

Session 3: The Ark of the New Covenant

The glory returns to the hill country

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. Through a side-by-side live discovery of Luke 1 and 2 Samuel 6, the group uncovers Luke's deliberate portrait of Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant, and plants the question of the lost Ark that the study will resolve near its end.

Catholic Touchstone. Mary as Daughter of Zion and Ark of the Covenant, the dwelling place of the Lord's glory (CCC 2676); the overshadowing Spirit (CCC 697).

What You Need to Know

The Ark of the Covenant was the holiest object in Israel: a gold-covered chest built to God's own specifications, housing the tablets of the covenant, and serving as the footstool of God's invisible throne. When it was completed, 'the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle' (Exodus 40:34); the verb for that covering in the Greek Old Testament is *episkiazo*, to overshadow. Whoever knows that word will feel the floor move at Luke 1:35: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow (*episkiasei*) you.' Luke reaches for the tabernacle's own vocabulary to describe what happens to Mary.

The centerpiece of tonight is a discovery the group makes with two columns of text: Luke 1:39–56 against 2 Samuel 6:2–16, David bringing the Ark up to Jerusalem. Brant Pitre lays these parallels out at length, and they are the study's best specimen of a verifiable textual echo: both narratives open with someone who arose and went toward Judah, David to Baale-judah in the Judean hills and Mary 'into the hill country, to a city of Judah' (the phrase 'hill country' is Luke's; the geography is shared); David asks 'How can the ark of the LORD come to me?' while Elizabeth asks 'why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'; David leaps and dances before the Ark while the infant John leaps in Elizabeth's womb; the Ark remains in the house of Obed-edom three months, and Mary remains with Elizabeth 'about three months.' Four distinct parallels compressed into one short narrative is design, not coincidence.

Scholars add a fifth, finer brushstroke, which you may hold in reserve: Luke says Elizabeth 'exclaimed with a loud cry' (Luke 1:42) using the Greek verb *anaphoneo*, a rare word that in the Greek Old Testament appears in connection with the liturgical acclamation of singers before the Ark (for example 1 Chronicles 15:28; 16:4–5). Present this as a point many scholars observe, at the strength the evidence has, no more.

Tonight also plants Thread B. Jeremiah 3:16 foretells days when the Ark 'shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed,' and 2 Maccabees 2:4–8 records the tradition that Jeremiah hid the Ark on the mountain, 'and the place shall be unknown until God gathers his people together again.' The Ark vanishes from history; no one in Israel ever claims to see it again. Leave the group with exactly that ache: the holiest object in the world, lost, with a promise attached. Do not so much as whisper where Scripture next shows it. That door opens in Session 11.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 25:10–22 and 40:34–38: the Ark's construction and the descent of the glory cloud. What made the Ark holy was never the box; it was the Presence enthroned upon it and the covenant it carried. That

principle governs everything the Church says of Mary: all her holiness, from her Immaculate Conception onward, is God's pure gift, flowing from the merits of the One she would carry and ordered entirely to him. Her glory is wholly derivative; it points beyond her to Christ.

Hebrews 9:4 inventories the Ark's contents as the tradition received them: the golden urn of manna, Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. The Fathers and the liturgy delighted in the correspondence: Mary carried the true Bread from heaven (John 6), the true High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), and the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). Offer this as the tradition's meditation, and note honestly that it is meditation built on real texts, not itself an argument.

2 Samuel 6 is the discovery text; let it stay fresh for the session. The one background note a leader needs: verse 9, David's awestruck question, is the emotional center. The Ark is wonderful and dangerous; Uzzah has just died for touching it. Elizabeth's question in Luke 1:43 carries that same awe, transposed into joy.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE LITANY OF LORETO

Among the titles the Church has prayed in this approved litany for centuries stands *Foederis Arca*: Ark of the Covenant. Before it was an argument, it was a prayer; the Church's *lex orandi* carried this typology long before most Catholics could footnote it.

Litany of Loreto, invocation 'Ark of the Covenant'

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN DAMASCENE

Preaching on the end of Mary's earthly life, St. John Damascene teaches, in substance, that Mary is the living Ark: the vessel that carried not tablets of stone but the Lawgiver himself, not manna but the Bread of Life, and that as the first Ark was carried to its place of rest amid singing, so the true Ark was brought to hers.

Homilies on the Dormition (summary)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: THE SYRIAC TRADITION, ASSOCIATED WITH ST. EPHREM

The Syriac hymns associated with St. Ephrem sing of Mary as the dwelling and tabernacle of God: the small space that contained the One whom the heavens cannot contain. The image is the East's way of saying what Luke's overshadowing cloud says: in her, the glory took up residence.

Hymns of the Syriac tradition (summary)

Catechism Connection

CCC 2676, unpacking the Hail Mary, teaches that Mary is the Daughter of Zion in person in whom the Lord makes his dwelling, and calls her the Ark of the Covenant, the place where the glory of the Lord dwells. This is the Catechism's own voice adopting tonight's typology.

CCC 697 gathers the cloud texts: the cloud of the Theophanies, the tent of meeting, and the Temple dedication, and teaches that in the Holy Spirit's overshadowing of Mary the same glory-cloud imagery is fulfilled. Cite both paragraphs as they stand; the Hebrews 9:4 contents-correspondence is the tradition's extension, and should be labeled so in the room.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Thread B ('where is the Ark?') plants tonight and it is the session's most important leader discipline. After Jeremiah 3:16 and 2 Maccabees 2:4–8, say only: 'So the Ark is hidden, with a promise, and the Old Testament closes without it ever being found. File that.' If anyone in the room knows Revelation 11:19, and someone might, receive it warmly and firmly: 'You are ahead of us, and I need you to sit on that for a few weeks. It will be worth it.' Resolves in Session 11.

Thread A ('the Woman'): dormant tonight; no mention. Sealed guesses stay sealed.

Continuity check: tonight's Zephaniah/Daughter Zion callback (CCC 2676) links Session 1 forward; name it in one sentence so the group feels the study accumulating.

Session Goals

1. Group has personally discovered at least three of the four Luke 1 / 2 Samuel 6 parallels from the two columns, unprompted.
2. Group can explain why the overshadowing (*episkiazo*) of Luke 1:35 evokes Exodus 40:34–35.
3. Group understands that Mary's holiness, like the Ark's, is entirely derivative of the Presence she carried.
4. Thread B planted cleanly: the Ark is lost, a promise is pending, and no one has peeked ahead.

Timed Plan (75–90 minutes)

Segment	Minutes
Welcome and opening prayer	5
Win questions	10
Build: what the Ark was (Exodus 25 and 40; Hebrews 9:4)	15
Build: live discovery, Luke 1 beside 2 Samuel 6	25
Build: overshadowed (Luke 1:35 and Exodus 40); Voices	10
Build: steelman and answer	10
Build: the lost Ark (Jeremiah 3:16; 2 Maccabees 2)	5
Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer	10

If short on time: Cut the Hebrews 9:4 contents-correspondence discussion question (keep it as a leader aside) and trim the Exodus background to Exodus 40:34–35 alone. Never cut the lost-Ark segment; Thread B depends on it.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

Leader prays: Lord God of Israel, your glory once filled a tent in the wilderness, and your people knew you were near. In the fullness of time your glory filled a daughter of Israel, and your people learned your name is Emmanuel. Fill this room tonight as we open your word, and make each of us, by grace, a place where you are pleased to dwell. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win: Opening Questions

1. Is there an object in your family, a ring, a Bible, a photograph, that gets treated as almost sacred? What makes people guard a thing like that?
2. Describe a time you were in a place that made you lower your voice without anyone telling you to. What creates that kind of awe?

Build: Into the Text

1. Read Exodus 25:10–22 and 40:34–38. What was the Ark, what did it hold, and what happened when the tabernacle housing it was completed?

Read aloud: Exodus 25:10–22; 40:34–38

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A chest of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold inside and out, crowned by the mercy seat and the cherubim, holding the covenant. It was the one object built so that God could say, 'There I will meet with you' (Exodus 25:22).

At its completion, the cloud covered the tent and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle so thickly that even Moses could not enter. Israel's God does not merely visit his people; he takes up residence among them.

Add Hebrews 9:4 as inventory: the golden urn of manna, Aaron's rod that budded, the tablets of the covenant. Ask the group to hold that list in memory for later in the session.

LIVE DISCOVERY: TWO JOURNEYS TO THE HILL COUNTRY

Split the group in two. Column A reads Luke 1:39–45 and 56 aloud; Column B reads 2 Samuel 6:2–11 and 14–16 aloud. Then say: 'One of these stories is written to remind you of the other. Find every parallel you can. There are at least four.'

Give them real time; do not rescue them early. The parallels to surface: (1) both arise and journey into Judah, David to Baale-judah in the Judean hills and Mary to a city in the hill country of Judah; (2) 'How can the ark of the LORD come to me?' against 'why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'; (3) David leaping and dancing before the Ark against the babe leaping in Elizabeth's womb; (4) the Ark three months in the house of Obed-edom against Mary remaining 'about three months.'

When they have them, ask the room to say aloud what Luke is claiming about Mary without saying it: she is what the Ark was.

2. Elizabeth's question echoes David's almost word for word, but David's awe was edged with fear and Elizabeth's overflows with joy. What changed between the two arks?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The first Ark carried the covenant written on stone, and the Presence upon it was holy in a way that could break in on the unprepared, as Uzzah found (2 Samuel 6:6–9). The new Ark carries the covenant Mediator himself, come not to be guarded from us but to be given to us.

The holiness has not decreased; it has drawn nearer. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, gets to voice what David could not: the Lord she dared not approach has come to her doorstep, in a girl's greeting.

3. Read Luke 1:35 next to Exodus 40:34–35. What single image does Luke borrow, and what is he claiming with it?

Read aloud: Luke 1:35; Exodus 40:34–35

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The overshadowing. The power of the Most High will 'overshadow' Mary exactly as the glory cloud overshadowed and filled the tabernacle; the Greek Old Testament uses the same verb (*episkiazo*) that Luke chooses.

The claim: what the tabernacle was, this woman now is. The locus of God's dwelling on earth is moving from a tent of goat's hair to a temple of flesh; compare John 1:14, where the Word literally 'tabernacled' (*eskenosen*) among us.

In reserve if the group wants more: Elizabeth 'exclaimed' (Luke 1:42) with a rare verb (*anaphoneo*) that the Greek Old Testament associates with the liturgical acclamation before the Ark (1 Chronicles 15:28; 16:4–5). Many scholars hear one more thread in the tapestry; weigh it at the strength it has.

DIG DEEPER: WHAT THE ARK CARRIED, WHAT MARY CARRIED

The tradition's meditation, built on Hebrews 9:4: the Ark held the manna, and Mary carried the true Bread from heaven (John 6:32–35); the Ark held Aaron's priestly staff, and Mary carried the great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14); the Ark held the tablets of the word, and Mary carried the Word made flesh (John 1:14).

Label it honestly for the group: this correspondence is the Church's meditation on real texts rather than a claim Luke makes, and it has fed the Church's prayer for many centuries. Meditation is allowed to be beautiful.

STEELMAN: PRESENT AT FULL STRENGTH

Present with full force: 'Parallels are cheap. Any two journey stories will share features: people arise, people travel, people rejoice, someone stays three months somewhere. Luke never writes the sentence *Mary is the Ark*; if that were his teaching, he had every opportunity to say it. And notice what this typology is really for: Catholics need Mary to be a sacred vessel so they can justify venerating her. You have found in the text exactly what your devotion required you to find. A neutral reader sees a sweet visitation story, nothing more.'

Before answering, ask the group: which of those sentences is hardest to answer?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Take the fair point first: parallel-hunting can be undisciplined, and a single shared feature proves

nothing. The question is always density and specificity, the controls we set in Session 1.

Then weigh what was actually found: four distinct, specific correspondences (destination, near-verbatim question, leaping before the presence, a matching stay of three months (three months in 2 Samuel 6:11; 'about three months' in Luke 1:56)) packed into seventeen verses, plus a fifth in Luke's tabernacle verb at 1:35. Coincidence explains any one of them; it strains to explain the cluster, in a writer who tells us he works from careful research (Luke 1:1–4) and whose Greek is soaked in the Septuagint.

On 'Luke never says it': Luke's method throughout is to show rather than announce; he also never writes 'Jesus is the new Temple' or 'John is the new Elijah,' yet he paints both. Biblical narrative teaches by pattern; demanding a proposition before admitting a pattern is a rule no one applies to the rest of Scripture.

On the motive charge, reverse it gently: the direction of travel runs the other way. The Church did not invent the Ark typology to license devotion; she found the typology in Luke and the devotion followed, early enough that ancient liturgical prayer already sings it: the Akathist hymn, in use by the sixth or seventh century, hails Mary as 'ark gilded by the Spirit' and 'tabernacle of God the Word.' And note what the typology actually asserts: the Ark was never worshiped, and its entire dignity came from the Presence within it. If Mary is the Ark, then everything said of her honor points beyond her to her Cargo. That is not Mary inflated; that is Mary explained.

4. Last texts of the night. Read Jeremiah 3:16, then 2 Maccabees 2:4–8. What happens to the Ark of the Covenant, and what promise is attached?

Read aloud: Jeremiah 3:16; 2 Maccabees 2:4–8

Leader note: Land the plane here and stop. The Ark is hidden by Jeremiah on the mountain; the place will remain unknown 'until God gathers his people together again.' The Old Testament ends and the Ark is never seen again. Say: 'The holiest object in the world is missing, and Scripture attaches a promise to its reappearance. File that away. This study will come back for it.' Then move to Send. Do not open Revelation.

Send: Taking It Out

1. The Ark's entire holiness came from the Presence that dwelt upon it and the covenant it bore, and in baptism you became a temple of the same Presence (1 Corinthians 6:19). What would change this week if you treated yourself, and the people beside you, as God-bearers?

2. Elizabeth blessed Mary out loud the moment she recognized what God was doing in her. Who in your life is carrying something God has begun, and how could you be their Elizabeth this week?

Live It This Week

- Once this week, arrive at Mass or an adoration chapel ten minutes early, and spend them in David's question: 'How can the Lord come to me?' Let the awe be real before the familiarity returns.
- Reread Luke 1:39–56 once on your own and mark every word of joy you find; count them.
- Each evening, name one way the Lord 'took up residence' in your day that you nearly missed.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

Luke 1:35 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Leader prays: Father, your glory once filled the tabernacle so completely that no one could enter, and then, in your mercy, you made your dwelling where anyone could come: in the child of Mary's womb, in the Word we have opened tonight, in the Bread on your altar. Make us reverent where we have grown casual, and joyful where we have grown afraid. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Close by praying together the invocation from the Litany of Loreto: Ark of the Covenant, pray for us. Gate of Heaven, pray for us. Morning Star, pray for us.

LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order:

- Exodus 25:10–22 (construction of the Ark)
- Exodus 40:34–38 (the glory fills the tabernacle)
- Hebrews 9:4 (contents of the Ark)
- Luke 1:39–45, 56 (the Visitation; live discovery, Column A)
- 2 Samuel 6:2–11, 14–16 (the Ark comes to Jerusalem; live discovery, Column B)
- Luke 1:35 (the overshadowing)
- John 1:14 (the Word tabernacled among us)
- 1 Chronicles 15:28; 16:4–5 (leader reserve: acclamation before the Ark)
- John 6:32–35; Hebrews 4:14 (Dig Deeper correspondences)
- 1 Corinthians 6:19 (Send: temples of the Spirit)
- Jeremiah 3:16 (the Ark forgotten; Thread B plant)
- 2 Maccabees 2:4–8 (the Ark hidden until God gathers his people; Thread B plant)
- Luke 1:35 (memory verse)