

**Scriptures**

Luke 1:57-66

John 1:6-8, 19-28

# Witness to the Worthy One

**We look to the dawning of God's light.**

- ◆ In today's gospel, John tells how the Baptist announced One who would come after him and fulfill his ministry.
- ◆ With young children we focus on the person of John the Baptist by telling the story of his birth together with his Advent message that One is coming.
- ◆ In today's session we explore the stories and the seasonal themes of babies and gifts through crafts, games and stories.

**Question of the Week**

How has God chosen me to bring good news, heal and set people free?

**Core Session**

- ◆ Getting Started (*paper-link calendar made in the session for 1st Advent*)
- ◆ Picture Talk (*photographs or magazine pictures of babies*)
- ◆ Gospel Story: Baby John (*doll, large basket, baby blankets*)
- ◆ Praying Together (*Advent wreath or candles*)

**Enrichment**

- ◆ Discover the Good News
- ◆ Singing Together
- ◆ Advent Action Rhyme: Look for Jesus
- ◆ Crèche Play (*simple crèche set, baskets of natural materials*)
- ◆ Tip: Acknowledging Children's Feelings
- ◆ Info: Young Children and the Gospel
- ◆ Info: Where You'll Find Everything Else

**Helps for Catechists**

- ◆ More about Today's Scriptures
- ◆ Reflection
- ◆ The Scriptures and the Catechism
- ◆ Faith Formation and the Arts, Part 3
- ◆ The World of the Bible: The Jews

## ✓ Getting Started (5-10 minutes)

Advent activities begun in the session for the 1st Sunday of Advent remind children that today we celebrate Advent, the time we get ready for Jesus.

If you made a paper-link Advent calendar in that session, gather children around it. Explain:

- ◆ We are getting ready for Christmas during this special time called Advent.
- ◆ There are 28 days in Advent this year.
- ◆ For each day of Advent, we can tear off one of these paper strips.
- ◆ Today we will tear off seven more strips because seven more days of Advent have gone by. *(Ask volunteers to tear off strips.)*

Touch the remaining 14 strips one-by-one as you count aloud how many days remain in Advent.

## ✓ Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)

### Story: Baby John

*Focus: Use a doll as a visual focus for today's story. Keep your movements with the doll gentle and loving, letting your actions provide an appropriate model for children to imitate.*

Zechariah and Elizabeth wait for their baby, baby John, to be born.

Zechariah makes a cradle for the baby.  
*(Touch the basket.)*

Elizabeth makes soft blankets for the baby.  
*(Carefully line the basket with a blanket.)*

Zechariah prays, "God, may our baby be healthy."  
*(Hold hands in prayer.)*

Elizabeth prays, "God, may our baby be happy."  
*(Hold hands in prayer.)*

Baby John is born. *(Take the baby doll into your arms and rock it for a few moments.)*

"Here is a soft blanket, dear baby John," says Elizabeth. *(Wrap the baby in a blanket.)*

"Here is your cradle, dear baby John," says Zechariah. *(Lay the baby gently in the cradle.)*

"Thank you, God, for our baby," Zechariah and Elizabeth say. "Thank you, God, for John."

## ✓ Picture Talk (10-15 minutes)

### Babies

Use photographs to spark children's stories about babies. Gather these photographs **before the session**. You can use family pictures, pictures torn from magazines or a library book that shows pictures of babies.

In the session, show pictures of babies. Encourage children to talk about babies with these or similar questions:

- ◆ What do you see in these pictures?
- ◆ What are the babies in these pictures doing?
- ◆ What else do babies do?
- ◆ Can you tell us about a baby you know?

Close by saying:

- ◆ Today's story is about a special baby.

## ✓ Praying Together (5 minutes)

Gather around an Advent wreath or four pillar candles. Say:

- ◆ We have four Advent candles.
- ◆ There is one candle for each week until Christmas.
- ◆ We will light another candle each week.

Light three candles. Then softly repeat the words and motions of the action rhyme from today's Getting Started activity as a closing prayer.

**Note:** Distribute this week's *At Home with the Good News* to children before they leave, or e-mail it to their parents after the session.

## □ Discover the Good News

(5-10 minutes)

In today's *Discover the Good News* you'll find the words and music to Christmas Dreams, a song you will use today and in several future sessions. You'll also find simple movements to the song that you can teach to the children.

## □ Singing Together (10-15 minutes)

From *Singing the Good News*, sing together:

- ◆ "Light Your Lamp" (songbook p. 14)
- ◆ "Prepare the Way" (songbook p. 16, also available as an MP3)
- ◆ "Christmas Dreams" (songbook p. 18, also available as an MP3)

**Note:** To access both the songbook and its attached MP3 files, open your Winter-B *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Singing the Good News*.

You can add simple movements to turn "Christmas Dreams" into a prayerful dance. Ask the children to hold hands as they form a circle. Sway back and forth, holding hands, as you sing the chorus. Accompany the first verse with these movements:

I rock the baby in my arms, and sing a lullaby.  
(*Drop hands. Stand in place and rock arms.*)

And in my dream I see the star shining in the sky.  
(*Raise hands to front and overhead. Spread and stretch fingers as you walk to center.*)

You can also teach children an Advent hymn, such as the refrain to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

## □ Advent Action Rhyme (5-10 minutes)

### Look for Jesus

Review with children this Advent action-rhyme learned in the session for the 1st Sunday of Advent:

The golden sun,  
(*Hold arms to front, waist-level, in circle.*)

Begins to rise;  
(*Slowly lift circle over head.*)

Bright morning light now fills the skies.  
(*Slowly open arms to side, palms up.*)

Look for Jesus! Look and say,  
(*Frame eyes with hands.*)

"Will Jesus come to us today?"  
(*Stretch raised arms to front, then fold and cross them over chest.*)

The evening sky grows dark and deep.  
All the world falls fast asleep.  
(*Reverse morning movements: Hold arms to side, bring together over head to form setting sun. Then bring hands together and lay head on them, as on a pillow.*)

Look for Jesus with all your might.  
(*Frame eyes with hands.*)

Will Jesus come to us tonight?  
(*Stretch raised arms to front, then fold and cross them over chest.*)

By morning sun  
(*Hold arms in circle.*)

Or evening moon,  
(*Pillow head on hands.*)

"Look!" says Jesus.  
(*Frame eyes.*)

"I'm coming soon."  
(*Cross arms over chest.*)

## □ Free Play (10-20 minutes)

### Crèche Play

*Activity Soundtrack:* Play Kimberly Braun's "O Antiphons." (Open your Winter-B *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Companion Music* for options on obtaining this music.)

Children explore the stories of the Nativity cycle through free play. As in the session for the 1st Sunday of Advent, we recommend that you provide this free-play area throughout the weeks of Advent and Christmas.

Cover a box, stool or small table with a cloth. Arrange the crèche figures on the table. Place baskets of natural materials nearby, such as evergreen branches, pine cones, twigs and stones. Invite two or three children at a time to explore this free play area.

Because some children may worry about whether or not they may touch the crèche figures, emphasize the children's freedom to touch, move and rearrange the figures and materials.

## **INFO** Acknowledging Children's Feelings

Several activities in today's session focus on babies. Expect to discover a variety of feelings about babies among the children in your group. Some children are intrigued by babies; others are bored. Some children want babies in their families; others wish the babies in their families would go away.

Imagine a child saying, "I hate my baby brother!" How can we respond to such a remark? If we say, "Oh, I'm sure you don't mean that," we teach children to mistrust their feelings. If we say, "That's naughty! You're supposed to love your baby brother," we teach children that we only approve of them when they say and do what we want.

Catechists need not agree with children's feelings to acknowledge them. A leader who responds with a simple, "I see," or by saying, "You're mad at your baby brother," affirms the right of a child to experience strong, negative emotions.

You can explore this topic further by reading *Between Teacher and Child* by Haim Ginott (New York: Avon, 1975). In this classic study, Christian leaders will find real support for their goal of nurturing children who are morally strong.

## **INFO** Young Children and the Gospel

Today is the 3rd Sunday of Advent, the season in which we prepare the way of the Lord. In today's session, we join together two stories to tell more about John the Baptist. Children also explore the holiday themes of babies and gifts.

Although we provide both new and traditional Advent activities for you and the children in your group, we also urge you to seek a balance between activity and serenity during this busy time of year.

Children will appreciate a relaxed atmosphere in which to enjoy a few carefully chosen activities; resist the urge to do everything! Free-play centers where children can set their own pace or quiet time for singing favorite songs can soothe children who are restless from "too much Christmas."

## **INFO** Where You'll Find Everything Else

- ◆ Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
  - Backgrounds and reflections for today's readings, titled *More about Today's Scriptures*.
  - A copy of today's *Gospel Story: Baby John*, which can be distributed or e-mailed to children and their families.
  - Instructions for a continuation of this season's Christmas Craft Activity: *Trail Mix Christmas Gift*.
  - An enlarged-text version of the *Advent Action Rhyme: Look for Jesus*.
  - Instructions for a *Story-Review Game: Baby Care*.
  - An informative article for catechists on using *Time Out* as a behavior management strategy.
- ◆ Open your Winter-B *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Seasonal Articles* to find:
  - Information on Winter-B's *Models of the Faith*.
  - For catechists and/or families, a helpful *Christmas Overview*.
  - Two articles for catechists and/or families by Roger Hutchison titled *Tapping into the Power of Art* and *Faith Formation and the Arts*.
  - For catechists and/or families, a helpful *Advent Overview*.
  - For catechists and/or families, an article with more on *John the Baptist*.
  - A reproducible handout for catechists and/or families on *The O Antiphons*.

## More about Today's Scriptures

Today's readings sparkle with the light of God's approaching deliverance. According to the prophet Isaiah, healing and deliverance draw near, bringing the dawn of a new day. In anticipation of this coming light, Paul exhorts believers to persist in holiness, confident that God alone will sanctify them. In today's gospel, John the Baptist announces the coming of Jesus, the true light in the midst of all our darkness.

### Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11

The prophet speaks a message of hope to those returning from exile in Babylon. The prophet describes an ultimate year of jubilee—a time of full blessing brought by divine favor. The blessing is accompanied

“To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda or even stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.”

—Dorothy Day

by a day of vindication that will bring full restitution for injustice. Thus the prophet looks back to the Mosaic ordinance regarding the jubilee year and forward to the day of the Lord.

In verses 10-11, the prophet assumes the voice of Zion, the kingdom of God. Zion

revels in the new life given it by God. This new life is described first as a wedding celebration—an occasion of joyful union—and then as a time of planting and new growth—an event full of divine initiative. Both images bespeak mystery and delight. In the same way, God will bring about a new life of justice and praise.

### 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Today's reading comes from the earliest New Testament writing, written probably about AD 50–51. Paul has dealt with several questions relating to the expectation of Jesus' imminent return (5:1). He closes his letter by reminding the Thessalonians that a strong and loving community life, not speculation and anxiety, is the proper environment for awaiting the Lord. God desires that their lives be characterized by joy, prayer and thanksgiving.

The Thessalonian Christians are to welcome the charismatic gifts, but with discernment. In speaking of spirit, soul and body, Paul does not intend to divide the human person into separate components. Rather, in Hebraic style, he describes the human person in the

threefold components of relation to God, of present vitality and of physical body. God both wills and works the sanctification of the total person.

### John 1:6-8, 19-28

All of the gospels portray John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. John's gospel emphasizes the Baptist's role as a witness to Jesus as the light that was to appear on the day of salvation. The evangelist John usually uses the term *the Jews* not to refer to Jews in general but to refer specifically to those who live in Judea or follow Judean practices. They are for him the stereotype for those who oppose Jesus, especially the religious authorities who rejected his claims.

The people of Jesus' time had a variety of expectations about the appearance of one or more figures who would bring the current age to an end. The most common hope centered on the coming of a political messiah who would be a member of the royal line of King David. Elijah was also expected as a herald. There was also a hope for the revival of prophecy by a prophet-like-Moses.

When questioned, John the Baptist rejects all of these identifications. He is only “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (v. 23; Isaiah 40:3). Likewise, the baptism that he practices points away from himself. It is only a preparation for the One already present but as yet undisclosed.

## Reflection

In days of large egos, few want to be the herald; everyone wants center stage. John the Baptist is a fine corrective. How puzzling he must have seemed to those eager to establish his identity, lock him into a familiar role. Elijah they could understand.

The Messiah would be even better—and might let them in on some personal perks. But this self-effacing prophet escapes any niche they could slot him into. He can voice only the longing for one to follow; he can do only his small piece to straighten the path.

If we spent some time reflecting on him, John could probably teach us the vulnerability of one who admits, “I don't have all the answers.” Most of us would be so flattered to be mistaken for Elijah or the Messiah, we'd prolong the falsity and soak up the acclaim. There is an honest relief about John: he won't delude anyone, even if it means losing an upgrade in his status.

What do we respond when asked, “Who are you?” Do we roll out the list of accomplishments, try to impress with credentials and career? Or do we admit we’re often confused and find our identity in another, who creates and saves?

## The Scriptures and the Catechism

Today we rejoice because, like the Jewish exiles, the time for God’s coming draws nearer. We prepare the way by building a community of right relationships (CCC, #1807, 1886–89, 2401–25) that is based on justice, held together by bonds of love, creating peace for all (CCC, #2443–49). This community will contrast with humanly devised communities that are founded on unjust dominations of one group over another, held in place by violence that always results in conflict for all.

## Faith Formation and the Arts, Part 3

by Roger W. Hutchison

### *Washing Dishes and The Language of the Heart*

It is late afternoon under a crisp blue French sky, and I am covered head to toe in water and soap bubbles. In order for everyone at Taizé to be fed, we volunteer to help out in the open-air kitchen.

The sea of voices rises up like a symphony, instruments that I do not recognize, yet long to understand and know. I hear sounds of laughter and joy—so much unrestrained laughter and joy. I recognize some faces: I see Hillary and Tom, a young woman and a young man that traveled with me to Taizé, France from Trinity Cathedral. Tom, the young man that saw God’s face clearly for the first time as he looked into the PAINted face of the crucified Jesus on an icon located in the community church.

Hillary, the young woman who feels in her heart that she will never be the same person she was before this journey. She, too, saw God’s face in the diversity of the people around her and in the glimmer of the candlelight as it danced across hand-painted icons.

I do not know some faces, but have seen them before. When I was young, I used to pour over my Grandmother’s copies of *National Geographic*. I would look for hours at the pictures of the nearly blue-black faces of strikingly beautiful African men and women.

As I gaze across the way, it is as if the picture in the magazine had come to life. That beautiful black face. Those dark and deep eyes. That bright encompassing smile.

Then I glance across to the faces of my new friends Adrian and Olgutsa. They are boyfriend and girlfriend who traveled to this small village from Romania, seeking the face of God. They too, communicate with laughter, broken English and their eyes. Where is Romania? Where is Cameroon? Now I know. These masterfully orchestrated creations of God are communicating with each other across water...no longer separated by the ocean, we communicate over a basin of dishwater. It is a more honest and more sincere form of conversation than I have ever experienced. It is not with our voices for we speak different languages. It is with our eyes and our laughter. We are speaking the language of the heart as we wash dishes.

I look down into the basin of dishwater and at the reflection of the faces of my new friends. The dancing water and the shifting light have caused our faces to become one. I, too, have discovered the face of God.

## The World of the Bible

### The Jews

In John’s gospel, the term *Jews* (Greek, *Ioudaios*) does not usually refer to Jews in general (who would be called *Israelites*) but identifies those Israelites who live in the specific geographical area of Judea, which was the southern portion of Palestine in Roman times (thus distinguished from Samaria, Galilee, Perea and Idumea). This region was the ancestral homeland of the tribe and later the kingdom of Judah under King David. It included the holy city of Jerusalem.

Thus the term *Jew* identified any Israelite, whether in Judea or elsewhere, who followed Judean customs and practices. For this reason, it might be much better to always translate the word *Ioudaios* as “Judean.” Similarly, *Ioudaismos* or “Judaism,” means the customs and behaviors of Judeans not all Jews.

For John, the Jews or Judeans function as the literary and religious stereotype of those who oppose Jesus and reject his claims, especially (as in this reading) pointing to the religious leaders.