We hail Jesus as the promised Messiah.

◆ When John the Baptist sends disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah, Jesus points to his words and deeds as evidence of the coming of God’s kingdom.
◆ We pair this story with the story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth to rejoice in the coming birth of their children.
◆ Today’s session continues the celebration of Advent as a season of joyful waiting.

Question of the Week
What do you think Jesus could do in our world today?

Core Session
◆ Getting Started
◆ Gospel Story: The Mothers Visit
◆ Game: Story-Review
◆ Praying Together (basket or doll’s cradle, straw or other filler)

Enrichment
◆ Discover the Good News
◆ Singing Together
◆ Christmas Craft: Popcorn Strings (plastic needle, thread, stale popcorn)
◆ Christmas Craft: Stocking Cards (red felt, blank greeting cards, tiny candy canes, nuts, raisins, pennies, trim, hole punch, yarn)
◆ Christmas Craft: Shiny Ornaments (jar lid, pen, Christmas cards, ribbons)
◆ Jesse Tree (optional: baskets, play or real food, rhythm instruments)
◆ Christmas Storybook
◆ 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
◆ Liturgy Link: The Jesse Tree
◆ The World of the Bible: Matthew’s Community

Scriptures
Matthew 11:2-6
Luke 1:39-47

The Coming One

We hail Jesus as the promised Messiah.

◆ When John the Baptist sends disciples to ask Jesus if he is the Messiah, Jesus points to his words and deeds as evidence of the coming of God’s kingdom.
◆ We pair this story with the story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth to rejoice in the coming birth of their children.
◆ Today’s session continues the celebration of Advent as a season of joyful waiting.

Question of the Week
What do you think Jesus could do in our world today?
Getting Started (5-15 minutes)
Gather the children in a circle. If time allows, you may first want to use the simple Advent Calendar made in the session for the 2nd Sunday of Advent. Explain:
◆ Now it is Advent, a time of waiting. What do we wait for in Advent? (Jesus, Christmas, baby Jesus, etc.)
◆ Soon it will be Christmas. How do we know when Christmas is here?

Help children act out these answers. (Children might give the same answers as they did to the first question.) Then invite children to hear a story about Mary, who waited for the first Christmas.

Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)
The Mothers Visit
Story Focus: You can use a baby doll as a focal point for today’s story.

Mary will be a mother. How does she know? God’s angel told her! “You will be the mother of God’s own Son,” said the angel.

Mary goes to visit Elizabeth.

Elizabeth will be a mother. How does she know? God’s angel said so! “Elizabeth will be the mother of John,” said the angel. “John will tell people about God’s own Son.”

“Hello, Elizabeth, mother of John,” shouts Mary.

“Hello, Mary, mother of God’s own Son,” shouts Elizabeth.

The mothers hug. The babies in their bellies jump for joy.

The mothers dance. Soon their babies will be born.

Game (10-15 minutes)

Story-Review
Children play Get Ready for the Baby, a circle game celebrating the visit of Mary and Elizabeth. This game is a variation on the one played in the session for the 2nd Sunday of Advent.

Teach children to sing these words to the tune of “The More We Get Together”:

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

Stand in a circle with the children around one child who represents Elizabeth. Choose a child to be Mary. Mary travels outside the circle in one direction as you dance with the children in the other direction. At the end of the verse, Mary enters the “house” (the circle) to join Elizabeth.

Mary and Elizabeth join hands and dance together as the circle stands still and sings this verse:

Elizabeth is dancing with Mary, with Mary,
Elizabeth is dancing, ’cause soon he’ll be born.

Choose a new Mary and Elizabeth and repeat the game.

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 want to celebrate your coming at Christmas, as Mary and Elizabeth celebrated your coming so long ago. 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 story-review game. You’ll also find a fingerplay based on a classic prayer and hymn: Day by Day.

You may wish to use these activities in the session before sending the paper home for children to enjoy with their families.

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.

Christmas Craft (10-25 minutes)
Popcorn Strings
Thread a plastic needle with several yards of thread. Put the threaded needle together with a big bowl of unbuttered, stale popcorn on a table. (Stale popcorn is more rubbery and less likely to break when threaded.) Help the children form a circle around the table.

Children walk in a line around the table in order to take turns threading popcorn on the needle. Children waiting for their turns can snack on the popcorn, too, if you bring a big bag. The finished string can decorate the congregational Christmas tree or the wall of the room where you meet.

Christmas Craft (10-25 minutes)
Stocking Cards
Before the session use the simple Stocking Pattern, attached to this document.

Cut a felt stocking for each child. Invite children to make stocking cards for their favorite stuffed animal or doll. Help children glue the stocking to the front of a blank greeting card, leaving the top of the stocking open and gaping slightly. Once the glue has dried, invite children to fill each stocking with a candy cane, a nut, a few raisins and a penny.

Children can decorate the stocking cards with stick-on stars, glitter sticks, glued-on felt shapes, etc. Children can use felt pens to write names or messages or to draw designs on the inside of the cards.

Christmas Craft (10-25 minutes)
Shiny Ornaments
Before the session cut 3” shapes from light cardboard. (To make circles, use a pen to trace around a jar lid.) Cut enough shapes so that each child in the group has at least one.

In the session, each child takes a shape and colors it completely with felt pens or crayons. Children brush over the designs with a layer of thinned glue; when the glue dries, the designs will glow.

Children can add decorations, such as pictures cut from old cards, paper scraps or bits of ribbon. Children place decorations on top of the wet glue and brush more glue over. Let dry.

Punch a hole in each ornament and help the children string yarn through the holes. These ornaments can be hung from the congregational Christmas tree or taken home.

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, you can share one or more of these simple stories with the children. Today we suggest you share from the poster the stories of Ruth and of David. 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:

◆ **Ruth Play Center:** Ruth joined God’s family, even though it meant she was so poor she gathered food from the fields. Although she was a foreigner, she was the mother of Jesse, the father of the great King David. Make available baskets and a selection of play or real food, such as nuts, beans and pasta shapes.

◆ **David Play Center:** David wrote and sang songs 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.

**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 *All Those Mothers At the Stable* by Norma Farber (Harper and Row, New York, 1985). Farber’s rhymed verse tells the story of animal mothers—“cow and mare and ewe and hen”—who gather around a woman giving birth to her child in a stable.

Gather the children in a comfortable circle. Read the book aloud slowly, pausing to show children each pair of pages.

**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—*The Mother’s Visit*.
  - A child-friendly version of today’s lectionary gospel story—*How Do I Know?*
  - A *Stocking Pattern* to use in today’s Christmas Craft.
  - A *Mothers Visit Mini-Poster* to use as a visual aid in telling today’s Gospel Story.
  - An optional *Advent Visitor* 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*.
  - A printable article exploring the *Jesse Tree*.
  - A printable article taking a look at the *Psalms of the Season*.
  - The *Introduction for Preschool/Kindergarten* for Living the Good News.
More about Today’s Scriptures

Today’s readings invite us to anticipate with joy the coming of Jesus, even in the face of suffering. Isaiah assures us that God will replace the desert life of the faithful with lush restoration, healing and peace. James urges patience, even in suffering, because the Lord’s return is near. Jesus reassures John the Baptist with the evidence of his ministry—he is indeed God’s anointed, come to deliver God’s people.

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

Chapter 35 is a hymn of praise to God for Zion’s restoration. The Lord will lead the people in a new exodus out of Babylon through the wilderness. Instead of being a place of trial and suffering, the desert will resemble paradise. The Lord’s coming will bring salvation and wholeness, especially to those who suffer in body or spirit. They will all be restored to Zion and to the worship there as the culminating act of God’s redemptive work.

After the actual return and its disappointments, this passage was easily taken to describe the coming of the Messiah. The highway imagery is typically from Isaiah and graphically illustrates the call to journey into Zion, God’s kingdom.

James 5:7-10

This short reading centers upon the need for patience in awaiting “the coming of the Lord” (v. 5). The early Church seems to have expected the Lord’s return within the span of the first generation of believers and, as time went on, had to deal with the apparent delay. In contrast to the unbelieving rich, Christians have reason to look forward to his coming. They must, however, exercise self-restraint, as does the farmer waiting for the harvest.

The imminence of judgment also colors the admonition against grumbling. A second exhortation to patience under persecution is based on the example of the prophets who often proclaimed God’s message amidst the darkest circumstances.

Matthew 11:2-11

Jesus’ words and works challenge people to a decision about the person of Jesus himself. Matthew, speaking for the Church, identifies Jesus as “the Messiah” (v. 2). John the Baptist asks if Jesus is indeed the “one who is to come” whom John announced.

Jesus answers indirectly by referring to his own words and deeds, which point to God’s action revealed through Jesus. Such miracles are not proofs but signs, for one may witness a miracle and react with doubt or rejection depending upon how one understands its significance.

Jesus then gives his own understanding of John’s role. He points to John’s fierce independence and austerity. He was neither pliant nor fashionable, but rather the forerunner and thus the returned Elijah. Despite his preeminent position among the prophets, John was never a disciple of Jesus. He stands only upon the threshold of the kingdom.

Reflection

If people who do prison ministry today are appalled by conditions in jails, imagine what conditions must have been in John the Baptist’s day! Today’s gospel inspires more sympathy for John than his earlier, harsher portraits evoke. The uncompromising figure of the desert who cried out certitudes is now hollow-eyed, unsure, questioning. Where is the tree-toppling axe? This long-awaited Messiah seems nonjudgmental, too gentle to toss the unfruitful into the fire (see Matthew 3:10). Where are the fireworks, the dramatic proofs that Jesus is God?

We become like John when we too wonder if it’s all worthwhile. After years of trying to be Christian, we sometimes grow tired. Did we take a wrong direction somewhere along the line? Shouldn’t we have more to show for our efforts? And why aren’t the slackers punished?

Jesus’ compassion for John reaches beyond one gloomy jail cell and enfolds all of us who wobble. He sends John direct word of splendid actions: the blind see, the deaf listen, the poor hear the good news. He doesn’t talk in hazy terms of insights or philosophies, knowing that these do not speak to the weary. Jesus’ answer respects John’s freedom and ours as he invites us all to rethink what the kingdom might be.
The Scriptures and the Catechism

Today we are told what the signs of the new age of discipleship will be. Isaiah and Matthew both describe the complete transformation of creation as the result of God's saving presence in our world (CCC, #1–3). As we read the signs of the times today, we recognize in our sacramental activity the realization of the transforming power of God in our lives (CCC, #1145–62).

Liturgy Link

The Jesse Tree

Year A of the lectionary, which centers around the Gospel of Matthew, is a particularly good time to make a Jesse Tree. In chapter 1, Matthew seeks to reinforce that Jesus is the Messiah by mentioning his ancestry from Abraham, David and the kings of Judah. (For more on Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew, see Helps for Catechists, p. 34.)

Jesse was the father of King David. Many years after Jesse lived, the prophet Isaiah spoke about a new tree that would grow from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1).

Making a Jesse tree helps us to remember the family of Jesse and all those throughout history who prepared God’s people for the coming of Jesus. The tree and the symbols we hang on it remind us of many who are vital links in our faith history: an ark is a symbol for Noah, a harp for David, a crown for Solomon. Don’t forget those faithful women who prepared for the coming of Jesus, too: Sarah, represented by a loaf of bread; Miriam, with her tambourine; and Ruth, with a sheaf of wheat.

The tree itself may be an evergreen or a bare branch set in a pot of wet sand or plaster of Paris. In some parts of the country, a tumbleweed tree may be suitable. Whatever type of tree is chosen, firm anchoring is necessary. Place the tree in the church, parish hall or the group’s room as part of the Advent decorations.

Note: You’ll find a complete set of directions for making and using a Jesse tree in Growing Together, Volume 1: Fall & Winter (available from www.Church-Publishing.org). This collection of rich resources and practical tips can help you plan intergenerational parish gatherings, or simply enrich your sessions with seasonal traditions, projects and prayers.

The World of the Bible

Matthew’s Community

Matthew revised Mark's gospel because it no longer answered the new problems facing his community in the mid-eighties of the first century. His primarily Jewish community was Greek-speaking, probably located in a city like Antioch in Syria, since the earliest references to the book are by Ignatius of Antioch, about 110 CE.

As more and more Gentiles streamed into the Christian communities, he realized that his community was facing marginalization in a Church that was fast becoming almost exclusively non-Jewish. They would not be able to continue unless they could find a place in the increasingly Gentile-Christian community. How could he affirm their Jewish tradition and yet urge them to participate in the growing worldwide mission? His gospel is his answer.

Christians faced a decision about their relationship to Judaism. The fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the destruction of its temple forced the decision. Without a temple, the diverse groups within Judaism struggled to decide how to be Jewish without a temple.

The Pharisees, whose practice of Jewish life focused on the laity and the synagogue rather than on priests and the temple, became the new Jewish leaders. They questioned and finally rejected the way of practicing Judaism that Jesus had taught. It may have been to meet this crisis in the community that Matthew describes the Christian community, not Pharisaic Judaism, as the true embodiment of Israel.