We prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

♦ John the Baptist calls God's people to get ready for Jesus.
♦ We pair the lectionary story with the story of the birth of John the Baptist. Young children explore in concrete terms how to get ready for Christmas, ready for a new baby and ready for Jesus.
♦ Today's session continues our celebration of Advent stories and Advent traditions.

Question of the Week
What did people do when they heard John the Baptist? What do you want to do when you hear his story?
Getting Started (5-15 minutes)
Gather in a circle. If time allows, you may first want to make a simple Advent Calendar, attached to this document. Ask the children:
◆ How can we get ready for Christmas?

Encourage children to act out their answers. Offer guidance, such as, “Let’s put a star on the Christmas tree,” or “Let’s set the table for Christmas dinner.” Ask:
◆ How can we get ready for a baby to come?

Help children act out these answers, too. Invite children to hear a story about getting ready for Jesus.

Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)

Gabriel and Zechariah
Story Focus: Use the Zechariah and Elizabeth Story Figures, attached to this document, to tell today’s story.

Elizabeth is old. Her husband Zechariah is old.

Elizabeth is sad. Zechariah is sad, too. “We don’t have any children,” they say. “We want to have a baby.”

Zechariah is in God’s house. He is praying to God.

Someone comes to God’s house—someone who looks like a man. But it’s not a man at all; do you know who it is? (Children may draw on their memories of last week’s story to answer; if not, say: It’s Gabriel, God’s angel.)

The angel Gabriel says, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah. God has heard your prayer. You and Elizabeth will have a baby and name him John. John will do great things for God. John will get people ready for Jesus.”

Zechariah goes back home. Soon Elizabeth is pregnant—she will have a baby! “Now we are happy,” says Elizabeth. “Now we will have the baby John.”

After the Story:
If possible, invite a pregnant woman to visit today’s session. Ask her to tell the children about her preparations and her hopes. Encourage the children to ask questions. If necessary, spark discussion by asking:
◆ How did you feel when you were told you were going to have a baby?
◆ What does it feel like to be pregnant?
◆ What are you doing to get ready for the baby to be born?

Story-Review Game (5-15 minutes)
Children play Get Ready for the Baby, a circle game celebrating the birth of John the Baptist. Teach children to sing these words to the tune of “The More We Get Together”:

Get ready for the baby, the baby, the baby,
Get ready for the baby, ’cause soon he’ll be born.

Stand in a circle with the children. Dance to the left on the first line and to the right on the second line. Stand still as you sing this verse:

Oh, we will rock the baby, the baby, the baby,
Oh, we will rock the baby, ’cause soon he’ll be born.

As you sing the verse, rock an imaginary baby in your arms. Dance left and right again as you repeat the chorus. For additional verses, invite the children to choose actions. You can ask:
◆ What else can we do when the baby is born? (Bounce the baby, feed the baby, etc.)

Praying Together (5 minutes)
Sit in a circle with the children. Set a basket or cradle in the middle of the circle. Have available soft filler, such as straw, unspun wool, cotton or 6” lengths of thick yarn. Say:
◆ Let’s make a soft bed as we wait and pray for baby Jesus.
◆ When you say a prayer to baby Jesus, put a piece of straw (or wool, cotton or yarn) into the cradle. Lead the way by praying, “Come quickly, baby Jesus,” as you put material into the cradle. When the children are finished, close by praying:
◆ Come, Lord Jesus, to all of us who are getting ready for you. Amen.

Note: Distribute this week’s At Home with the Good News to group members as they depart (or e-mail it to families after the session).
Discover the Good News (5-10 minutes)
In today's Discover the Good News you'll find a simple version of today's gospel story from the lectionary. You'll also find a simple family Advent craft. You may enjoy making or sharing these candleholders with the children.

Singing Together (5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News, sing together:
- “A Very Special Baby” (p. 17 of the songbook, also available as an MP3)
- “Prepare the Way” (p. 18 of the songbook)

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

Jesse Tree (5-25 minutes)
Following the lectionary sometimes leaves catechists wishing they could celebrate more Old Testament heroes and heroines. In Advent, we suggest using a Jesse Tree to briefly explore these figures.

Post the Jesse Tree poster, with its colorful stories of figures from the Old Testament, attached to this document.

During each session of Advent, share one or more of these simple stories with the children. Today we suggest you share from the poster the stories of Noah, of Moses and of Miriam. Point out the pictures to the children as you tell the stories.

You can also engage children in simple play centers based on these stories:
- Noah Play Center: Noah built a boat to live on as water covered the world. Set out one or more plastic dish pans with water. Make available water toys, such as sieves, cups and spoons.
- Moses Play Center: Moses led God's people through a sandy desert. Set out one or more plastic dish pans with sand or corn meal. Children can make paths and designs in the dry material; adding water means children can make sand castles or other shapes.
- Miriam Play Center: Miriam played the tambourine to praise God. Make available simple rhythm instruments. You can improvise these, too: small bells, a pair of wooden blocks and a metal bowl rung with a wooden spoon.

Art and Movement (5-15 minutes)
McGrath’s Prince of Peace Activity Soundtrack: Play “Deep Peace.” (Open your Winter-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Companion Music for options on obtaining this music.)

Together with the Jesse Tree activity, you can explore an Old Testament reading for Advent through Michael O’Neill McGrath’s painting Prince of Peace, attached to this document.

McGrath is an American painter and a Catholic brother, teacher and workshop presenter. His colorful paintings often tell stories, both biblical stories and the stories of remarkable people of God.

Gather children around the poster. Read aloud from a Good News Bible Isaiah 11:6-9. Ask children to find in the painting the animals mentioned by Isaiah. Children may want to try to move like each of the animals shown in the painting. Affirm for children: God loves all these animals. God wants peace for all these animals—and for all people on the earth, too.

Christmas Storybooks (5-10 minutes)

With a little advance preparation, children hear a different version of the nativity story each session of Advent.

Several excellent storybooks about the nativity are available in libraries and bookstores. This week we recommend The First Christmas by Tomie de Paola (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1984). This pop-up book has scenes of the annunciation, Mary and Joseph’s arrival at Bethlehem, the innkeeper’s stable, the shepherds, the wise kings and the Holy Family. Gather the children in a comfortable circle. Read the book aloud slowly, pausing to show children each pair of pages. Children enjoy the movable parts!

Young Children and the Gospel

Even young children can link preparation with Christmas. They see cards written to friends, help bake cookies for the tree and count the days remaining until Christmas. In today’s gospel, John the Baptist prepares God’s people for the coming Messiah: Jesus. We pair the lectionary gospel with an extra Advent story: Elizabeth and Zechariah prepare for the birth of John.

In the session for the 1st Sunday of Advent, we paired the story of Mary with Jesus’ teachings about the end of the age because both stories have a similar theme: wait for Jesus. In today’s session, we pair the story of John the Baptist’s birth with John the Baptist’s ministry. The common theme is: get ready for Jesus.

The story of the birth of John the Baptist, told this week, comes before the story of Gabriel and Mary, which we told a week ago. Preschool and kindergarten children care little about chronology. For them each week’s session stands alone. We provide pairs of stories with similar themes to help children find more meaning in these stories. We believe that children who experience meaning in stories are children more likely to recall those stories in years to come.

As in the session for the 1st Sunday in Advent, we provide a choice of optional activities that help children experience Advent as a season of waiting.

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 child-friendly version of the story told in today’s Core Session—Gabriel and Zechariah.
  — A child-friendly version of today’s story from the lectionary—Getting Ready for Jesus.
  — Someone Is Coming Story Figures to use in telling today’s alternative lectionary story, Getting Ready for Jesus.
  — Elizabeth and Zechariah Story Figures for telling today’s Gospel Story.
  — An Advent Calendar activity.
  — McGrath’s Prince of Peace, to be used in today’s Art and Movement activity.
  — A family paper, At Home with the Good News, to print and distribute or to e-mail to families for use at home.
◆ Open your Winter-A Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  — Information on Winter-A’s Models of the Faith.
  — An article exploring the meaning of the Advent Wreath, along with directions on how to make one.
  — A printable article titled First Impressions, which offers practical helps for the use of fine art in your classroom.
  — Two items exploring the gospel for Year-A: a PowerPoint presentation on The Gospel of Matthew and an article titled The Gospel of Matthew.
  — The Introduction for Preschool/Kindergarten for Living the Good News.
More about Today's Scriptures

In anticipation of the coming of God’s anointed, today’s readings call us to repentance, to turn from sin and faithfully follow God. Isaiah tells us that a Branch of Jesse, anointed with God’s Spirit, will bear the fruit of justice, peace and fellowship with God. Paul describes the repentant life, lived in love for God and one another. John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus by calling God’s people to repentance.

Isaiah 11:1-10
The hope associated with the kings of David’s line was never really borne out by experience, yet it persisted. The picture painted here by the prophet Isaiah became even more meaningful to the exilic and postexilic generations, as shown by the quotation from it in Habakkuk 2:14. It formed the expectation of a messianic king who would embody all the best qualities of the past and be empowered with the Spirit of the Lord as was David, the son of Jesse. The king’s wisdom issues in justice, especially for the poor. His reign restores the peaceful harmony of the created order.

Romans 15:4-9
In chapter 14, Paul dealt with the dispute between the “strong” and “weak” Christians about dietary observances. It is not clear whether the division arose between two groups of Gentiles or between Gentile and Jewish Christians.

In 15:3, Paul applies Psalm 69:9 to Christ to call the conflicting parties to mutual surrender. At the beginning of today’s reading, Paul justifies his use of the scriptures by pointing out their role in showing the continuity of God’s activity and thus providing encouragement and hope to Christians. The example of Christ himself provides the model for imitation.

God, in Christ, both fulfilled the hope of “the circumcised” (v. 8), the Jewish people, for a Messiah and extended salvation to the Gentiles. Paul’s quote from 2 Samuel 22:50 shows that the inclusion of the Gentiles was a part of God’s purpose. Such encouragement in Christ and in the scriptures results in a divine hope that overflows in the believer’s life.

Matthew 3:1-12
John the Baptist’s clothing identifies him as a prophet. But he is more than a prophet, he is Elijah returned. He preaches the same message as Jesus, challenging the same opposition. But Matthew also makes clear the difference between John and Jesus. John calls his listeners to repent (be converted) and turn back to the covenant way of life, for the kingdom of heaven is spatially and temporally at hand in the person of Jesus. The kingdom stretches between present reality and future consummation.

Neither physical descent from Abraham nor baptism by John, but only deeds that spring from repentance will avail against the coming judgment, symbolized by fire. The mightier one to come will baptize with “the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 11). This was later interpreted by the early Church as the regenerative baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Reflection
These questions, which spring from today’s gospel, must be answered in the context of our lives:

What’s the desert?
Who’s the prophet?
What’s the good fruit?
Where’s the chaff?

Some need to step back from busyness and find a deserted place for a better view. Time at a retreat center or a quiet evening at home may ground us for continue works of service. Other lives have become a desert, filled with empty pursuits and trivial fluff; these people must find an alternative to nurture the soul with scripture, prayer, natural beauty and service.

Contrast the prophet John with slick, high profile figures in magazines. He doesn’t care much about his appearance—or his diet. Uncompromising about evil, he is slow to let himself—or anyone else—off the hook. True prophets may not be “nice guys,” but sternly confront the evils with which others become cozy: militarism, environmental abuse, sexism, racism, child neglect.

Wondering how we’d measure up on John’s scale? Look at the fruit of our labors. Have we wasted hours at the mall or in front of TV? Or have we created something good and abiding: a family, works of art, a stable society, justice?

The chaff is anything that stands between us and our full magnificence as God’s children: fear, anxiety, squandering talents. What should we toss into the fire?
The Scriptures and the Catechism

John the Baptist issues the challenge “reform your lives!” Although all persons are invited to discipleship (CCC, #74, #1877–78), the condition is the forgiveness of sins and a new way of living (CCC, #1440–60, 1468–70). Discipleship is not easy but the power of the Holy Spirit makes it happen (CCC, #798–801, 1830–32).

Liturgy Link

The Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath is full of rich symbolism. In the form of a circle, the wreath reminds us that God has no beginning and no end. The evergreens used in making the wreath remind us of God’s everlasting love and suggest that we who love God will live forever.

The wreath has four candles, for the four weeks of Advent. Different traditions have used different colors: most traditional are four purple or deep blue colors, matching the liturgical colors used in Advent. These royal colors can remind us that we are watching and preparing for our King. Red candles were more common in Scandinavian traditions. These Advent wreaths were often decorated with red apples as well as red candles.

Some traditions use a rose candle for the third or fourth week, a holdover from the liturgical custom known as “Gaudete Sunday” or “Rose Sunday.” In other centuries, Advent, like Lent, was marked by a tradition of fasting and penitence. In those days the readings for the Third Sunday of Advent expressed joy. (Gaudete is the Latin word for rejoice, or be joyful). The people observed a break in the Advent fast, and rose-colored vestments were worn at the Eucharist.

One candle is lit on the First Sunday of Advent and on each successive Sunday an additional candle is lit. The Christ candle, if used, is lit on Christmas Eve. The candles in the Advent wreath remind us of the way Jesus changed the darkness of hatred and evil into the light of joy and love.

The World of the Bible

Prophet

Biblical prophets (from the Greek, to speak for or on behalf of someone) speak as God’s intermediaries to the king and the covenant people. Rulers tended to forget that they were to rule according to God’s covenant law and not for their own interests.

The prophets spoke on behalf of God, reminding the people of God’s agenda and encouraging trust in God rather than in human power and wisdom. They also spoke on behalf of the poor and downtrodden who often had no one else to speak for them.

Although their words were often taken as predicting the future, their predictive power was nothing more than a consequence of their belief that God always comes in judgment to punish evil and in mercy to reward good. God’s judgment of sin and reward of salvation were accomplished in and through the political and social life of the people.

Prophets revealed God’s hidden presence in the political, social and personal events of their times. Being attuned to God’s word, the prophets showed a world that invited cooperation with God to establish and maintain right relationships. Through their double vision of the world from both the divine and human perspectives, prophets taught how to see, evaluate and act in the world as God instructed.

Prophets encouraged hearing and heeding God’s message. But they were never just interested in good ideas, but in good lives that met the demands of the right relationships with God and with others. They offered a new vision of the world and demanded that people change themselves and their ways because of God’s presence.