

The Dawn from on High

Messianic Prophecy from Isaiah to Bethlehem

SESSION 3: THE SIGN OF THE VIRGIN

Isaiah 7:10-17 | Gaudete Week (Third Sunday of Advent) | The Sealed Guesses Open

PART 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

The group opens their sealed guesses about what Israel was waiting for, and then discovers that Isaiah 7 makes every safe answer too small: the sign God gives the house of David is a child whose name means God with us. Israel was not only waiting for something from God. Israel was waiting for God.

Catholic Touchstone

The Church has always read Isaiah 7:14 as pointing to the virginal conception of Jesus (CCC 496-497), a work of the Holy Spirit (CCC 484-486). The name Emmanuel, God with us, names the deepest truth of Christmas (CCC 744). Tonight falls in Gaudete week: on Gaudete Sunday rose vestments may be used where that is the custom, and many Advent wreaths light a rose candle, as signs of joy breaking into a season still waiting.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

We are back in Session 1's crisis, a few years earlier in the story. Around 735 BC, Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel besiege Jerusalem to force young King Ahaz into their anti-Assyrian coalition, planning to depose him and install a puppet, "the son of Tabeel" (7:6). This is not just politics: if David's line is cut off, God's covenant promise would appear to have failed, and the hope of Israel would look humanly finished. (Say it that way. The visible dynasty can be threatened; God's oath itself cannot die.) Isaiah meets Ahaz at the conduit of the upper pool (7:3), perhaps while the king inspects Jerusalem's water supply against a siege, and tells him to stand firm: these two enemies are "smoldering stumps of firebrands," nearly burnt out.

Then God does something extraordinary: he invites Ahaz to ask for a sign, any sign, "deep as Sheol or high as heaven." Ahaz refuses, wrapping his unbelief in pious language: "I will not put the LORD to the test." He has already decided to trust Assyria instead. Isaiah's answer turns from Ahaz to the whole dynasty: "Hear then, O house of David... the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." A sign the king refused to request, given anyway, to the house rather than the man, on God's own scale rather than Ahaz's.

One spelling note before someone sharp-eyed asks: your Bibles print Immanuel here in Isaiah and Emmanuel in Matthew 1:23. Same name, God with us; the first spelling comes through the Hebrew, the second through the Greek. Nothing is hiding in the difference.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Verses 15-16 tie the sign to Ahaz's own timeline: before such a child would reach the age of moral discernment, the land of the two kings Ahaz dreads will be deserted. (Quote 7:16 carefully; it speaks of that land being forsaken, not simply of the kings dying.) Historically both kings went down fast: Rezin and Pekah were removed around 732 BC, within a few years of the oracle, and the northern kingdom itself fell by 722 BC. So the oracle has a near horizon; honest reading admits it, and tonight's steelman gives it full strength. But the oracle also strains past that horizon: the sign was offered on a scale reaching from Sheol to heaven; it is addressed to the house of David as a dynasty rather than to Ahaz personally, which leaves it open to a Davidic fulfillment

beyond his lifetime; no surviving text identifies a child of that court formally named Immanuel; and in a Christian canonical reading the Emmanuel theme of chapters 7 and 8 (8:8, 8:10) prepares for the extraordinary Davidic child of chapter 9 that the group met in Session 1.

The fulfillment text is Matthew 1:18-25. An angel tells Joseph that the child conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit, and Matthew writes: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet," quoting our verse with the Greek word *parthenos*, virgin. Long before Matthew, and long before Christianity existed, the Jewish translators of the Greek Isaiah had already rendered Isaiah's *almah* with that word. Matthew did not invent the wording; he received a pre-Christian Jewish rendering that proved exactly apt for what was revealed in Christ. (That is the honest claim. What the translators themselves understood by it is not something the word choice alone settles.)

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Justin Martyr

Within a century of the apostles, Justin's Dialogue presents a learned Jewish interlocutor named Trypho pressing this very verse: that the Hebrew means simply "young woman" and points to a child of Isaiah's own day. Justin answers, in substance, that a young woman bearing a son would be no sign at all, while the Scriptures here promise something without precedent. Tonight's steelman is not a modern invention; the Church has been answering it, respectfully and from the text, since the second century.

Dialogue with Trypho, especially chapters 43 and 66-68 (2nd century)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Irenaeus

Irenaeus defends the Septuagint's rendering, virgin, and argues, in substance, that a translation made by Jewish scholars long before Jesus was born cannot be dismissed as Christian tampering. That is his contribution here, and it is a strong one: the reading Matthew used was already in Jewish hands. (The related argument that an ordinary birth would be no sign at all belongs to Justin, above; the appeal to the offered scale of the sign is this study's own press. Keep the three distinct.)

Against Heresies 3.21 (2nd century)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyril of Alexandria

Cyril teaches, in substance, that the child of Mary is not a man merely accompanied by God but God the Word truly made man, so that what Isaiah's name promises, God with us, is literally true in her arms. That is why the Council of Ephesus, where Cyril presided, confessed Mary as Theotokos, God-bearer: not to exalt her above her Son, but to protect the full meaning of Emmanuel. Every time the Church says "God with us," she is saying what Ephesus protected when it confessed Mary as Theotokos.

Second Letter to Nestorius, received by the Council of Ephesus (431)

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 484-486: the virginal conception is the work of the Holy Spirit, inaugurating the fullness of time. CCC 496-497: the Church's faith in the virginal conception, with Matthew's Gospel seeing in it the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. CCC 744: in the fullness of time the Holy Spirit accomplishes in Mary all the preparations for Christ's coming, and the Son of God is Emmanuel, God with us.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Do not reveal these to the group

SEALED GUESS: OPENING RITUAL. Tonight, after Question 3 and before the steelman, hand back the sealed guesses. Unsealing happens together, on your word, with some ceremony; they have been sealed since Session 1, two weeks ago. Volunteers read theirs aloud; no answer is wrong, and say so. Most answers will be true and too small: a king, a rescuer, freedom, peace. Do not correct anyone. Let the rest of the session do it: the passage itself will enlarge every answer in the room into "God himself, with us." At session's end, invite a few to say aloud what they would write now, and tell everyone to keep their paper: the written final answer belongs to Session 5. (The Discussion Guide ritual and the Logistics block say the same; keep all three aligned.)

THE NAMES OF THE CHILD. The fifth name arrives tonight: Immanuel/Emmanuel joins Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. You may let the group notice that Isaiah keeps naming this child; do not yet reveal that the list completes at a manger in Session 5, where he is named Jesus.

THE DAWN. Rests tonight. Resist connecting Gaudete joy to the dawn imagery; Session 5 does it.

SESSION GOALS

1. Tell the Ahaz story well enough that the group feels the stakes for David's line.
2. Open the sealed guesses with real ceremony and total safety; every guess honored.
3. Present the "young woman of Ahaz's day" reading at genuine full strength, then press it from the text.
4. Discover Matthew 1:18-25 and the pre-Christian Jewish translation choice behind parthenos.
5. Land the enlargement: Israel was waiting for God himself, and so are we; that is Gaudete joy.

TIMED PLAN (90 MINUTES)

0:00 Opening prayer, Win questions (12 min). 0:12 The Ahaz story and Isaiah 7:10-17; Questions 1-3 (28 min). 0:40 SEALED GUESS OPENING RITUAL (12 min). 0:52 Steelman chain (13 min). 1:05 Discovery B: Matthew 1:18-25; Question 4 (12 min). 1:17 Question 5, Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer, Take-Home 3 (13 min).

CUTS FOR 60 MINUTES: one Win question; compress Questions 1-2 into the leader telling the Ahaz story with the text open; assign Dig Deeper home. Never cut the opening ritual: it is the night's heart. If time collapses, the steelman may be compressed to its BUILD paragraph plus the single strongest press point (the sign's offered scale).

MIXED-AGES NOTE: children own the opening ritual: let younger participants distribute the sealed guesses and give the "unseal" countdown. A child's guess read aloud ("a superhero"? "a new king"?) is often the evening's best theology; take every one seriously. The steelman's language debate can run over young heads; anchor it with the concrete question everyone can weigh: "would an ordinary birth be a sign deep as Sheol or high as heaven?"

SESSION 3: THE SIGN OF THE VIRGIN

PART 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Father, you gave your people a sign they did not ask for and could not have imagined. As we open your word tonight, and open our own guesses, enlarge our hearts. Teach us to expect more of you, not less. Through Christ our Lord. All: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

WIN

W1. What is the best gift you ever received that you never would have thought to ask for?

W2. Rose candle week: the Church says the waiting is more than half over. Where in your life right now does joy leak through before the thing you are waiting for actually arrives?

BUILD

Leader, tell the story first (aqueduct, siege, the plot against David's line), then read Isaiah 7:10-17 aloud with one strong reader.

1. God invites Ahaz to ask for a sign "deep as Sheol or high as heaven." What is God offering him, and what reason does Ahaz give for refusing? Then find 2 Kings 16:7-9: where had Ahaz already gone looking for security?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

God offers a frightened king unlimited proof: name anything, from the underworld to the sky. The reason Ahaz gives sounds pious, "I will not put the LORD to the test." Isaiah 7 does not tell us what was behind it, which is why the group goes to 2 Kings 16:7-9 and finds him sending silver and gold to Tiglath-pileser and asking Assyria to come and save him. His policy exposes the posture behind the refusal: he has already gone shopping for a protector. You cannot ask God for a sign when you have already sworn allegiance elsewhere. His refusal is not humility; it is a closed door with a Bible verse taped to it.

2. Verse 13 shifts the audience: "Hear then, O house of David." Verse 14: "the Lord himself will give you a sign." Who is the sign actually for, and what is the sign?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

God goes over the king's head to the dynasty itself, the house of David, whose survival his covenant guaranteed, so the sign is no longer addressed to Ahaz as a private man. And the sign is not an army or an omen in the sky: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." A birth, and a name: God with us. Once again (the pattern of this whole study) God answers a geopolitical crisis with a child.

3. Look at verse 14 again. What are the elements of the sign God gives: what happens, and what is the child called? And if a name is a promise, what is this name promising?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The sign has parts: a conception, a birth, a son, and a name. And the name is the part that will not sit still. Immanuel: not God for us at a distance, not God watching us sympathetically, but God with us, present, arrived, sharing the situation. The name promises presence. Be honest if someone raises it: a name in Scripture can proclaim what God does without meaning the child is God, and Isaiah 8:10 uses the same expression as a declaration of divine aid. So hold this open, and hold it beside everything the group has already found: a highway built for God himself to travel (Session 2), a child called Mighty God (Session 1). Isaiah keeps circling the same unthinkable idea from different sides. Do not resolve it yet; the ritual comes next, and Matthew comes after it.

THE SEALED GUESSES OPEN

Hand back the sealed guesses. Count down together and unseal. Invite volunteers of every age to read theirs aloud. Receive every answer with honor; say clearly that no guess is wrong. When the reading is done, ask the room: "Put our guesses next to tonight's sign. Most of us guessed things God would send: a king, a rescue, peace, freedom. What is the name Immanuel claiming that is bigger than all of them?" Let the group say it themselves: Israel was not only waiting for something from God. Israel was waiting for God. Then say: "Keep your guess. At our last session you will write the answer you would give now."

STEELMAN: BUILD, THEN PRESS

BUILD (full strength): "The Hebrew word here, *almah*, means a young woman of marriageable age; Hebrew has a more specific word for virgin that Isaiah did not use. Verses 15-16 tie the child to Ahaz's own timeline: before he knows right from wrong, the two enemy kings will be gone, which happened within about a dozen years. So the natural reading is a child born in Isaiah's own day, perhaps the next royal son, whose growth is a countdown clock for the crisis. Matthew, quoting the Greek translation centuries later, turned a birth announcement into a miracle." This reading is serious: it takes the Hebrew and the timeline honestly, and learned Jews like Trypho pressed it on the Church from the second century.

PRESS (from the text): Take it in four moves, and do not oversell any of them. First, the scale. God had offered a sign reaching from Sheol to heaven, and Justin and Irenaeus both press the question: what kind of sign would an ordinary conception be? Grant honestly that a predicted birth with a symbolic name could function as a real near-term sign, as prophetic children do elsewhere in Isaiah and Hosea; the point is that the scale offered invites something more. Second, the address: the sign is given to the house of David as a dynasty, not to Ahaz, who had just refused it, which leaves the oracle open beyond his lifetime. Third, the name: no surviving text identifies a child of that court formally named Immanuel, and in the canonical reading the name grows through 8:8 and 8:10 toward the child of chapter 9. Fourth, and this is the weight-bearing one, Matthew. An inspired evangelist, writing in Greek, applies this verse to the virginal conception of Jesus, using the rendering *parthenos* that Jewish translators had already chosen generations before Christianity existed. The Church receives that reading as definitive (CCC 497). So say clearly what is settled and what is not: that this prophecy is fulfilled in Christ is settled; exactly how to reconstruct the near horizon in Ahaz's day is not, and Catholic interpreters differ. The reading this study takes, common in the Fathers and in Catholic commentary, keeps the both/and the group has now seen twice: a real near horizon (the timeline of vv. 15-16 is not erased), and a promise whose own words overflow it, waiting for the birth that finally is deep as Sheol and high as heaven.

LIVE DISCOVERY B

Say: "Seven centuries later, an angel has to talk a carpenter out of a quiet divorce. Find Matthew 1:18-25. Read it, and tell us what Matthew does with tonight's verse."

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Joseph, a just man, resolves to end the betrothal quietly; the angel reveals that the child is conceived of the Holy Spirit, and Matthew plants our verse at the center: "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet." The virgin conceives; the son is born; and the name lands with its translation attached: "Emmanuel (which means, God with us)." Notice too that Joseph is addressed as "son of David": the sign given to the house of David in 735 BC is delivered to that house in person.

4. Stay inside Matthew for a moment. Whom does he place at the center of the fulfillment, how does he say the child is conceived, and what does he do with the name?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Matthew places Joseph, "son of David," at the hinge, which delivers the sign to the very house it was addressed to in 735 BC. The child is conceived of the Holy Spirit, not by human generation. And the name arrives with its translation attached: Emmanuel, God with us. Now the doctrinal landing, which Matthew plus the Church's teaching genuinely supports: the Church calls Mary Theotokos, God-bearer, because the child she carried is the Immanuel of tonight's verse. If he is truly God with us, then she truly bore God. Her greatness is entirely about who he is, which is exactly how she would want it. (Leader bridge only, do not develop it tonight: Luke tells the story from Mary's side, and the group will meet her free yes next week.)

5. Gaudete question: "God with us" is a present-tense name, not just a Christmas fact. Where do you most need Immanuel to be true this week, not someday, but with you?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Open sharing; no fixed answer. The leader should name a real place first. If the group needs a prompt: the Eucharist is where the name keeps its promise most concretely; Emmanuel did not visit and leave.

Dig Deeper

For groups that want more

Follow the name inside Isaiah: in 8:8 the land under threat is suddenly called "your land, O Immanuel," and in 8:10 the nations' plots fail "for God is with us." The name outgrows any child of the 730s within a chapter of its announcement. Then reread the four throne names of 9:6 from Session 1 and ask who could carry all five names at once.

SEND

S1. Your sealed guess named what you thought Israel was waiting for. Be honest: what have you been treating as the thing you are waiting for from God, that might be smaller than God himself?

S2. Who do you know for whom "God with us" would sound too good to be true right now? What could you do this week that makes the name believable?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray the name: three times this week, sit for five quiet minutes with only the word Emmanuel. When your mind wanders, return to the name. God with us is a fact before it is a feeling.

2. Make one visit, call, or note to the person from the second Send question. Presence is the point; you are delivering the meaning of the name, not a speech.

3. Three candles now, rose week: keep the evening candle practice, adding tonight's memory verse.

MEMORY VERSE

"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)." (Matthew 1:23)

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: Emmanuel, God with us, you are the sign we would never have dared to ask for. Stay with us in the waiting that remains. Enlarge every guess we have ever made about you. All: Rejoice! The Lord is at hand. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

SESSION 3: THE SIGN OF THE VIRGIN

PART 3: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE USED, IN ORDER

Isaiah 7:1-9: leader background, the siege and the plot (told, not read).

Isaiah 7:10-17: session text, one reader.

Isaiah 8:8 and 8:10: press point and Dig Deeper, the name Immanuel growing.

Isaiah 9:6: Dig Deeper callback to Session 1, the four throne titles, read alongside Immanuel from Isaiah 7 and 8.

Matthew 1:18-25: Live Discovery B, the fulfillment text.

2 Kings 16:7-9: Question 1, where Ahaz had already gone for security.

Philippians 4:4-5: closing prayer response ("Rejoice! The Lord is at hand").

Revelation 22:20: the study's recurring prayer response, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Matthew 1:23: memory verse.

ANSWERS AT A GLANCE

Q1: unlimited sign offered; a pious-sounding refusal, with 2 Kings 16 showing where he had already turned. Q2: sign redirected to the house of David as a dynasty; a birth and a name. Q3: the parts of the sign, and a name that promises presence. Ritual: guesses honored, then enlarged by the name. Steelman: the *almah* and timeline reading at full strength; pressed by the offered scale, the dynastic address, the absence of any recorded Immanuel, and above all Matthew's inspired application with the pre-Christian *parthenos*; Christological fulfillment settled (CCC 497), near-horizon reconstruction left open. Q4: inside Matthew, Joseph son of David, conception by the Spirit, the name translated, and Theotokos as the doctrinal landing. Q5: open, personal, Eucharistic pointer.

IF YOU ARE RUNNING LONG

Cut in this order: the second Win question, then Dig Deeper (send it home), then compress Questions 1 and 2 into the leader telling the Ahaz story with the text open. Never cut the opening ritual. If time collapses entirely, the steelman may run as its BUILD paragraph plus the single strongest press point, which is Matthew's inspired application.

LOGISTICS

Bring the sealed guesses and scissors or a letter opener for ceremony. Rose candle on the table if you have one. Distribute Take-Home 3 at the door. Sealed guesses go home with their owners tonight; ask everyone to keep them for the last session, where the final answer is written. A few may say aloud tonight what they would write now, but nothing is collected.