

The Dawn from on High

Messianic Prophecy from Isaiah to Bethlehem

A Five-Session Parish Study for Advent and Christmastide

For All Ages, Around One Table

"Through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high." (Luke 1:78)

CATHOLIC ARMORY

Scripture quotations follow the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition.

CONTENTS

Using This Guide.....3

Session 1: A Light in the Darkness (Isaiah 9:1-7).....5

Session 2: A Voice Cries: Prepare (Isaiah 40:1-11).....13

Session 3: The Sign of the Virgin (Isaiah 7:10-17).....21

Session 4: The Shoot from Jesse’s Stump (Isaiah 11:1-10; 61:1-4).....29

Session 5: The Word Made Flesh (Luke 2; John 1:1-14).....38

Each session contains three parts: the Leader Preparation Guide, the Discussion Guide, and the Leader Reference Card. The five participant Take-Home sheets are provided separately for duplex printing.

USING THIS GUIDE

What This Study Is

The Dawn from on High walks one road for five weeks: from Isaiah's promises, spoken into real darkness in the eighth century before Christ, to their fulfillment at Bethlehem. Four sessions match the four weeks of Advent; the fifth is a Christmastide capstone, kept deliberately after Christmas Day, because Catholics do not stop the feast on December 26. The study pairs naturally with its companions in the Catholic Armory catalog on Isaiah and on Matthew, but stands fully on its own.

How a Session Works

Every session is built for discovery rather than lecture. The group reads the Isaiah text first and works it hard on its own terms, history included; only then does a Live Discovery send everyone hunting for the New Testament fulfillment, so that the connections are found, out loud, by the people at the table, never announced from the front. Each numbered question is followed by an ANSWER box on parchment: leaders, let the discussion run before sharing it. Each session also carries a steelman, the strongest honest objection to the Christian reading, built at full strength and then pressed from the text itself. Do not skip the steelmans or soften the build; a guest, a skeptic, or a sharp teenager at your table has heard these objections, and deserves to watch the Church answer them fairly.

All Ages, One Table

This study assumes a parish room: grandparents, parents, teens, and children old enough to sit with a Bible, together. The questions are written to work for a nine-year-old and a ninety-year-old at the same time, and each session's timed plan includes mixed-ages notes: readings assigned to younger readers, roles for confirmands, and moments (an unsealing, a litany, a creche) where the children lead. Do not split the room by age unless you must; the study works best when the generations hear each other.

What This Study Leaves Out

Five weeks is a road, not a survey, and this one ends at the manger. That means real material is deliberately outside it. The servant songs of Isaiah 42 and 49 are met only in passing, through Simeon's canticle in the final session, rather than studied. The suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the most famous contested messianic chapter in the book, is not here at all: its subject is the atoning death and vindication of the servant, which belongs to Lent or to the companion Isaiah study, and it should not be squeezed into an Advent evening. Micah 5:2 appears only as a short discovery in the last session. If your group wants those texts, they deserve their own nights; a later post-Epiphany session could carry Isaiah 53 well. What this study does instead is follow one thread, Isaiah's promises of the coming child, all the way to the crib, and face the hard questions honestly along the way.

The Sealed Guess

At the first session, every participant writes and seals an answer to one question: What was Israel actually waiting for? The guesses are collected at Session 2, opened together with some ceremony at Session 3, and answered one final time, in writing, at Session 5. Protect this mechanic: collect what should be collected, reveal nothing early, and honor every guess when they open. It is the study's heartbeat.

Practical Notes

Timing: each session is planned for 90 minutes, with marked cuts for a 60-minute evening. Materials: Bibles for all (quotations follow the RSV, Second Catholic Edition; any solid Catholic translation works at the table), the Take-Home sheet for each participant weekly, an Advent wreath or candles if you can manage them, and the few session-specific items listed on each Leader Reference Card. Schedule: Sessions 1 through 4 fall in the four Advent weeks (Session 2 lands the week the parish hears Mark 1:1-8 at Sunday Mass in Year B; Session 4 belongs to the O Antiphon days, December 17 to 23); Session 5 meets between Christmas and Epiphany. Take-Homes: two pages each, made for duplex printing, spoiler-free by design.

A last word to leaders: this study asks you to prepare, not to perform. Read Part 1 during the week, trust the questions, love the people, and let the texts do what they have done for twenty-seven centuries. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

The Dawn from on High

Messianic Prophecy from Isaiah to Bethlehem

SESSION 1: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Isaiah 9:1-7 | Week of the First Sunday of Advent

PART 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that Isaiah's oracle of the great light names the territory that fell first to Assyria, Zebulun and Naphtali, and that Matthew shows Jesus beginning his Galilean ministry in that same territory. The promise is not vague optimism. It has an address, and God kept it.

Catholic Touchstone

The coming of God's Son was prepared over centuries (CCC 522), and the Church relives that long expectancy every Advent (CCC 524). This study reads the Old Testament the way the Church does: the New lies hidden in the Old, and the Old is unveiled in the New (CCC 129).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The setting is roughly 735 to 732 BC, during the crisis scholars call the Syro-Ephraimite war. The northern kingdom of Israel and its ally Syria tried to strong-arm Judah into an anti-Assyrian coalition. King Ahaz of Judah panicked and called on Assyria itself for help (2 Kings 16:7-9). Assyria came, and it did break the immediate coalition: Damascus fell and Rezin was killed. But the rescuer became the overlord. Tiglath-pileser annexed great stretches of the north in 733 to 732 BC, and about a decade later, under his successors, Samaria fell and the northern kingdom ended (722/721 BC). Among the first territories devastated and annexed were the Galilean lands: the group will find this for themselves in 2 Kings 15:29, which names Galilee and all the land of Naphtali (with Gilead and a list of towns) among the territories Tiglath-pileser captured, carrying the people into exile. Isaiah 9:1 is what adds Zebulun alongside Naphtali; the historical reconstruction that both tribal lands fell in the same Assyrian annexation is well grounded but is a reconstruction, so say so if asked.

That is the darkness of Isaiah 9:1-2. It is not a mood. It is a map: real villages under occupation, families deported, lamps out. Into precisely that geography Isaiah speaks a promise: the land brought into contempt will be made glorious, and the people walking in that darkness will see a great light. (Isaiah 9:1 contrasts former contempt with latter glory for that region; the pairing of "first to fall, first to see the light" is the canonical shape the group will find when Matthew begins there, not a clause Isaiah himself writes.)

The oracle then explains the light, and here is the shock of the passage. The answer to Assyria is not a bigger army. It is a birth: "to us a child is born." The child carries four titles, read by Christians as names of the child, each one a sentence of theology: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Scholars differ over whether these function as throne names in the ancient royal style, as a single sentence-name, or as titles describing God's action; the Church reads them in their fuller messianic sense. You need not raise this unless someone does.) And his reign rests "upon the throne of David," which sends us back to God's covenant oath to David in 2 Samuel 7 that his house and kingdom would be made sure for ever.

Hold the two halves of the session together for the group: the darkness is specific, and so is the dawn. When Matthew reaches for this oracle in Matthew 4:12-16, he is not decorating. He is testifying that when Jesus made Capernaum his base, the light stood up in the same territory where the dark had fallen first.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Isaiah 9 does not float free. Its taproot is the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7:12-16, where God promises David a son, a house, and a throne established for ever. Every messianic hope in this study grows from that oath. Isaiah 9:7 takes up its covenant vocabulary: throne of David, his kingdom, for evermore, and then adds the guarantee that carries the whole season: "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." Not Israel's effort. God's own jealous love.

The fulfillment text is Matthew 4:12-16. Notice what Matthew does: he keeps the tribal geography of Isaiah 9:1 and the darkness-and-light saying of 9:2, wraps them in a fulfillment formula, and adapts the wording as he goes (Isaiah's people "walked" in darkness; Matthew's "sat" in the region and shadow of death; Isaiah's "has light shined" becomes "has dawned"). Do not tell the group that Matthew changes a future promise into a past fact: both verses are already in completed-action form in your Bibles, and a leader who says otherwise will be corrected by anyone with the page open. (For your own interest: Hebrew prophecy often speaks of the certain future in a completed form, the so-called prophetic perfect. That belongs in your head, not in the session.) Keep the word dawned in your pocket. The study's title comes from Zechariah's canticle, which blesses God for the day that "shall dawn upon us from on high" (Luke 1:78). The group will meet that canticle again in the weeks ahead.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine

"The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New." This one sentence is the method of our whole study. Augustine is not saying the Old Testament is a code to be cracked and discarded; he is saying the two Testaments are one plan of God, and each lights up the other. This session is Augustine's sentence in action: Isaiah hides Christmas, and Matthew unveils Isaiah.

Quaestiones in Heptateuchum 2.73, as quoted in CCC 129

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Jerome

Jerome, who spent decades in Bethlehem translating the Scriptures, says in substance in the prologue to his Isaiah commentary that Isaiah deserves to be called an evangelist rather than merely a prophet, because he sets out the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that he seems to be narrating what has already happened rather than foretelling what is to come. (The familiar English phrasing varies between translations, so this is given as summary rather than quotation.) When your group opens Matthew and hears Isaiah's own words, they will feel exactly what Jerome meant.

Prologue to his Commentary on Isaiah

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Henry Newman

"Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on!" Newman wrote these lines in 1833 after a nearly fatal fever in Sicily, on the ship home, becalmed in the Mediterranean, unsure of his future. They belong in this session because they pray Isaiah 9:2 from the inside: the honest voice of a person still in the dark, asking for one step of light. Advent gives everyone in your group permission to pray from that place.

The Pillar of the Cloud (the hymn Lead, Kindly Light), 1833

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 129: the unity of the two Testaments, with Augustine's dictum. CCC 522: the coming of God's Son is an event so immense that God willed to prepare for it over centuries, making the promise heard and the expectation grow. CCC 524: in celebrating Advent each year, the Church makes that ancient expectancy of the Messiah present, and shares in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming. CCC 712: the Catechism itself points to Isaiah 6-12, the "Book of Emmanuel," as the place where the features of the awaited Messiah begin to come into view. Our first four sessions live inside or alongside that very section of Isaiah.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Do not reveal these to the group

THE NAMES OF THE CHILD. Tonight plants four names (Isaiah 9:6). Session 3 adds a fifth, Emmanuel. Session 5 harvests them all at the manger, where the child finally receives the name Jesus. When the four names come up tonight, let the group marvel; do not connect the dots forward.

THE DAWN. Tonight: light promised (Isaiah 9:2) and light dawned (Matthew 4:16). This thread resolves in Session 5 with Zechariah's "dawn from on high" and Simeon's "light for revelation to the Gentiles." If someone asks why the study is called The Dawn from on High, smile and say the study will answer that by Christmas.

SEALED GUESS. Take-Home 1 carries the write-in box: "What was Israel actually waiting for?" Participants write an answer this week, seal it, and bring it back. Collect the sealed guesses at Session 2 and keep them; they open at Session 3, where Isaiah 7 will make the question harder and stranger than it sounds tonight. Do not discuss answers before then.

SESSION GOALS

1. Ground Isaiah 9:1-7 in its real history: Assyria, Ahaz, and the fall of the Galilean territories (2 Kings 15:29).
2. Let the group discover, on their own, that Matthew 4:12-16 places the start of Jesus' Galilean ministry in that same geography.
3. Sit with the strangeness of the four titles, especially "Mighty God" spoken of a human child.
4. Present the Hezekiah reading of the oracle at full strength, then press it against the text's own scope.
5. Send everyone home with the memory verse, the first Live It practice, and the sealed guess to write.

TIMED PLAN (90 MINUTES)

0:00 Opening prayer and Win questions (15 min). 0:15 Read Isaiah 9:1-7; Questions 1-3 with Discovery A (30 min). 0:45 Question 4 with the steelman chain (15 min). 1:00 Discovery B: Matthew 4:12-16; Question 5 (15 min). 1:15 Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer, distribute Take-Home 1 (15 min).

CUTS FOR A 60-MINUTE EVENING: use one Win question instead of two; assign the Dig Deeper box as home reading; compress Question 2 into the leader's summary sentence after Question 1. Do not cut Discovery B or the steelman: they are the session's spine.

MIXED-AGES NOTE: this study assumes a parish room, not a campus room: grandparents, parents, teens, and children old enough to sit with a Bible. Both Win questions work for a nine-year-old and a ninety-year-old. During the readings, assign verses to younger readers. When the four names are read in Question 4, consider having four different voices read one name each, slowly. Depth is in the questions, not the vocabulary; do not talk down to the room, and do not leave the children behind.

SESSION 1: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

PART 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Father, your people walked in darkness, and you promised them a great light. As Advent begins, gather everything in us that is dark, our worries, our waiting, our tiredness, and let your light dawn there first. Open the Scriptures to us tonight, and open us to the Scriptures. We ask this through Christ our Lord. All: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

WIN

W1. Tell about a time you had to wait a long time for something good. What did the waiting itself feel like?

W2. Where do you notice darkness in the world, or in your own week, right now? (Any answer is welcome, from the news to a hard homework season.)

BUILD

Read Isaiah 9:1-7 aloud. Use two readers: one for verses 1-3, one for verses 4-7. Invite the group to listen for every word about darkness and light.

1. What words about darkness and light did you hear? Who exactly is "walking in darkness" here, and what has happened to them? (Look closely at verse 1: two tribal names are given.)

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Verse 1 names the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, tribal territories in Galilee, in the far north of Israel. Verse 2 calls their people "the people who walked in darkness... in a land of deep darkness." Something has been done to this land: it was "brought into contempt." The darkness in this passage is not a feeling. It is a specific place under a specific catastrophe, which the next discovery will uncover.

LIVE DISCOVERY A

Say: "Zebulun and Naphtali. Something happened to those lands in Isaiah's own lifetime. Find 2 Kings 15:29 and tell us what it was." Give the group time to find it and read it aloud themselves.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

2 Kings 15:29 reports that Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, captured a list of northern towns and regions, including Gilead, Galilee and all the land of Naphtali, and deported the people to Assyria. (The verse names Naphtali; Zebulun comes from Isaiah 9:1, and historians place both tribal lands in the same Assyrian annexation.) These Galilean territories went down early, well before Samaria and the end of the northern kingdom. Isaiah is preaching to the first casualties of the Assyrian age. When he says "darkness," his hearers could name the villages.

2. In verses 2-5, what does God promise to do about this darkness? Notice the three pictures in verses 4-5.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Light will shine exactly on those who sit in deep darkness (v. 2), and joy will multiply like harvest joy (v. 3). Then come the three pictures of liberation. First, the gear of oppression broken: the yoke, the staff across the shoulder, the oppressor's rod (v. 4). Second, the manner of the victory: "as on the day of Midian" (v. 4), recalling Gideon in Judges 7, where God cut the army down to three hundred men so that Israel could not claim the win as its own. Third, the aftermath: the soldier's boots and blood-soaked uniforms burned as fuel (v. 5), because the war is so completely over that the gear is only good for the fire. The promise is not survival in the dark. It is the end of the dark.

3. All of that raises the question: how? Verse 6 gives the answer, and it is not what anyone expected. What is it, and what surprises you about it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The answer to an empire is a baby. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder." Not a coalition, not a weapon, not a warrior in his prime: a child, given as a gift ("to us... given"), on whose small shoulder the whole government rests. God's answer to the darkness begins as the most vulnerable thing in the world. Let the group sit with how strange that is; this study will not let go of that strangeness until Christmas.

4. Read the four throne names in verse 6 again, slowly, one at a time: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Which one startles you most, and why? What is each name claiming about this child?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Each name is a claim. Wonderful Counselor: his wisdom is a wonder, a word the Old Testament uses of God's own marvelous deeds. Mighty God: the startling one. *El Gibbor*, and in Isaiah 10:21 the same title is used of the LORD himself. Everlasting Father: not confusing the child with God the Father, but naming him the fatherly, everlasting protector of his people. Prince of Peace: his reign is marked by *shalom*, wholeness and right order, and the very next verse joins that peace to a government and a Davidic throne without end. Together the names say this child rules the way only God can rule.

STEELMAN: BUILD, THEN PRESS

BUILD (present this at full strength before answering): "Isn't this about a king of Isaiah's own generation? Isaiah is speaking in the 730s BC. Ahaz's son Hezekiah belongs to exactly this moment, and he will be a genuinely good king; many interpreters tie this oracle to his birth or his accession, or to the ideal Davidic ruler the court celebrated at an enthronement. Ancient royal language was extravagant and could sound divine: Psalm 45:6 addresses a Davidic king with the words 'Your divine throne endures for ever and ever.' Titles compounded with God's name were ordinary in the ancient Near East and need not claim the king is God; they can proclaim what God does through him. On this reading Isaiah 9 is a royal oracle for Isaiah's own century, and Christians are reading Christmas back into it." Let the group feel the strength of this: it takes the history seriously, and Hezekiah was real. One caution for you: his sole reign is usually dated around 715 BC, two decades after this crisis, so do not phrase the objection as though he were about to be crowned. The strong form is about royal ideology, not the calendar.

PRESS (answer from the text): Ask the group to test the reading against three facts. First, verse 7: "of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end... from this time forth and for evermore." Any Davidic king could be honored with large language, but this oracle sets no horizon at all, and no reign of that century came near it: Hezekiah died, and Assyria stripped his kingdom back to Jerusalem's walls. The point is not that he had nothing to do with the oracle. It is that he cannot exhaust it. Second, verse 1: the oracle promises glory for the northern tribal lands specifically, and no king of Judah restored Galilee. Third, the weight of the titles. Grant the objection its due: royal language could be extravagant, and theophoric names were common. Then notice that Isaiah does not merely give the child a name compounded with God's; he calls him *El Gibbor*, and one chapter later (10:21) he uses that same title of the LORD himself, in a passage about the remnant returning to God. A prophet who uses a phrase of God on one page is not using it loosely of a man on the next. The Catholic reading does not deny that the oracle spoke into Isaiah's own moment or that a good king stood near its horizon; it insists the oracle's own words overflow every merely human king, and waits for the one they fit.

LIVE DISCOVERY B

Say: "So the oracle waits. More than seven centuries pass. Then someone picks up this passage and pins it to a map. Find Matthew 4:12-16 and read what happens, and where." Let the group find it and hear their own voices make the connection.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Matthew reports that Jesus, at the start of his Galilean ministry, left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum, "in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali," precisely so that Isaiah's words might be fulfilled, and then Matthew takes up our passage. The territory first devastated by the empire is the territory where Matthew shows the messianic light appearing. And notice how he handles Isaiah's words: he keeps the tribal names exactly, he wraps them in a fulfillment formula, and he renders the last image as light having "dawned." The promise had an address, and God kept it, more than seven centuries later, in a lakeside fishing town.

5. Why Galilee? What does it tell us about God that the light is shown dawning in the place that went dark first?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

This is the pattern the Church hears all through the fulfillment: God does not begin with the capital, the strong, or the safe, but with the place that was broken first. The territory that took the first blow is the territory where the light is shown rising. That shape will hold all the way to Bethlehem, a small town, a poor family, an occupied land. Invite the group to hear it personally, as an invitation rather than a guarantee: this passage gives us reason to bring our most wounded places to God, and reason to believe that no darkness lies beyond the reach of his light. Be careful not to promise anyone a timetable for their own healing; the text promises the light, not the schedule.

Dig Deeper

For groups that want more

Court language or confession? Compare Psalm 45:6, exalted address to a Davidic king, with Isaiah 10:21, where "Mighty God" (*El Gibbor*) is the LORD. Isaiah knew exactly how strong his words were. Also compare the birth announcement formula of Isaiah 9:6 with the angel's words the group will meet in Session 4 (keep the reference to yourself for now).

SEND

S1. Where in your own life does light need to dawn this Advent? Name it as concretely as you dare.

S2. Who around you is sitting in a dark place right now? What is one way you could carry light there before we meet again?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Each evening, when the first Advent candle is lit (at home or in your imagination), say Isaiah 9:2 aloud from memory. One candle, one verse, every day.
2. One morning this week, pray Zechariah's canticle, the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79), slowly. Underline every word about light and dawn.
3. Do the one thing you named in the second Send question. Small counts. Light usually starts small.
4. Write your sealed guess on the Take-Home sheet, seal it, and bring it back next week.

MEMORY VERSE

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." (Isaiah 9:2)

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, light of the world, you dawned first where the darkness fell first. We give you the dark places we named tonight. Reign there, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. All: The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

SESSION 1: A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

PART 3: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE USED, IN ORDER

Isaiah 9:1-7: the session text, read aloud by two readers.

2 Kings 15:29: Live Discovery A, the fall of Zebulun and Naphtali to Tiglath-pileser.

Judges 7 (background for "the day of Midian," Isaiah 9:4): Gideon's victory; mention only, no reading required.

Psalms 45:6: steelman, exalted court address to a Davidic king.

Isaiah 10:21: steelman press and Dig Deeper, "Mighty God" used of the LORD.

2 Samuel 7:12-16: leader background, the Davidic covenant beneath Isaiah 9:7.

Matthew 4:12-16: Live Discovery B, the fulfillment text.

Luke 1:68-79: Live It This Week, the Benedictus.

Luke 2:32: leader-only thread background (Simeon's "light for revelation to the Gentiles," quoted in Thread Watch).

Isaiah 9:2: memory verse.

ANSWERS AT A GLANCE

Q1: Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilee, a land "brought into contempt." Q2: three pictures, the broken yoke and rod, the Midian-pattern victory, the war gear burned. Q3: a child, born and given, government on his shoulder. Q4: four titles claiming divine-scale rule; steelman is the royal-oracle reading (often tied to Hezekiah), pressed by 9:7's "no end... for evermore," the Galilee geography, and *El Gibbor* used of the LORD at 10:21. Q5: the pattern of a God who begins where the blow fell first.

IF YOU ARE RUNNING LONG

Pre-chosen cut order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper box, sent home instead, (3) Question 2, folded into one leader sentence after Question 1. Never cut Discovery B or the steelman chain; they carry the session.

LOGISTICS

Collect nothing tonight. Distribute Take-Home 1 as people leave; it carries the sealed guess box ("What was Israel actually waiting for?"). Collect sealed guesses at Session 2. They open at Session 3.

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.

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.

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.

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.