Like Mary and John the Baptist, we welcome God’s new world.

- In the lectionary gospel, John calls those who would welcome God’s new world to a life of justice.
- In today’s session, we tell the story of Mary, a woman who lived out John’s message by welcoming God’s own Son, Jesus.
- In today’s core session, we focus on Mary’s story and review the Advent message that Jesus is coming.

**Question of the Week**
What in our household can we share with those in need?
Getting Started (5-10 minutes)

Use the chain-link Advent calendar made in the session for the 1st Sunday of Advent to introduce today's session and remind children that we now celebrate the season of Advent. (If you have not yet made this calendar, make one today to begin the session. You'll find the directions in the session for the 1st Sunday in Advent.)

Explain that today is the 3rd Sunday of Advent. Advent is when we get ready for Christmas to come. Advent is when we get ready for Jesus to come. Invite children to take off seven more loops from our Advent Chain to see how close we are coming to Christmas.

Remind children of the ritual phrase learned in the session for the 1st Sunday of Advent:

Leader: Who's coming?
Children: Jesus is coming

Invite seven volunteers each to remove a loop. Lead children in reciting the ritual phrase as each loop is removed.

Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)

The Mother of Baby Jesus

Story Focus: You can use crèche figures of Mary and an angel as a visual focus for today's story. After the story, make the figures available to the children in a free-play center.

Mary was a young woman who lived long ago. One day she looked up. An angel was looking at her! The angel said, “Peace be with you. God has chosen you for something special!”

Mary was scared. She did not know what the angel meant. The angel spoke again: “Don't be scared, Mary. You are going to have a baby. His name will be Jesus. He will be great! He will be called God’s Son.”

Mary asked, “But how can this happen? There is no one to be the baby’s father.”

The angel answered, “God will make it happen. There is nothing that God cannot do.”

Mary said, “I want to do whatever God asks of me. I will be the mother of baby Jesus.”

Then the angel went away.

Mary and the Angel (10-15 minutes)

Draw (or ask a volunteer to draw) a simple picture of an angel on the sheet of construction paper, similar to one of these:

Ask one child to be Mary. Ask Mary to sit in the center of a circle formed by the other children. Tape the picture of the angel to the floor in the circle’s path. Play music, such as “Soon and Very Soon.” (Open your Winter-C Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Companion Music for options on obtaining this music.)

Ask the children to walk or travel in a circle while the music plays. When the music stops, the child who lands on the angel picture is the angel. The angel “flies” to Mary and says, “Jesus is coming.”

Praying Together (5 minutes)

Gather in the prayer corner. Repeat with the children the exchange learned at the beginning of today's session:

Leader: Who's coming?
Children: Jesus is coming

Then say, “Mary listened to an angel sent by God. How can we listen to God?” Accept the children’s suggestions, and add your own: We can listen to God in the stories of the Bible, in the feelings of our heart, in the hugs our parents give us and in silence. Invite children to listen for God for 1 minute of silence.

Close by praying:
◆ Thank you, God, for speaking to us in so many ways.
Thank you for speaking to Mary, too, and asking her to be the mother of baby Jesus. Amen.

Note: If you use At Home with the Good News, either distribute this week’s papers to the children before they leave or e-mail the papers to their families.
Discover the Good News (5-10 minutes)
On page 1 of today’s Discover the Good News you’ll find text for a simple discussion to go with the poster Tar Beach 2 (also attached to this document). Read aloud the text for the children and invite their answers.

On page 2, you’ll find an illustrated version of a story-review song about John the Baptist and a To Parents note for families.

Singing Together (5-10 minutes)
From Singing the Good News you and the children can sing together:
- “Light Your Lamp” (p. 19 of the songbook; also available as an MP3)
- “Season of Glory” (p. 22 of the songbook; also available as an MP3)

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

Angel Shapes (10-15 minutes)
Children construct angel pictures from simple shapes. This project requires plenty of hands-on help; you might even prefer to cut out the shapes before the session. For a simpler art project, talk with the children about “what angels look like” (see below). Then distribute drawing materials and invite children to draw pictures of angels.

Discuss:
- What do you think angels could look like?

Accept all the children’s answers. Then explain that the Bible tells us that angels do not all look alike, but they all bring messages from God. Sometimes the Bible tells stories about angels with wings. Sometimes the Bible tells stories about angels with bright light around them. Sometimes the Bible tells stories about angels who look like animals, with peoples’ heads. Angels can look differently to different people, but all angels bring messages from God.

Cut out shapes for the children to use in making angels. You’ll find Angel Shapes Pattern attached to this document.

Give each child a piece of 9” x 12” construction paper and the shapes for the body and head. Help children glue shapes to form their pictures, following three steps:
- Step one: Start with a triangle for the body and a circle for the head.
- Step two: Add wings.
- Step three: Add yarn hair and decorate the wings with glitter or aluminum foil.

Some children will enjoy the puzzle of replicating an arrangement of shapes on another page, but welcome those pictures that use the materials in different and imaginative ways. The goal is not for all the angels to look alike, but for children to explore traditional and imaginative images of angels.
Young Children and the Gospel

Today’s gospel from the lectionary tells a story about John the Baptist. Although the figure of John the Baptist is an important one, young children find his connection to the Christmas narrative obscure. Remembering that children have years to hear these important stories, we focus on the story of John in the session for the 2nd Sunday of Advent only.

In today’s session, we turn to the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as another important story of preparation for the coming of Christ. Mary, like a second Abraham, says the fundamental yes that welcomes God’s plan into the world.

From now until several weeks after Christmas, we recommend that you make available a simple crèche set for children to use in a free-play center. The crèche set at home or on display in the church building may be too fragile for children to touch! They will welcome a set they can freely handle.

Angels

Several activities in today’s session and throughout Winter include the mysterious biblical figures of angels. In today’s session, for example, children make angel pictures. What language can we use with young children? A first principle is: do not teach children anything we do not truly know or believe about angels.

One example of what not to teach would be the popular cultural belief that when humans die, they become angels. Neither scripture nor the Church teach us this about angels. Instead you might say:

◆ The Bible tells us that angels do not all look alike.
◆ Sometimes the Bible tells about angels with wings.
◆ Sometimes the Bible tells about angels with bright light around them.
◆ Sometimes the Bible tells about angels who even look like animals, with peoples’ heads.
◆ I don’t know what angels look like, but all angels bring messages from God.

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.
  — Angel Shapes Pattern to use in the Angel Shapes activity in today’s session.
  — A copy of today’s Gospel Story to hand out to children or e-mail to their families.
  — This week’s At Home with the Good News to hand out to children or e-mail to their families.
◆ Open your Winter-C Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Seasonal Articles to find:
  — Information on Winter-C’s Models of the Faith.
  — An article for catechists and/or families exploring the ministry of John the Baptist.
  — An article for catechists and/or families titled Learning through Literature.
  — An article for catechists and/or families titled Learning through the Visual Arts.
  — The Introduction for Preschool/Kindergarten for Living the Good News.
More about Today’s Scriptures

Today’s readings celebrate God’s promise of freedom, forgiveness and healing. The prophet Zephaniah assures God’s people of approaching victory and gladness. Joy is the keyword in today’s reading from Philippians, as Paul urges his readers to rest fully in God and know God’s deep, abiding peace. John the Baptist announces the imminent arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, who will bring forgiveness, cleansing and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Zephaniah 3:14-18a

Zephaniah’s ministry took place during the reign of Josiah (640-609 BCE) before the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon.

Zephaniah’s book foretells the coming “day of the Lord,” the reckoning day when God first judges the unfaithful and then rewards the faithful.

Today’s passage contains Zephaniah’s message of comfort and jubilant hope. It presents a picture of the salvation of the people and the ultimate restoration of Jerusalem after God’s judgment has been carried out.

These verses recount the glorious dwelling of God with the people. The enemies of Israel will be destroyed, and all the exiles will finally be gathered together.

The promise in verse 17 encapsulates the revelation to God’s people; power and tenderness unite in God’s relationship with humanity to produce final victory and great joy.

Philippians 4:4-7

Paul encourages the Philippians to recognize and establish joy as the atmosphere of their lives. Their participation in the past sufferings of Christ and in his present lordship, and their anticipation of his glorious return in the future are the context for their life together now.

This joyful lifestyle means that they can be gracious, unselfish, free from anxiety, bold in prayer and thankful as they make their needs known to God. Then peace beyond understanding, peace in the midst of trial, will be theirs.

Luke 3:10-18

In this reading, John the Baptist preaches the good news of forgiveness and of the coming of a new relationship with God.

John’s baptism is a symbolic and prophetic act, the outward sign of a changed inner self. But he makes clear that repentance or changing one’s life has many practical implications.

Those who have are to share with those who have not; tax collectors are to cease their extortion (19:8); and soldiers are to cease brutality and blackmail.

The mightier one who is coming, identified with the Messiah, will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire,” two images that are often associated with God’s power and judgment (12:49).

John’s image is of a baptism of judgment (3:9, 17) rather than one that purges and saves. The conjunction of Holy Spirit and fire may also foreshadow what will happen later at Pentecost.
Reflection

The heartening thing about John’s advice is, it’s something we can all do. The things he tells the crowds are fairly basic. None of it entails fasting strictly, leaving home or career, forsaking everything, pursuing martyrdom, or traveling to a mission country. What’s doable happens within the familiar parameters of our jobs, skills and neighborhoods.

Furthermore, the readings carry a splendid note of joy, perhaps because they call us not merely to cope but to transform. We can rejoice because God rejoices over us, withdrawing any judgment against us. If we want an image of this God, we need look no further than a bride and groom gazing into each other’s eyes, or a parent looking at a newborn child. Like these human beings, God can’t resist delighting in us.

Knowing that, it seems somewhat absurd to harbor anxieties, a pernicious habit left over from a time when we didn’t understand how outrageously God cares, how deftly God looks after us. When “the Lord is near,” God’s peace expels the demons of fretting and fear.

The Scriptures and the Catechism

The readings for today highlight God’s presence in our midst as a mighty savior (CCC, #169, 430–35). This certainly creates a sense of joy in us. But when we recognize God’s presence, we realize that this will change our lives. God’s Holy Spirit is a transforming power that never leaves us the same (CCC, #687–747). All areas of our lives will be affected by God’s presence (CCC, #978, 1213, 1263–66).

The World of the Bible

Savior

Before it became a theological term, savior meant one who rescued someone from a difficult situation, especially one that was life-threatening. Thus it was commonly attributed to the king or emperor or general who saved the nation by defeating their enemies in a war.

For the Jews, God was their primary Savior because God had rescued them from their oppression in Egypt and continued to defend them against their numerous enemies.

For Christians, Jesus is identified as the Savior because he rescued us from our broken relationship with God and offered us a new relationship under God’s kingdom rule, which completely reorders creation and the human community.

Savior is best understood in relation to God’s activity and plan. God’s presence and activity is always for the sake of relationships. God’s purpose and plan is revealed in the drama of God entering into a covenant with humanity. Thus human history is, at its core, salvation history—the story of God in search of a people who will form the kind of community that God envisions.

God’s plan illustrates how the divine power is used to realize the right kind of relationships. As the familiar salvation story unfolds, God’s patronal roles as life-giver (creator), rescuer (savior), covenant maker (master), lawgiver and judge (lord) are played out in relation to the communities chosen as God’s covenant partner. God’s presence to judge (demonstrating God’s ethical seriousness) and to save (demonstrating God’s gracious mercy) transforms all creation.