Our Salvation

Jesus’ parents encounter Simeon and Anna in the temple.

- In today’s gospels, we celebrate the mystery of God’s Light come to God’s People and into the world.
- Christmas can be an over-excited day for young children. The Church's season of Christmas allows them a time to quietly reflect on the Christmas story that may have been lost in the excitement of the day.
- In today’s session we focus on the Christmas narrative itself, revisiting Advent activities in the light of Christmas fulfillment.

Question of the Week

In your family, children also grow in “wisdom, age and grace.” Where do you see God’s presence in your family?

Core Session

- Getting Started (simple crèche set)
- Gospel Story: Many Miles to Bethlehem
- Story-Review Game (simple crèche set)
- Praying Together (Advent wreath or candles)

Enrichment

- Discover the Good News
- Singing the Good News
- Gospel Story: Going to the Temple
- Crèche Play (simple crèche set, baskets of natural materials)
- Story-Review Game
- Art: Swanson’s Festival of Lights
- Light-and-Darkness Paintings (newspapers, royal blue tempera paint, spray bottles, pebbles)
- 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 5
- Reflections on the Incarnation

Scriptures

John 1:5

Holy Family – B

Preschool/Kindergarten
Getting Started (10-15 minutes)

Before the session wrap each figure of a crèche set in a separate small box. Hide these boxes around the room.

The crèche figures available for children’s free play throughout Advent take center stage in today’s session, beginning with this simple hunting game. Invite children to share stories about their Christmas celebrations. Explain:

* There are Christmas boxes hidden all around this room with figures we need for today’s story.
* Can you help find the boxes we need for today’s story?

Be careful how you word your request. Make clear that the boxes contain story figures that will be used by all the children, not just those who find the boxes. Make clear, too, that the figures will be used only in the session rather than taken home.

When children have found all the boxes, invite them to carefully unwrap the boxes to find the figures.

Gospel Story (5-10 minutes)

Focus: Use the crèche figures found in today’s Getting Started activity to serve as a visual focus for today’s story.

Story: Many Miles to Bethlehem

“Come, Joseph,” says Mary. “It’s time for Jesus to be born.”

“Come, donkey,” says Joseph. “It’s time for Jesus to be born.”

Walk, walk, walk, walk. It’s many miles to Bethlehem.

“How can we stay here?” asks Mary. “It’s time for Jesus to be born.”

“No room, no room,” the people say.

“How can we stay here?” asks Joseph. “It’s time for Jesus to be born.”

“No room, no room,” the people say.

But the donkey follows its nose to a stable filled with animals—birds and cows and sheep.

Here’s room! Here’s room!

And now baby Jesus is born.

Far away, shepherds watch their sheep. Suddenly, the sky is filled with angels, flying here and there.

“Good news! Good news!” the angels sing. “Jesus is born! Go and find him in Bethlehem.”

Walk, walk, walk, walk. It’s many miles to Bethlehem.

“Here is the stable,” says a shepherd. “Here is the mother and here is the baby.”

“Good news! Good News!” the shepherds shout.

“Baby Jesus is born!”

Story-Review Game (5-10 minutes)

Explain:

* I will say riddles about today’s story. If you know who the riddle is about, point to that story figure.

Riddles:

* I am an animal. I carry Mary to Bethlehem. (donkey)
* I am a woman. I am the mother of baby Jesus. (Mary)
* I am a man. I am the husband of Mary. (Joseph)
* I am a baby. I am born in a manger. (baby Jesus)
* I fly through the skies. I tell shepherds the good news about baby Jesus. (angel)
* I take care of sheep. I see angels in the sky. (shepherd)
* I am an animal. Shepherds take care of me. I have warm, curly wool. (sheep)

Praying Together (5 minutes)

If you included the Light-and-Darkness Painting activity, lay the paintings around the Advent wreath. Place the candle in the center of the wreath. Say:

* Today our Advent wreath has a new candle, a fifth candle for baby Jesus.
* Today we will light all our candles.

Light the candles. Then quietly read aloud words from John 1:5, taken from today’s gospel: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.

After a moment of silence, sing a favorite Christmas song, such as “Away in the Manger.”

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)
On page 1 of today’s Discover the Good News you’ll find a Christmas rhyme to read to the children.

On page 2 we give instructions for a simple Christmas memory book that children can make today.

Singing Together (10-15 minutes)
From Singing the Good News you and the children can sing together:
◆ “Christmas Dreams” (songbook p. 18, also available as an MP3)
◆ “The Hay Was Scratchy” (songbook p. 20)
◆ “Going to the Temple” (songbook p. 22)

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 also use simple movements to turn “Christmas Dreams” into a prayerful dance. You’ll find the directions in the handout Christmas Dreams Dance, attached to this document.

Crèche Play (10-15 minutes)
Children explore the stories of the Nativity cycle through free play. As in the sessions for the 1st through 4th Sundays 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 creche 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 creche figures, emphasize the children’s freedom to touch, move and rearrange the figures and materials.

Story (5-10 minutes)
Focus: A second gospel for today’s session tells the story of Jesus’ presentation in the Temple. You can use crèche figures to tell this story, too. If you like, use the chorus of “Going to the Temple” (see Singing Together, previous column) as a story refrain.

Story: Going to the Temple
“Come, Joseph,” says Mary. “It’s time to take Jesus to the Lord.”

“Come, Jesus,” says Joseph. “We’re going to the temple today.”

Simeon is in the temple. Anna is in the temple. They are waiting for God’s special baby to come to the temple.

In walk Mary and Joseph. The baby Jesus is in Mary’s arms. “Look!” says Simeon.

“God’s special baby is here!” says Anna.

“Praise God!” shout Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna. “Baby Jesus is here!”

Story-Review Game
Children play a story-review game. Place chairs in a circle. Everyone is seated. Explain that you are Anna, and that you will tell everyone the good news of Jesus’ birth. When you say, “Jesus is here!” everyone leaps up and changes places.

While the children are changing places, sit in one of the chairs. The child who is left without a chair becomes the new Anna and announces, “Jesus is here!” Repeat as long as interest is sustained.

Art (5-10 minutes)
Swanson’s Festival of Lights
Activity Soundtrack: Play “Oh Happy Day.” (Open your Winter-B Seasonal Resources folder, then click on Companion Music for options on obtaining this music.)

Gather children around John August Swanson’s painting Festival of Lights, attached to this document. This colorful poster shows people holding lights, moving together in a joyful procession toward the viewer. The image evokes the brightness given to us through the life and Spirit of Jesus, spread throughout the world in the people of his Church.

Ask children to talk about what they see in the picture. Can they find people in the picture? What do the people carry? If they could stand in the picture, too, where would they like to stand?
Explain:
- Christmas is a time when we think about light shining in darkness.
- Sometimes we call Jesus our Light. We say, “Jesus, you are the Light of the world.”
- Listen as I read you words from scripture about Jesus our Light.

Read aloud John 1:5: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.*

**Light-and-Darkness Paintings**
(10-25 minutes)
Children explore light and darkness with wet-on-wet painting techniques as background for a picture of the Holy Family.

Because achieving precise forms with watercolors is difficult, watercolors are rarely recommended for use with young children. However, wet-on-wet techniques help children experience painting as an exploration of color rather than form.

We recommend that you use good-quality materials, including real artists’ paints, for this activity. Since only two colors are needed—blue and yellow—the cost need not be high. Prepare the painting center by following these steps:
- Mix one part paint with three to four parts water. Pour the mixed paint into small jars.
- Use a sponge to dampen a water-resistant work surface, such as that of an ordinary kitchen counter or a desk.
- For each child, immerse a sheet of paper in the dishpan of water. Let excess water drip back into the dishpan.
- Lay each paper flat on the dampened surface, avoiding any wrinkles or ridges. Use the side of your hand to sweep any excess puddle of water off the surface of the paper.
- Provide each child with a painting smock, a paint brush, a jar of plain water, a rag and one jar each of blue and yellow paint.

Read aloud John 1:5: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.*

Explain:
- Christmas is a time when we think about light shining in darkness. Sometimes we call Jesus our Light. We say, “Jesus, you are the Light of the world.”
- We have dark blue paint and bright, light yellow paint today.
- Can you use your paints to show light shining in darkness?

Help children use this technique as they paint:
- Dip the brush in water.
- Blot excess water from the brush onto a rag.
- Dip the blotted brush into paint.
- Touch the paint brush to the wet paper.
- Repeat the entire sequence whenever the painter wishes to switch colors; this will keep the colors clean.

Because the paper and paints are both wet, the color will easily spread, slide and expand. Some children will lay patches of color side by side on their papers. Other children will paint the colors right on top of one another, turning the entire page into shades of green.

**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: Many Miles to Bethlehem*, which can be distributed or e-mailed to children and their families.
  - An optional *Action Rhyme*, that retells today’s Gospel Story.
  - Printable directions for the *Christmas Dreams Dance*, suggested in today’s Music activity.
  - Swanson’s *Festival of Lights*, to use in today’s Art activity.
- Open your Winter-B *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Seasonal Articles* to find:
  - Information on Winter-B’s *Models of the Faith*.
  - A printable article for catechists titled *First Impressions*, which offers practical helps for the use of fine art.
  - For catechists and/or families, a helpful *Epiphany Overview* and an article offering *Reflections on the Incarnation.*
More about Today’s Scriptures

Today’s readings explore God’s loving care for families, including the family of Jesus. The author of Sirach describes the mutual joy and respect to be found in the ideal parent-child relationship. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul details relationships in God’s family—and human families as well. In the gospel, Simeon and Anna greet Jesus’ family at the temple and witness with great joy to the baby Jesus, the Lord’s Messiah.

**Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14**

Written almost 200 years before Jesus Christ, the book of Sirach contains the teachings of Jesus ben Sirach (50:27) who dedicated himself to the instruction of youth in the path of wisdom. Much of Sirach deals with relationships: with God, family members, neighbors, business associates, close friends.

Sirach addresses the ancient understanding of the parent-child relationship, focusing on the attitudes and actions that he believes children should exhibit. He affirms the parents’ authority over a child and advises children to treat both mother and father with honor and reverence. Such attitudes result in a right relationship with God and a long life. The relationship between parent and child continues even when the child has attained independence. As parents age, children are called to a respect exhibited in care and kindness.

**Colossians 3:12-21**

Paul discusses the practical consequences of accepting Christ as Lord. In baptism those to be baptized put off their old clothes and afterward put on the new white baptismal robe as a sign of their having put off the old nature and put on the new. This fact must now be lived out by putting to death the old way of life and putting on the new life in Christ.

Believers are to embody the characteristics that Jesus proclaimed in his teaching and modeled in his ministry. Above all, the peace of Christ resulting from reconciliation with God and with one another is to rule in their hearts. This loving interaction is to be seen in the liturgy, in mutual teaching, in psalms, in hymns and in spiritual songs (possibly sung spontaneously or with the Spirit). All is to be done in the name of Jesus.

**Luke 2:22-40**

The presentation in the temple combines several themes and several rituals. One ceremonial requirement was for the purification of a mother 40 days after the birth of a son. For this the sacrifice of a pair of two young pigeons, the offering specified for the poor, was made. The second ceremonial requirement was for the redemption of the firstborn son, who as a recognition of God’s gift of life was consecrated to the Lord.

Simeon awaits the consolation of Israel, a way of describing messianic expectation. This he sees fulfilled in the infant Jesus whom he recognizes as Messiah. In the words for the emancipation of a slave, he asks God to let him go in peace. The word to Mary anticipates the central role of Jesus in God’s plan of salvation and highlights the importance of our response.

Anna is described using biographical details probably intended to link her to the figure of Judith (Judith 8:4-8; 16:22-23). She serves as the second witness needed for true testimony. The closing sentence stresses Jesus’ human growth—physical, mental and spiritual—in the context of his family and again parallels Samuel (1 Samuel 2:26).

**Reflection**

At first, the story of Jesus’ presentation and circumcision seems to turn the custom upside-down. The parents, following tradition, present their newborn to the Lord—but he is the Lord. They can’t afford a lamb for sacrifice—but he is the Lamb of God.

Their meeting with Simeon suggests questions for us to reflect on. What would we like to see before we die? Fill in the blank: “Seeing ______, I could die happy.” Many of us want to see our children secure, fulfilled and successful. Others want to achieve something in their chosen field: sports, academics, business. Others want to finally visit a beautiful spot they’ve only imagined.

But Simeon has a broader view, which surpasses personal desire. Prophetically, he sees the importance of Jesus not only to Israel but to all humanity. He even sees beyond the infant’s sweetness to the steel: this innocent looking child will inspire hatred, and ultimately the sword of heartbreak will pierce his mother.

Anna has spent a long time preparing for her moment of recognition. She isn’t focused completely on herself or on trivia, so she can speak the language of praise. Finally, Jesus’ family returns to Nazareth, a two-bit town where holiness abounds.
The Scriptures and the Catechism

The interpersonal relationships in our families must mirror our relationship with God (CCC, #2201–13, 2232–33, 2685). The covenant fidelity and loving concern that marked God’s relationship with the people become the goals of Christian marriage (CCC, #1601–24). Family attitudes of respect, honor and reverence for one another provide a healthy antidote to the dysfunctional family dynamics so prevalent today (CCC, #2197–2200).

Faith Formation and the Arts, Part 5
by Roger W. Hutchison

Exploring Your Worship Space

Take an excursion with your group to your church’s worship space. Ask them to show you their favorite spot. It may be near a special window where the light shines over them or in a pew where they can have a wonderful view of the ever-changing altar.

Take young children, your teenagers or a group of adults and have them touch the actual floor—encourage them to imagine the many soles and souls who have walked over these floors. Maybe they crawled across these floors as a baby. Maybe they said “I do” here to the love of their lives. Maybe they said a final goodbye to a parent or a friend.

Does your worship space have clear glass in the windows instead of stained glass? Have you ever really watched a tree change from season to season? A child in your midst watches the leaves change and the squirrels play. Creation (and destruction) is always taking place.

Experience the Stations of the Cross with your teenagers. Provide them a blank canvas or shapeless lump of clay and encourage each of them to create one of the stations. Watch their eyes as they enter into each graphic and vivid image, seeking to hold Christ up. This dance between visual arts and Christian Formation is not just for young children; it is for all of us on this journey.

Imagine the spiritual impact for your community of faith if you exhibited the Stations of the Cross as designed by your teenagers. Display their work during Holy Week, around a Labyrinth, in your worship space or in an empty room. Provide a journal at the end of the Stations for people to leave their responses.

Reflections on the Incarnation

The incarnation is more than an article of faith reserved for textbooks. It is a statement about how God chooses to relate to creation and to human beings. The notion of a god taking human form is not unique to Christianity. Many pagan religions had similar tales of the gods’ coming in human form.

The incarnation is unique, however, in what it says about the God who comes into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. First, we must be precise: to speak of the incarnation is to speak of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God. In itself the incarnation is an act of the Trinity. The Father wills that the Word become flesh through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The spatial notion of God in heaven before the incarnation and on earth can’t be applied here. God is not bound by the same strictures that bind us in flesh, time and place. The Word made flesh is the involvement of God in time and history in a new way and an expression of the Lordship of God over both.

The incarnation expresses God’s love and desire for the redemption of human nature. The Word becomes flesh in order that the children of flesh might become children of God, not just in their origin but in their very nature. The early teachers of the Church spoke of *theopoiesis*, which means “making Godlike.” By this they do not mean that Christians become gods, but rather that through our baptism into Christ, we are enabled to share in the divine life of God in a new and fulfilling way. We call this divine life *sanctifying grace*. This divine life is more than eternal life. It is the opportunity to share in a vision of the world as God sees it, corrupted by sin yet still capable of being restored to the shape, to the nature in which it was created by God.

If our celebration of the incarnation is to have any impact on the world in which we live, we must return to a proclamation of its power. Christmas is not about a baby in a manger. Christmas is about the incarnation of the Word of God, who comes to judge the world and give life to those who hear the message that the Word proclaims. Christmas is about the call of God to men and women, children and adults, to become “divinized” persons, full of the divine life and its vision for the world. In such persons, God makes an appeal to all humanity to enter into this new life.