you framed for them; tone tender, "my people... your God." Q2: royal highway built for the LORD himself; herald's message "Behold your God!" Q3: might (v. 10) and shepherd gentleness (v. 11) held together. Steelman: return-from-exile reading granted as a real beginning, pressed by the unpaid surplus of 40:5, with the Christian fulfillment and the still-future consummation both named. Discovery B: Mark lays the LORD's highway in front of Jesus; John evokes Elijah (Mark 1:6 with 2 Kings 1:8, Malachi 4:5, Luke 1:17). Q4: Mark teaches by arrangement and lets the reader draw the conclusion. Q5: the word outlasts every empire and every wait.

IF YOU ARE RUNNING LONG

Cut in this order: second Win question, then Dig Deeper (send it home), then Question 4. Question 2 and Discovery B must survive; the session's whole claim rests on them.

LOGISTICS

Collect sealed guesses as people arrive; keep them sealed and visible. Late writers may seal one tonight. Distribute Take-Home 2 at the door. The guesses open next session; say no more than that.