

The Dawn from on High

Messianic Prophecy from Isaiah to Bethlehem

SESSION 5: THE WORD MADE FLESH

Luke 2:1-20, 25-35 and John 1:1-14 | Christmastide Capstone

PART 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

The group harvests every thread of the study at the manger: the names of the child complete in the name Jesus; the dawn breaks in Zechariah's canticle and Simeon's arms; and the glory of the LORD that Isaiah promised all flesh would see (40:5) is discovered shining in John 1:14, "we have beheld his glory." Then each person answers the sealed question one final time.

Catholic Touchstone

In the poverty of the stable, heaven's glory was made manifest (CCC 525). The Word became flesh that we might know God's love (CCC 458) and be made partakers of the divine nature (CCC 460), the exchange the liturgy calls wonderful (CCC 526). At the Presentation, Simeon recognizes the infant as the light of the nations (CCC 529). Christmas is not the end of the waiting but its transformation; the Church keeps the feast until Epiphany and beyond, and so does this session.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Luke sets the birth against the largest stage he can name: Caesar Augustus, master of the world, setting a whole world in motion with a decree of enrollment. And the decree, without Caesar knowing it, moves one family of the house of David from Nazareth to Bethlehem, David's own town, Jesse's town, the town of the stump and the root. The King the study has awaited for four sessions arrives with no room, laid in a feeding trough, and the birth announcement, the greatest in history, is delivered to shepherds on a night shift: "for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Hold Session 2 in your other hand as you read. Isaiah 40:11 promised God would come like a shepherd who gathers lambs in his arms; the first people summoned to the manger are shepherds, and the child is laid where animals feed. Isaiah does not predict shepherd witnesses or a manger, and Luke does not cite Isaiah 40 here, so present this as a resonance the Church has always loved rather than as a fulfillment the texts spell out. It is no less moving for being a resonance. Forty days later, an old man named Simeon, promised he would not die before seeing the Lord's Christ, takes the child in his arms and sings the words the Church still prays each night at Compline: my eyes have seen your salvation, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." The dawn thread of this study lands, literally, in an old man's arms.

John's prologue tells the same event from heaven's side: the Word who was in the beginning with God, and was God, "became flesh and dwelt among us." John's verb for "dwelt" means pitched his tent, tabernacled: the God who filled the wilderness tabernacle with glory has pitched his tent in a human nature. And then John writes the sentence this study has been waiting for since Session 2: "we have beheld his glory."

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Two discoveries close the study. Discovery A: Simeon's canticle is woven from Isaiah. Send the group to Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6, and have them notice that the two verses contribute different things: 42:6 gives the servant as a covenant to the people and a light to the nations, while 49:6 makes him a light to the nations so that God's

salvation reaches the end of the earth. Simeon, holding the baby, gathers both into one sentence. (Your Bible's own cross-reference at Luke 2:32 points to exactly these two verses.) Discovery B: Isaiah 40:5 promised "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." Session 2 showed that the return from exile did not exhaust that promise. Now the group reads John 1:14 and hears where Christians have always found it answered: the glory was revealed in flesh, so that flesh could see it. John does not quote Isaiah 40:5 or call this its fulfillment, and the wordplay on flesh is this study's own synthesis, so offer it as a canonical connection rather than an explicit citation. The highway of Session 2 ended at a manger.

The name thread completes here. Across the study the child has gathered names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Session 1); Immanuel, God with us (Session 3); Son of the Most High, Son of God (Session 4). Tonight he receives the personal name spoken by the angel: Jesus, "the LORD saves." Every title the prophets stacked up is now carried by someone you can name, hold, and follow.

Leader only: if someone raises the census

Luke's enrollment under Quirinius is the most commonly raised historical difficulty in this passage, and someone who has met it online may put it to you at Question 1. You do not need to solve it at the table. Say honestly that the coordination of Luke's census with Roman records is genuinely debated among historians, that Catholics are not required to resolve every chronological question to receive what Luke is telling us, and that the theological point of his staging, Caesar's decree serving the delivery of David's heir to David's town, is untouched by the debate. Offer to point them to a solid Catholic commentary afterward, and move on. Do not spend group time on it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Athanasius

"For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." Athanasius' famous sentence, quoted by the Catechism itself, states the exchange at the heart of Christmas: he took what is ours, our flesh, our weakness, our mortality, to give us a share in what is his, divine life as adopted children. Said carefully, and say it carefully every time the sentence is spoken aloud, this does not mean we become additional gods; it means we are drawn by grace into God's own life. (The image this study uses for it, that the manger begins a ladder, is ours, not his. Athanasius supplies the doctrine; the picture is a teaching aid.)

On the Incarnation 54, as quoted in CCC 460

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Leo the Great

"Christian, recognize your dignity." Preaching on Christmas in Rome in the fifth century, Leo addresses the baptized: you share in the divine nature and belong to the body of Christ, so do not return by sin to the baseness you were rescued from. That is his charge, and it is addressed to a Christian about their own life. Drawing it outward, that no one who bears the human nature the Son assumed may despise it, in themselves or in anyone else, is this study's extension of Leo rather than his next sentence, and it is thoroughly Catholic ground to stand on. It is the perfect word for the week after Christmas, when the feast's glow meets ordinary life again.

Christmas sermon (Sermo 22), as quoted in CCC 1691

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Francis of Assisi

Three years before his death, Francis asked a friend to prepare a place at Greccio with hay, an ox, and a donkey, so that he could see with his own eyes the poverty and smallness in which the newborn King lay. The townspeople came with lights; Mass was celebrated over the manger; Celano describes the night as filled with brilliant torches and glad song. Nativity images in Christian art are far older than 1223, so do not say every creche descends from Greccio; what does trace to that night is the living Nativity and much of the household creche devotion that followed in the West. Francis' gift to the whole Church is the instinct this study has practiced for five weeks: do not just discuss the mystery. Go look at it.

Greccio, 1223, often called the first living Nativity; Thomas of Celano, First Life of St. Francis, ch. 30 (§§84-87)

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 460: the wonderful exchange, with the words of St. Athanasius. CCC 525: Jesus born in the humility of a stable, into a poor family, with shepherds as first witnesses; in this poverty heaven's glory was made manifest. CCC 529: at the Presentation, Simeon and Anna, the expectation of Israel in person, recognize in the infant the long-expected light of the nations. CCC 1691: St. Leo's Christmas charge, Christian, recognize your dignity.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Tonight everything unseals

THE NAMES OF THE CHILD: HARVEST. After Discovery B, run the naming litany (it is scripted in the discussion guide): the group calls out every name the child has gathered across the study, and you write them where all can see, ending with Jesus. Let the visual do the teaching: five weeks of prophecy on one board, one person.

THE DAWN: RESOLUTION. The study's title finally explains itself tonight through Zechariah's Benedictus ("the day shall dawn upon us from on high," Luke 1:78, prayed since Session 1's Live It) and Simeon's light for the nations. When you reveal the title's source, remind them they have been praying it for weeks without knowing.

SEALED GUESS: FINAL ANSWER. Everyone brought their opened guess from Session 3 (have spare paper for those who forgot). In the closing exercise each person writes their answer now to "What was Israel actually waiting for?", compares it with their Advent-week guess, and keeps both. Invite, do not require, sharing. The commissioning prayer sends them out as heralds: people who know what the waiting was for. One precision worth keeping in your own head as they write: Israel's hopes were many and varied, and few if any consciously expected God to be born as a child. The point of the ritual is not that everyone should have guessed the Incarnation. It is that the promises were reaching toward something larger than any guess, and that it arrived with a name.

SESSION GOALS

1. Read the Christmas narrative slowly enough, after four weeks of prophecy, that the fulfillments land one by one.
2. Discover Isaiah 49:6 and 42:6 inside Simeon's canticle, and Isaiah 40:5 answered in John 1:14.
3. Harvest the names litany and resolve the dawn thread, revealing the study title's source.
4. Handle the Christmas-date objection honestly and without anxiety.
5. Close the sealed question with a personal final answer, and commission the group to carry the light outward.

TIMED PLAN (90 MINUTES)

0:00 Opening prayer, Win questions (12 min). 0:12 Luke 2:1-20; Questions 1-2 (20 min). 0:32 Luke 2:25-35 with Discovery A: Isaiah 49:6 and 42:6 (15 min). 0:47 John 1:1-14 with Discovery B: Isaiah 40:5; Question 3 (15 min). 1:02 Names litany and title reveal (8 min). 1:10 Steelman (8 min). 1:18 Final answer exercise, Send, Live It, memory verse, commissioning prayer, Take-Home 5 (12 min).

CUTS FOR 60 MINUTES: one Win question; read Luke 2:1-20 with Question 1 only; compress the steelman to its press paragraph. Never cut the two discoveries, the litany, or the final answer exercise: they are the study's payoff.

MIXED-AGES NOTE: meet at the parish creche if you can, or bring a nativity set and let children arrange it as the session opens. Children read the shepherds' lines; the oldest member present reads Simeon, and let that casting speak for itself. For the litany, children call out the names while an adult writes. If your parish sings, end the commissioning with a verse of "O Come, All Ye Faithful": it is still Christmas, and the room has earned it.

SESSION 5: THE WORD MADE FLESH

PART 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Father, through the tender mercy of our God, the day has dawned upon us from on high. We came to the end of Advent and found it was not an ending: it was a birth. Open the Scriptures one more time, and let us behold his glory. Through Christ our Lord. All: Amen. Glory to God in the highest.

WIN

W1. What was the best moment of your Christmas this year, big or small?

W2. Think back to the first night of this study, when we talked about waiting. Now that Christmas has come, how does the waiting look different from this side of it?

BUILD

Read Luke 2:1-20 aloud: a narrator, children for the angel and the shepherds' response, everyone together for the Gloria of verse 14.

1. Luke opens with Caesar Augustus commanding the whole world, and closes with shepherds at a feeding trough. Trace what the census actually accomplishes, and who is really moving the pieces.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Caesar decrees an enrollment of his world, and the decree's real accomplishment is to move Joseph, "of the house and lineage of David," and Mary to Bethlehem, David's city, Jesse's town, precisely in time for the birth. The master of the world is, without knowing it, a stagehand for the Root of Jesse. The group has watched God work this way all study: through Assyrian invasions, exile, and now an imperial census, the promise keeps its appointments. History's largest forces turn out to be in the service of its smallest child.

2. The birth announcement goes to shepherds on the night shift, and the "sign" they are given is a baby in a manger. What do those two details tell you about this King? And after Session 2, what echo do you hear in them?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Take the textual observations first: the witnesses are night-shift laborers, the sign is a baby in a feeding trough, and the announcement names him Savior, Christ, Lord. Nobody in the scene is important by the world's measure, which by now the group will recognize as the pattern. Then offer the resonance, and name it as a resonance: Isaiah 40:11 promised God would arrive like a shepherd gathering lambs in his arms, and when he arrives, shepherds are the first ones called and he is laid where animals feed. Luke does not make the connection for us; the Church has heard it there for centuries. Glory to God in the highest, sung over a feeding trough: heaven's scale and Bethlehem's smallness in one scene (CCC 525).

LIVE DISCOVERY: THE TOWN HAD A PROPHECY TOO

Three minutes, off a line they have just read. Say: "Luke 2:4 says Joseph went up to Bethlehem, the city of David. That town had a prophecy attached to it centuries before Caesar signed anything. Find Micah 5:2." Let them read it aloud. Micah names Bethlehem Ephrathah, little among the clans of Judah, and says that from it will come forth one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Then, if you like, Matthew 2:5-6, where the chief priests quote that very verse to Herod: the scholars knew the address, and the wise men went there on the strength of it. Our road has been Isaiah, but Isaiah was not the only one holding a map.

Now read Luke 2:25-35: narrator, and the oldest member of the group reading Simeon's words.

LIVE DISCOVERY A

Say: "Simeon's little song is stitched together from Isaiah. Find Isaiah 49:6, and then Isaiah 42:6, and tell us what Simeon is doing as he holds this baby." Give time; let the group read both verses aloud and make the match themselves.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The two verses do not say the same thing, and noticing the difference is the discovery. Isaiah 42:6 gives the servant as a covenant to the people and a light to the nations. Isaiah 49:6 says it is too small a thing for him to restore Israel only: he is made a light to the nations so that God's salvation may reach the end of the earth. Simeon, holding a forty-day-old child in the temple, gathers both into one line: "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." He is declaring, from Scripture, who this baby is: the Servant Isaiah promised, salvation made visible ("my eyes have seen your salvation"). The Church has prayed Simeon's canticle nightly at Compline for many centuries; it is among the last Scripture countless Christians pray before sleep, this old man's Isaiah-soaked verdict on the child.

Finally, read John 1:1-14 aloud, slowly, one strong reader; ask the room to sit with it in a moment of silence when it ends.

LIVE DISCOVERY B

Say: "One promise from this study has been standing open since Session 2. Find Isaiah 40:5, read it aloud, and then look through John 1 for the verse where Christians have always heard that promise answered."

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Isaiah 40:5: "And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." In Session 2 the group found that the return from exile did not exhaust that promise. John 1:14 is where Christians have heard it answered: "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... we have beheld his glory." John's verb for "dwelt" means pitched his tent, tabernacled: the glory that once filled the tabernacle has taken flesh, so that flesh can see it. (John does not quote Isaiah 40:5, and the play on the word flesh is ours rather than his; offer it as the connection the Church has long made, not as a citation John supplies. The full sight promised to all flesh together is still ahead of us.) The highway of Session 2 was real, and it ended at a manger. And listen to what stands four verses earlier, which answers the darkness Session 1 opened with in Isaiah 9:2: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

THE NAMES OF THE CHILD: LITANY

Stand at a board or large sheet. Say: "For five weeks, one child has been collecting names. Call them out as you remember them, and I will write." Children lead. The list the group should assemble: Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace. Immanuel, God with us (which Matthew, writing in Greek, spells Emmanuel; one name, two roads into English, as Session 3 explained). Son of the Most High. Son of God. When the board is full, add the last one yourself: the angel told Mary, "you shall call his name Jesus" (Luke 1:31), and the name itself means "the LORD saves." Then the title. Have someone read Luke 1:76-79 aloud, slowly, and ask the group to listen for two words. When they hear "through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness," tell them where the study's name came from, and that many of them have been praying it since week one without knowing. Every name on the board is now the name of someone who has come.

STEELMAN: BUILD, THEN PRESS

BUILD (full strength): "Christmas on December 25 is just a baptized pagan festival. The Romans kept the birthday of the Unconquered Sun near the winter solstice, and the church, centuries later, simply took over the party and renamed it. Even your own dawn-and-light language tonight is solar religion with a halo." Said every December, and worth taking seriously: the solstice timing is real, and the ancient world did keep solar feasts.

PRESS (honestly): First, the history is genuinely debated: scholars are divided over whether the Christian date borrowed from the Roman feast, or arose separately from an early Christian calculation linking Jesus' conception to March 25, with argument on both sides; honest people should not claim certainty here in either direction. Second, and more important: nothing tonight rests on the calendar. The Church proclaims the Nativity on December 25 as her festal day and has kept it so for centuries, but she has never defined it as the precise historical anniversary that Catholics must hold; she assigned a day on which to keep the feast. Third, the dawn imagery is not borrowed sunlight: the group has traced it from Isaiah 9:2 through Isaiah 40:5 to Zechariah and Simeon, texts centuries older than the Roman feast. If the Church did plant her feast at the darkest turn of the year, it was not theft but translation: proclaiming, where the world already ached for returning light, whose light it actually is.

3. St. Athanasius says the Son of God became man so that we might become God: not that we turn into additional gods, but that by grace we are made sharers in God's own life (CCC 460). St. Leo adds: Christian, recognize your dignity. This one is application rather than discovery, so answer it from your life: what changes, practically, when you believe the Incarnation includes you?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Open sharing, with an anchor: if the Son assumed the human nature we all share, then human nature, yours, your neighbor's, the difficult relative's, the stranger's at the parish door, has been visited and claimed. Keep the precision beside the wonder: sharing in the divine life is a gift of grace, not a merging of our person into God's. Leo's charge is addressed to the baptized about their own dignity, and the Church has always drawn it outward too: do not despise that nature in yourself (self-contempt is now out of date) and do not despise it in anyone else. The practical shape of Christmas faith is how we treat flesh, ours and others', in ordinary life.

FINAL ANSWER: THE QUESTION, ONE LAST TIME

Hand out paper (and ask everyone to take out their opened guess from Session 3). Say: "First night, you sealed a guess: What was Israel actually waiting for? You have now walked from a darkened Galilee to a manger. Write your answer as you would give it tonight." Give real silence. Invite, never require, a few to read both versions aloud; the distance between them is the study's fruit. Close by letting the room say together what the texts have taught: Israel's hopes for rescue, for a king, for the kingdom, for God's own coming were fulfilled beyond anything anyone had guessed, in God the Son come among us as one of us, and his name is Jesus.

SEND

S1. Simeon could depart in peace because his eyes had seen. What have your eyes seen in these five weeks that you did not see before?

S2. The shepherds "made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child." Who will you make it known to, now that Advent is behind us and the harder work of ordinary life resumes?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Keep the Christmas season like a Catholic: it continues through Epiphany to the Baptism of the Lord. Leave the creche up, and in the spirit of St. Francis at Greccio, visit it once with intention, telling the Lord your final answer in person.
2. Adopt Simeon's prayer: pray the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32) at bedtime this week, as the Church does every night at Compline. Let it become a habit that outlives the study.
3. Be a shepherd: do the one act of making-it-known from the second Send question before Epiphany.
4. February 2, Candlemas, forty days after Christmas, the Church reads Simeon's scene and blesses candles. Put it on your calendar as this study's unofficial reunion feast.

MEMORY VERSE

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father." (John 1:14)

COMMISSIONING PRAYER

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Immanuel and Emmanuel, God with us: the people who walked in darkness have seen your great light. Send us now as heralds of the dawn, tender-voiced, shepherd-handed, unashamed of the manger. All: Through the tender mercy of our God, the day has dawned upon us from on high. Glory to God in the highest! Amen.

SESSION 5: THE WORD MADE FLESH

PART 3: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE USED, IN ORDER

Luke 2:1-20: first session text, multi-voice reading with children.

Luke 2:25-35: Simeon, read by the oldest member present.

Isaiah 49:6 and 42:6: Live Discovery A, the servant as light to the nations, behind the Nunc Dimittis.

John 1:1-14: third session text, one reader, followed by silence.

Isaiah 40:5: Live Discovery B, the open promise answered by John 1:14.

Luke 1:78-79: the title reveal, Zechariah's Benedictus.

Luke 2:29-32: Live It, the Nunc Dimittis for bedtime.

Micah 5:2 (with Matthew 2:5-6): Live Discovery, the prophecy attached to Bethlehem.

Isaiah 40:11: Question 2, the shepherd resonance.

Isaiah 9:2 and 9:6: the commissioning prayer and the names litany, gathered from Session 1.

Luke 1:31: the naming of Jesus in the litany.

Luke 1:76-79: read aloud at the title reveal.

John 1:14: memory verse.

ANSWERS AT A GLANCE

Q1: Caesar's enrollment as God's stagecraft, delivering David's heir to David's town. Q2: lowly witnesses and the manger sign, with the Isaiah 40:11 shepherd link offered as resonance; heaven's glory in poverty (CCC 525). Micah discovery: the town had its own prophecy (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:5-6). Discovery A: 42:6 (covenant, light to the nations) and 49:6 (light, salvation to the end of the earth) gathered into Luke 2:32. Discovery B: Isaiah 40:5 answered where Christians have always heard it, at John 1:14; "dwelt" as tabernacled; the all-flesh sight still ahead. Litany: the gathered titles crowned by the name Jesus (Luke 1:31); title reveal from Luke 1:76-79. Steelman: the Sol Invictus objection, pressed with honest scholarly uncertainty, the Church's never having defined the date, and the pre-Roman pedigree of the dawn texts. Q3: partaking of the divine nature by grace (CCC 458-460, named at 526) and Leo's dignity charge (CCC 1691), made practical.

IF YOU ARE RUNNING LONG

Pre-chosen cut order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Micah discovery, which can be named in one sentence instead, (3) the Simeon block reduced to a read-aloud without Discovery A. Never cut Discovery B, the names litany, or the final answer exercise: they are the payoff of five weeks, and the title thread lands in them.

LOGISTICS

Bring: board or large sheet and marker for the litany; spare paper and pens for the final answer; a nativity set if not meeting at the parish creche. Collect nothing; everyone keeps both their guess and their final answer. Distribute Take-Home 5, the last, at the door, and announce Candlemas (February 2) as the reunion feast.