

The Dawn from on High

Messianic Prophecy from Isaiah to Bethlehem

SESSION 4: THE SHOOT FROM JESSE'S STUMP

Isaiah 11:1-10 and 61:1-4 | Week of the Fourth Sunday of Advent | The O Antiphon Days

PART 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that when Gabriel announces the child to Mary, he speaks in the vocabulary of Isaiah 9 and the Davidic covenant, and that when Jesus opens the scroll in Nazareth, he reads Isaiah 61 and claims it: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The promises the group has traced for three weeks are answered by name.

Catholic Touchstone

The Catechism lists the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and says they belong in their fullness to Christ, Son of David (CCC 1831); it is CCC 712 that points to the Spirit resting on the shoot of Jesse in tonight's text. The Catechism also reads Isaiah 61 as the anointing Jesus claims in the Nazareth synagogue (CCC 714). Mary's answer to Gabriel, the obedience of faith (CCC 494), is the hinge on which the fulfillment turns. And these very days, December 17 to 23, the Roman liturgy prays the O Antiphons at Evening Prayer, half of which are woven from the passages this study has read.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Session 1 promised a child on David's throne; tonight opens with the throne cut down. "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse." A stump is what remains after the axe. In Isaiah's own horizon the axe is Assyrian; in the fuller canonical picture the Davidic monarchy is finally felled by Babylon, which ends its independence though not David's family line. Isaiah's image is deliberately humiliating and deliberately hopeful at once: the royal tree cut to the ground, and out of that stump, from Jesse, David's father, the root stock older than the crown, one green shoot.

On the shoot the Spirit rests, and Isaiah names the endowment in pairs: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the LORD. Count them in your Bible before the session, because this catches leaders live: the RSV2CE gives six qualities after "the Spirit of the LORD." The Church's seventh, piety, comes through the ancient Greek and Latin versions of this verse. This is the biblical source of the Church's seven gifts, and anyone in the room preparing for Confirmation is memorizing that list whether they know it or not. Then the vision widens to a healed creation: wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, a child playing safely where the serpent struck, and the root of Jesse standing "as an ensign to the peoples," a rallying flag for the nations.

Isaiah 61 gives the shoot his mission statement: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted... liberty to the captives." Anointed is the word to lean on. Isaiah 61:1 uses the Hebrew verb, "he has anointed me"; from that same root comes the noun *mashiach*, anointed one, Messiah, rendered in Greek as *christos*, Christ. Tonight the group hears the job description; the two discoveries show the person stepping into it.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Discovery A is Luke 1:26-38, the Annunciation. Listen to Gabriel with three weeks of Isaiah in your ears: "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David... and of his kingdom there will be no end." The angel weaves together the vocabulary and promises of Isaiah 9:7 and 2 Samuel 7 in a close scriptural echo, and the "no end" claim is the same claim the group pressed in Session 1 against every merely human king. And the mechanism is Session 3's sign: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you," a virgin conceiving. Mary's answer, "let it be to me according to your word," is the free human yes on which the whole ancient promise pivots.

Discovery B is Luke 4:16-21. In the Nazareth synagogue, at the start of his public ministry, Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah, finds tonight's second passage, reads it, sits down, and says one of the most staggering sentences in the Gospels: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." There is a detail the group should find themselves: compare what Jesus reads (Luke 4:18-19) with Isaiah 61:1-2 and notice where he stops, before "the day of vengeance of our God." He rolls up the scroll on the acceptable year and leaves the vengeance unread. (One thing to know as leader so you are not caught out: Luke's citation is principally Isaiah 61:1-2 but also carries a clause corresponding to Isaiah 58:6, about setting the oppressed at liberty. It is not a continuous verbatim excerpt.) That editorial silence carries tonight's steelman.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

In one of the most loved pages of Advent, Bernard imagines the moment after Gabriel finishes speaking: heaven and earth holding their breath, Adam and every exile, the whole waiting world on its knees before the girl of Nazareth, begging, in substance: Answer, Lady, answer; the word on which our comfort hangs is yours to speak. Bernard's point is serious theology in dramatic dress: God, who needs nothing, chose to let his promise wait on a free human yes.

Fourth Homily in Praise of the Virgin Mother, as read in the Liturgy of the Hours (December 20)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: The Church at Prayer: the O Antiphons

For these seven evenings the Church sings to Christ under seven Old Testament titles: Wisdom, Adonai (Lord of Sinai), Root of Jesse, Key of David, Dawn (O Oriens), King of the Nations, Emmanuel. The group will recognize the antiphons as a summary of this very study: the Root of Jesse is tonight's ensign for the peoples (Isaiah 11:10), Emmanuel is Session 3's name, and the Dawn is where our fifth session is heading. Their Latin titles also form a reverse acrostic, read from the last evening back to the first: *ero cras*, "Tomorrow I will come." It is a delight, and it is genuinely there in the titles; whether the antiphons were composed with it in mind is not something the liturgical books tell us.

Liturgy of the Hours, Evening Prayer, December 17-23

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas teaches, in substance, that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not decorations for the unusually holy but stable dispositions, given by God, which make a soul readily moved by the promptings of the Holy Spirit. That is the whole of what this Voice claims for him. (The sails-and-wind comparison people often reach for here, a ship rigged to answer the wind, is a later catechetical image and this study's illustration, not Aquinas's own; use it if it helps you, but do not put it in his mouth. That the gifts belong in fullness to Christ is treated elsewhere in the Summa, at III, q. 7, a. 5.)

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 68, especially aa. 1-3

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard's great word is *viriditas*, greenness: the living freshness God pours into creation, the sap that makes dry wood put out leaves. She sings of the greenest branch budding and bearing fruit, and she hears in the Incarnation the greening of a world gone dry. Bring her into tonight's first image, in substance: a stump is not merely a ruin, it is wood with life still in the root, and the God who promises a green shoot from Jesse is the God whose freshness keeps entering dead-looking places. She is the one Doctor of the Church in this study who writes as a woman, and she is here because she read this verse's picture better than most.

Doctor of the Church; her antiphon O viridissima virga, and the viriditas theme running through her writings

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 494: at the announcement, Mary gives the obedience of faith, and her yes undoes the knot of disobedience. CCC 671-672: Christ's kingdom is already present in mystery and yet still to be fulfilled; we live between the comings. CCC 712: the features of the awaited Messiah in the Book of Emmanuel, including the Spirit resting on the shoot of Jesse. CCC 714: the Messiah's anointing, with Isaiah 61:1-2 as read by Jesus in Luke 4. CCC 1831: the seven gifts, which belong in their fullness to Christ, Son of David. For the sacramental application, CCC 1266 (the gifts given with baptismal grace) and CCC 1303 (Confirmation's increase of them).

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Do not reveal these to the group

THE NAMES OF THE CHILD. Gabriel adds the greatest titles yet: "Son of the Most High," "Son of God," and, at last, the personal name: "you shall call his name Jesus." If the group notices the name-collecting, enjoy it with them, but save the full harvest (all the names laid out together at the manger) for Session 5.

THE DAWN. O Oriens, the Dawn antiphon, is sung December 21, likely within a day or two of your meeting. You may point out that one of this week's antiphons shares the study's title; say no more. Session 5 pays everything off.

SEALED GUESS. Closed as a mechanic, but alive as a question. If anyone references their guess tonight (Gabriel's speech tends to trigger it), welcome it briefly and move on; the final rewrite happens in Session 5.

SESSION GOALS

1. Feel the stump: the promise survives the felling of the dynasty, and hope in Scripture is not optimism.
2. Root the seven gifts of the Spirit in Isaiah 11 for every confirmand and every confirmed person in the room.
3. Discover Gabriel speaking Isaiah's vocabulary at the Annunciation, and honor Mary's free yes.
4. Discover Jesus claiming Isaiah 61 in Nazareth, and find where he stops reading.
5. Present the "unfulfilled kingdom" objection at full strength and answer it honestly with the two comings.

TIMED PLAN (90 MINUTES)

0:00 Opening prayer, Win questions (12 min). 0:12 Isaiah 11:1-10; Questions 1-2 (20 min). 0:32 Isaiah 61:1-4; Question 3 (10 min). 0:42 Discovery A: Luke 1:26-38; Question 4 (15 min). 0:57 Discovery B: Luke 4:16-21 with the stop-point find (10 min). 1:07 Steelman chain (13 min). 1:20 Send, Live It (O Antiphon practice), memory verse, closing prayer, Take-Home 4 (10 min).

CUTS FOR 60 MINUTES: one Win question; read Isaiah 61:1-4 without Question 3 and let Discovery B carry its weight; assign Dig Deeper home. Keep both discoveries and the steelman; this session is the study's hinge from promise to person.

MIXED-AGES NOTE: bring something cut-and-sprouting if you can (a stump photo, a bulb, a branch in water); children grasp the stump image instantly and adults grasp it through them. Any confirmands present should be asked to recite the seven gifts when Isaiah 11:2 is read; let them shine. For the peaceable kingdom verses, younger readers do wolf, leopard, lion, and child; it is the most read-aloud-friendly text in the study.

SESSION 4: THE SHOOT FROM JESSE'S STUMP

PART 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Come, O Root of Jesse, standing as a sign for the peoples. Where our hopes have been cut down to stumps, bring forth your green shoot. Rest your sevenfold Spirit on us as we open your word. Through Christ our Lord. All: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus, delay no longer.

WIN

W1. Has anything in your life ever grown back after you were sure it was dead: a plant, a friendship, a hope? Tell the short version.

W2. This close to Christmas: what is one thing you are genuinely looking forward to, and one thing that still is not ready?

BUILD

Read Isaiah 11:1-10 aloud: one reader for verses 1-5, then younger readers taking the animals in verses 6-9, one reader for verse 10.

1. Session 1 gave this child a throne. Tonight the throne's family tree is "the stump of Jesse." What happened to the tree, and what is Isaiah claiming will come out of the stump?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The axe happened. In Isaiah's own horizon the Assyrian blow falls on the north and reduces Judah; in the end Babylon fells the monarchy itself, and the Davidic kingship loses its independence and looks like a dead stump (though David's family line continues, which the group will need at Bethlehem). Isaiah says the promise survives the axe: one shoot, green and alive, will rise not from the royal glory but from Jesse, the ordinary Bethlehem father the whole tree grew from. God's promise does not need the tree to be impressive; it needs the root to be his.

2. Verse 2 lists what rests on the shoot. Count what you find there in your own Bible. How many are there? And where has your parish heard a list like this before?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Expect the group to count six: the Spirit of the LORD, unfolding as wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the LORD. That is what the Hebrew gives. The Church's familiar seven adds piety, which comes through the ancient Greek and Latin versions of this verse, and that is worth telling them plainly rather than letting them think they miscounted. These are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (CCC 1831), the list every confirmand learns, and they belong in their fullness to Christ, Son of David. Then the application, which is the Church's teaching rather than Isaiah's sentence: the life of grace given in Baptism carries these gifts (CCC 1266), and Confirmation increases them and strengthens the baptized for witness (CCC 1303). For the baptized in your room, tonight's prophecy is also a description of equipment they carry.

Now read Isaiah 61:1-4 aloud, one reader, slowly.

3. Isaiah 61 reads like a mission statement. Who anoints, who is anointed, and for whom is the mission good news? Keep the word "anointed" in view: what is it in Hebrew?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The LORD anoints; the speaker is the one anointed. Isaiah 61:1 has the verb, "he has anointed me," and from that root comes *mashiach*, anointed one, Messiah, which Greek renders *christos*, Christ. Most of the mission is mercy aimed downward: good tidings to the afflicted, binding for the brokenhearted, liberty to captives, comfort for all who mourn. Do not sand off what sits in the middle of it, because the group will need it later: verse 2 proclaims both the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God. Whoever this anointed one is, his kingship is measured by what happens to the poorest people in the room, and his commission includes judgment.

LIVE DISCOVERY A

Say: "Centuries pass. An angel walks into a village in, of all places, Galilee. Find Luke 1:26-38. As it is read, raise your hand every time you hear the angel say something we have already read in Isaiah or in God's promise to David." Read it with two voices, narrator and Gabriel, and a third for Mary if you like.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Hands should rise all through Gabriel's speech: "the throne of his father David" (2 Samuel 7 and Isaiah 9:7), "he will reign... for ever," and the clincher, "of his kingdom there will be no end," the same claim the group used in Session 1 to show that no ordinary king could fit the oracle. The mechanism is Session 3's sign: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you"; a virgin will conceive. Gabriel is not improvising; he is weaving the accumulated promises of this entire study into one announcement, at one address. And heaven then waits (St. Bernard says all creation waits) for an answer. Mary gives it: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." The fulfillment came through her genuinely free assent (CCC 494).

LIVE DISCOVERY B

Say: "Fast forward thirty years. The child, grown, stands up to read in his hometown synagogue. Find Luke 4:16-21. Read it, then put it side by side with Isaiah 61:1-2 and answer two questions: what does he claim, and, look very carefully, where does he stop reading?"

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The claim is total: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus does not say the passage is about a future figure; he sits down in the seat of the teacher and says it is about him, today. And the stop-point: he reads through "the acceptable year of the Lord" and rolls up the scroll before Isaiah's very next phrase, "and the day of vengeance of our God." He leaves the vengeance unread. Luke does not tell us why, and the text does not call the omission an announcement, so do not put words in his mouth. But read alongside everything else the New Testament says about his return, Christians have long heard a timetable in that silence: his first coming opens the year of favor, and final judgment belongs to his return. Keep this discovery in hand; it is about to meet tonight's hardest objection.

STEELMAN: BUILD, THEN PRESS

BUILD (full strength): "Look out the window. Wolves still eat lambs. Captives still sit in prisons; the brokenhearted are everywhere; the nations are not streaming to any ensign. Isaiah 11 promises a healed creation and Isaiah 61 promises liberty, and two thousand years after Nazareth the world is still bleeding. This is a longstanding and serious Jewish objection to the Christian claim, and it is sharper than it first sounds. It is not merely that the world looks unfinished. It is that the Hebrew Scriptures nowhere plainly teach an incomplete first arrival followed by a later completion, and that a second coming looks like a way of deferring the very criteria by which the Messiah was supposed to be recognized. Read the prophets honestly and admit it." Give this its full weight; it is asked in good faith, and it hurts because it is partly true.

PRESS (from the text): Begin by conceding the true part out loud, because it is true: the wolf does not yet lie down with the lamb, and Christians who pretend otherwise are not reading either the prophets or the newspaper. Then answer in three pieces. First, the scroll. Jesus stopped before the day of vengeance, and the Church reads that stop as a timetable: favor now, judgment at his return. Say honestly that this is a reading drawn from the stop-point rather than a declaration Jesus makes there, and that it does not stand alone. It rests on the wider New Testament, which everywhere expects him to come again to judge the living and the dead, a hope the Creed puts on our lips every Sunday. Second, admit what this concedes: the two-advent shape is a specifically Christian reading of the Scriptures, which Jewish interpreters do not accept, and it must be argued rather than assumed. Third, St. Bernard's three comings (Session 2): between Bethlehem and the end, Christ comes hiddenly now, and wherever he is received, previews of Isaiah 11 break out, enemies reconciled, captives of sin freed, the poor hearing good news. The Church confesses exactly this both/and: the kingdom already present in mystery, not yet complete (CCC 671-672). We do not claim the prophecy is finished. We claim the Shoot has sprouted, and we pray, with the whole Church this week: Come, Lord Jesus, delay no longer.

Dig Deeper

For groups that want more

The ensign for the nations (Isaiah 11:10) begins working immediately in the Gospel: watch for the magi, foreigners rallying to the newborn King, in Matthew 2. And a wordplay long treasured in Christian reading: Matthew 2:23 links Jesus' hometown, Nazareth, to the word of the prophets, and some Christian writers (St. Jerome among them, through the "branch" etymology) and many later scholars have heard in it Isaiah's *netser*, the "branch" that grows from the roots in 11:1, paired there with *choter*, the "shoot" from the stump. Matthew's difficult sentence has several competing explanations and names "prophets" in the plural, so hold the conclusion lightly: on this ancient reading, the man from Nazareth is, in his very address, the Shoot.

SEND

S1. Mary's fiat was not the whole of her vocation but the beginning of it; a lifetime of following followed, all the way to Calvary. Is there a concrete invitation you believe God is putting in front of you? What would a free and faithful answer actually require?

S2. Isaiah 61 measures the Messiah's reign by the afflicted, brokenhearted, captive, and mourning. Which of those four words names someone you will see between now and Christmas?

When your own hopes are stump-shaped, tonight's first verse is addressed to you. Say that as the Send questions close.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray the O Antiphons with the whole Church: one each evening through December 23, at the candles. The Take-Home sheet carries all seven with their dates. On December 21, notice which title the Church sings, and think of this study.
2. Imitate the fiat: give God the yes from the first Send question, out loud, in prayer, before Christmas Eve. Small and real beats grand and imaginary.
3. Do one act of Isaiah 61 for the person you named in the second Send question: good news, binding up, liberty, or comfort, delivered in person if you can.

MEMORY VERSE

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: Father, your promise survived the axe and rose green from the stump. Rest your sevenfold Spirit on us; teach us Mary's answer. All: Behold, we are the servants of the Lord; let it be done to us according to your word. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus, delay no longer.

SESSION 4: THE SHOOT FROM JESSE'S STUMP

PART 3: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE USED, IN ORDER

Isaiah 11:1-10: first session text; animals read by younger readers.

Isaiah 61:1-4: second session text.

Luke 1:26-38: Live Discovery A, the Annunciation; hands raised at Isaiah echoes.

2 Samuel 7:12-16 and Isaiah 9:6-7: echo sources behind Gabriel's speech (callback, not read in full).

Luke 4:16-21: Live Discovery B, the Nazareth synagogue, compared line by line with Isaiah 61:1-2.

Matthew 2 and Matthew 2:23: Dig Deeper, magi and the Nazareth/netser wordplay.

Isaiah 58:6: leader-only note, the clause Luke 4:18 carries alongside Isaiah 61.

Isaiah 11:10: Dig Deeper, the ensign for the nations behind the magi.

Luke 1:38: memory verse.

ANSWERS AT A GLANCE

Q1: monarchy felled, shoot from Jesse's root, hope that survives the axe. Q2: they will count six; the seventh, piety, comes through the Greek and Latin versions (CCC 1831), with CCC 1266 and 1303 for the sacramental application. Q3: the verb "anointed," *mashiach* and *christos*; a mission mostly of mercy that also names the day of vengeance. Discovery A: Gabriel echoes Isa 9:7 and 2 Sam 7; the "no end" claim answers Session 1's press; Mary's free assent (CCC 494). Discovery B: "Today... fulfilled"; he stops before "the day of vengeance." Steelman: the unfulfilled-world objection at full strength, including that the two-advent shape must be argued rather than assumed; answered by the Church's reading of the stop-point, the wider New Testament expectation of his return, Bernard's middle coming, and CCC 671-672, conceding openly that the wolf does not yet lie down.

IF YOU ARE RUNNING LONG

This is the heaviest night in the study. Pre-chosen cut order: (1) the second Win question, (2) Dig Deeper, sent home, (3) Question 3, replaced by the leader reading Isaiah 61:1-4 aloud and naming the anointing in two sentences before Discovery B. Keep both discoveries and the steelman; they are the hinge from promise to person.

LOGISTICS

Bring: a sprouting branch or stump image; the O Antiphon schedule (it is on Take-Home 4). Ask confirmands beforehand to be ready with the seven gifts. Distribute Take-Home 4 at the door and remind everyone: final session meets after Christmas; bring your opened guess from Session 3.