

THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH

Take-Home 1: A Light in the Darkness (Isaiah 9:1-7)

WHAT WE FOUND

Isaiah's "people who walked in darkness" were not a metaphor. Verse 1 names Zebulun and Naphtali, Galilean lands caught in the first Assyrian blow; we found the catastrophe itself in 2 Kings 15:29, which names Galilee and all the land of Naphtali among the territories carried off. Into that occupied, deported, lamps-out geography, Isaiah spoke a promise: the land that went dark first would see the great light first.

And the light was not an army. It was a child, born and given, with the government on his shoulder and four throne names no ordinary king could carry: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The guarantee behind it all: "The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."

Then we watched Matthew pin the promise to a map. Jesus began his Galilean ministry in Capernaum, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, and Matthew took up our very passage: "light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16). The promise had an address, and God kept it. That is the pattern the Church hears everywhere in this story: God begins where the blow fell first.

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." That single sentence is the method of our whole study: Isaiah hides Christmas, and Matthew unveils Isaiah.

Quaestiones in Heptateuchum 2.73, as quoted in CCC 129

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Jerome

Jerome says, in substance, that Isaiah deserves to be called an evangelist rather than merely a prophet, because he tells the mysteries of Christ so clearly he seems to describe what has already happened. This week we heard why.

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 this in 1833 on the voyage home from Sicily, becalmed and unsure of everything. It is an Advent prayer for anyone still in the dark, asking for one step of light.

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

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 act of light you named at the end of our session. Small counts. Light usually starts small.

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)

MY GUESS (SEAL IT)

WHAT WAS ISRAEL ACTUALLY WAITING FOR?

Write your honest answer below. Fold this section over, seal it with tape, put your name on the outside, and bring it back next week. We will open these together at Session 3. No one reads it before then, including you.

Name (outside the seal): _____

BEFORE NEXT SESSION

Read Isaiah 40:1-11 once, slowly. Bring your Bible and your sealed guess.

Catechism references from this session: CCC 129, 522, 524, 712.

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Take-Home 2: A Voice Cries: Prepare (Isaiah 40:1-11)

WHAT WE FOUND

Isaiah 40 speaks into a darkness even deeper than last week's: Jerusalem destroyed, the people exiled to Babylon. And God's first word into it is tenderness: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Then a voice commands a royal highway through the wilderness, and we read verse 3 word by word and found who the road is for: "the way of the LORD... a highway for our God." The herald's whole message is "Behold your God!" The comfort of Isaiah 40 is not a change of circumstances. It is a Person, arriving: with might (v. 10), and gathering lambs in his arms (v. 11), in the same breath.

Then we opened Mark 1:1-8 and did the arithmetic aloud. Mark begins his Gospel with a prophetic citation whose controlling line is our verse 3: John the Baptist is the voice, and the way being prepared is the way of Jesus. His camel's hair and leather girdle (Mark 1:6) closely evoke Elijah's haircloth garment and leather girdle (2 Kings 1:8), and Malachi 4:5 had promised Elijah before the great day of the LORD. The highway Isaiah built for the LORD himself, Mark lays down in front of Jesus of Nazareth. In his opening sentence, without a single argument, Mark has told us who Jesus is.

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." A voice sounds for a moment and fades; the Word remains. Every herald, Isaiah included, is a voice. There is only one Word.

Sermon 293, on the birth of John the Baptist

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard teaches, in substance, that the Lord has three comings: in flesh at Bethlehem, in glory at the end, and between them a hidden middle coming, in spirit and power, in which the one who keeps his word receives him within. Advent prepares us for all three at once.

Fifth Sermon for Advent (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 each soul, as a physician suits the medicine to the illness, so that the shepherd bends to the weak rather than driving them. The same signature is in our text: the God who comes with might spends the next verse gathering lambs in his arms. Strength that stoops is the signature of the God of Israel.

The Pastoral Rule, especially Book III

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Clear the road: go to confession this Advent. If the parish has a penance service, it goes on the calendar now.
2. Be the voice once this week: one deliberate act or message of comfort to the person you thought of tonight. Speak tenderly.
3. Two candles now: keep the evening candle practice, adding this week's 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)

BEFORE NEXT SESSION

Read Isaiah 7:10-17 once, slowly. It is Gaudete week: the sealed guesses open. Bring your Bible.

Catechism references from this session: CCC 64, 523, 719.

THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH

Take-Home 3: The Sign of the Virgin (Isaiah 7:10-17)

WHAT WE FOUND

King Ahaz, under siege, was offered any sign he could imagine, "deep as Sheol or high as heaven," and refused with pious-sounding words; 2 Kings 16 shows where he had already gone for protection. So God went over his head to the whole 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," God with us. Once again, God answered a geopolitical crisis with a child, and this time the child's name promises not something from God but God himself, present.

We opened our sealed guesses about what Israel was actually waiting for, and every guess in the room, king, rescue, peace, freedom, turned out to be true and too small. Then Matthew 1:18-25 showed us the sign delivered: the angel, Joseph son of David, the child conceived of the Holy Spirit, and our verse quoted with the word Jewish translators of the Greek Isaiah had chosen long before Matthew: *parthenos*, virgin. "Emmanuel (which means, God with us)." Israel was not only waiting for something from God. Israel was waiting for God.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Justin Martyr

Within a century of the apostles, Justin debated this very verse with a learned Jewish scholar, answering, in substance, that an ordinary birth is no sign at all, while God's promised sign is something without precedent. The Church has been discussing tonight's question, respectfully and from the text, since the second century.

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

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Irenaeus

Irenaeus argues, in substance, that the rendering "virgin" cannot be Christian tampering, since Jewish scholars chose it long before Jesus was born. The reading Matthew used was already in Jewish hands.

Against Heresies 3.21 (2nd century)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyril of Alexandria

Cyril teaches, in substance, that Mary's child is not a man merely accompanied by God but God the Word truly made man. That is why Ephesus confessed Mary as Theotokos, God-bearer: to protect the full meaning of Emmanuel. Every time the Church says "God with us," she says what that council protected.

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

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.
2. Make the visit, call, or note you thought of tonight, to the person for whom "God with us" sounds too good to be true. Presence is the point.
3. Three candles, rose week: keep the evening practice, adding this week's 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)

BEFORE NEXT SESSION

Read Isaiah 11:1-10 and Isaiah 61:1-4. Keep your opened guess somewhere safe: you will want it at our final session.

Catechism references from this session: CCC 484-486, 496-497, 744.

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Take-Home 4: The Shoot from Jesse's Stump (Isaiah 11:1-10; 61:1-4)

WHAT WE FOUND

The Davidic tree was cut down to a stump, and Isaiah promised a green shoot from Jesse's root, bearing the Spirit of the LORD. We counted six qualities in verse 2; the Church's familiar seventh, piety, comes through the ancient Greek and Latin versions, giving the list of gifts every confirmand learns (CCC 1831). Isaiah 61 gave the Shoot his mission: anointed (the verb behind *mashiach*, Messiah, and Greek *christos*) to bring good news to the afflicted and liberty to captives, in a commission that also names the day of vengeance. Then we heard Gabriel deliver the whole study's promises to one address in Nazareth, "the throne of his father David... of his kingdom there will be no end," and heard Mary's free yes on which everything turned. And in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus read Isaiah 61 about himself, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," and rolled up the scroll before the day of vengeance. Christians have long read that silence, together with everything the New Testament says about his return, as a timetable: the year of favor now, final judgment when he comes again. The kingdom is already here in mystery, not yet complete (CCC 671-672).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard imagines the moment after Gabriel finishes: heaven, earth, and every exile on their knees before the girl of Nazareth, begging, in substance: Answer, Lady; the word on which our comfort hangs is yours. God chose to let his promise wait on a free human yes.

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

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

Seven evenings, seven Old Testament titles sung to Christ. This week, pray them with the whole Church (see the schedule below). Their Latin titles form a reverse acrostic, read from the last evening back to the first: *ero cras*, "Tomorrow I will come."

Liturgy of the Hours, December 17-23

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard's word is *viriditas*, greenness: the living freshness God pours into creation, the sap that makes dry wood put out leaves. A stump is not merely a ruin; it is wood with life still in the root. She heard in the Incarnation the greening of a world gone dry.

Doctor of the Church; her antiphon O viridissima virga

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas teaches, in substance, that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are stable dispositions, given by God, which make a soul readily moved by the Spirit's promptings. They belong in their fullness to Christ; the life of grace given in Baptism carries them (CCC 1266), and Confirmation increases them (CCC 1303).

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

THE O ANTIPHONS, EVENING BY EVENING

PRAY ONE EACH EVENING AT THE CANDLES

December 17: O Wisdom (O Sapientia). December 18: O Adonai, Lord of Sinai. December 19: O Root of Jesse (O Radix Jesse). December 20: O Key of David (O Clavis David). December 21: O Radiant Dawn (O Oriens). December 22: O King of the Nations (O Rex Gentium). December 23: O Emmanuel. Each one ends the same way the Church has prayed all month: Come, Lord Jesus.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray the O Antiphons, one each evening through December 23, using the schedule above.
2. Imitate the fiat: give God your yes, out loud, in prayer, before Christmas Eve. Small and real beats grand and imaginary.
3. Do one act of Isaiah 61 (good news, binding up, liberty, comfort) for the person you named tonight, 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)**

BEFORE OUR FINAL SESSION

Merry Christmas! We meet once more, after Christmas Day, for the capstone. Read Luke 2:1-20 (ideally aloud, at home, on Christmas). Bring your Bible and your opened guess from Session 3.

Catechism references from this session: CCC 494, 671-672, 714, 1831.

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Take-Home 5: The Word Made Flesh (Luke 2; John 1:1-14)

WHAT WE FOUND

Caesar counted his empire and, without knowing it, delivered David's heir to David's town. The announcement went to shepherds, and the sign was a child laid where lambs feed: the God who promised in Isaiah 40:11 to gather lambs in his arms began by joining the flock. Simeon took the child in his arms and sang Isaiah over him, gathering two verses into one line: 42:6 gives the servant as a covenant and a light to the nations, and 49:6 makes him a light so that salvation reaches the end of the earth. "A light for revelation to the Gentiles." And John 1:14 answered the promise that had stood open since Session 2, Isaiah 40:5: the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, "we have beheld his glory."

We gathered every name the child collected across our five weeks: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Immanuel (Emmanuel in Matthew's Greek), Son of the Most High, Son of God, and, at the last, the name the angel gave: Jesus, which means the LORD saves. And each of us answered the study's sealed question one final time: Israel's hopes were fulfilled beyond anything anyone had guessed, in God the Son come among us as one of us. Our study's title came home too: "when the day shall dawn upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness" (Luke 1:78-79), the canticle many of us have been praying since week one.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Athanasius

"For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." He took what is ours to give us a share in what is his. Not that we become additional gods: by grace we are made sharers in God's own life.

On the Incarnation 54, as quoted in CCC 460

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Leo the Great

"Christian, recognize your dignity." Leo tells the baptized not to return by sin to what they were rescued from. And since the Son assumed the nature we all share, the Church draws his charge outward too: do not despise that nature, in yourself or in anyone else.

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

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Francis of Assisi

Francis had a place prepared with hay, an ox, and a donkey, so that he could see with his own eyes the poverty in which the newborn King lay; the townspeople came with lights and song. The living Nativity, and much of the household creche devotion that followed, traces to that night. Do not just discuss the mystery. Go look at it.

Greccio, 1223, often called the first living Nativity; Thomas of Celano, First Life, ch. 30

LIVE IT: CARRYING THE DAWN INTO ORDINARY TIME

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 for good: the Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32) at bedtime, as the Church prays every night at Compline. Let it outlive the study.
3. Be a shepherd: make it known. Do your one act of telling before Epiphany.
4. February 2, Candlemas, forty days after Christmas: the Church reads Simeon's scene and blesses candles. It is this study's unofficial reunion feast; put it on the calendar.

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)

WITH OUR THANKS

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Merry Christmas, and glory to God in the highest.
Catechism references from this session: CCC 460, 525, 529, 1691.