
LEADER'S GUIDE

The Gospel
Stories of
Jesus' Birth

Behold This Child



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PLEASE NOTE: This leader's guide was originally written for those using this video program in its VHS format. Those now using this program on DVD may find some references that do not apply to their use (i.e., directions for locating segments, time notations, etc.). We trust that both VHS- and DVD-users will find this guide a valuable resource.

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Overview of the Program

This video program offers a look behind the Christmas story that is so familiar to us all. Presenting contemporary Scripture scholarship concerning the birth of Christ, this program explores the biblical background in a way easily understood and accepted by the average audience. Charming original paintings in the style of medieval illuminated manuscripts illustrate the four segments of the program. Traditional Christmas symbols are portrayed, reassuring viewers that the central truth of the beloved stories of Christ's birth remains. Contemporary scholarship seeks to move beyond literal history or biography to the rich theology behind the stories. From this overview, viewers will appreciate the deeper truths which the Christmas stories have to teach us about Christ, the Church and each other.

The program is divided into four presentations:

- *The Christmas Story: An Introduction* (10 minutes)
- *The Promise Fulfilled: The Annunciation Stories* (11 minutes)
- *And It Came to Pass: The Birth of the Messiah* (10 minutes)
- *What Child Is This? The Messiah Is Recognized* (12 minutes)

While *Behold This Child* will be chosen by many as part of an Advent or Christmas program, it is equally suitable for any year-round Scripture study. *Behold This Child* serves as a link between Old Testament and New Testament studies and celebrates the truth that the story of Christmas is one of the best ways we have of getting in touch with our roots as Christians.

Theological Orientation

Most Catholics today accept the idea that the Old Testament contains many different literary forms which often are meant to explain and advance certain religious concepts rather than recount historical details or facts.

The following excerpt from the Vatican II document *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei Verbum* ["The Word Of God"] applies to all Scripture, not just the Hebrew Scriptures:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another. (Dei Verbum, 12)

Because the New Testament Gospels present the life of Jesus, with details that resemble our contemporary biographies, those who hear the Gospels proclaimed,

and know the familiar stories, such as the Infancy Narratives, may find it surprising that these stories are more than simply the presentation of biographical detail.

Catholics may be surprised to learn that the accounts of Matthew and Luke, when read side by side, reveal that the Christmas story, as we know it, is really a combination of two accounts, each detail included for a particular audience. The Infancy Narratives are transitions between the literary forms of the Old Testament and the more easily verified accounts of Christ's public life and death. The well-known stories such as the Annunciation, the Flight into Egypt, the Slaughter of the Innocents, the Coming of the Magi carry forth literary symbols and traditions found in the Old Testament in order to become familiar cornerstones on which the New Church may rest comfortably.

For some, especially those who have never considered that the Bible may offer more than biographical facts, a look behind the familiar story of Christmas may at first be uncomfortable, even disquieting.

But mature Christians soon discover that the meaning behind these stories enriches these accounts which Christians know and love. Students of the Infancy Narratives find the study of this deeper level exciting and rewarding. *Behold This Child* aids and accelerates these discoveries.

Tips for Leaders

- It's important to be aware that many people in your audience, especially those who may not have been involved in any form of contemporary Scripture study, may at first feel uncomfortable with the idea that the biblical Christmas story is not simply a literal, biographical account. Please encourage the

sharing of any doubts or confusion which might arise. Unless these feelings can be shared openly, and explored with respect, it may be difficult for your viewers to get behind the story and discover the richness of its meaning.

- You may wish to stress that exploring levels of meaning in a story—biblical or not—is certainly not the same thing as saying it never happened. There is no way to document historically every detail of the birth of the Messiah; even if there were, the real truth of the story lies not in its separate parts but in its overall message, the message of the Gospel. The segments of this program explore the process by which the Infancy Narratives were composed. Stress is placed on the ways in which Matthew and Luke wove together oral tradition, written sources, and their own faith—not to downplay the idea of inspiration, but to explore how the Holy Spirit works in and through human literary forms and symbols, and to involve viewers more fully in the experience of the Christmas Story as Matthew and Luke’s readers first heard it, with all its power.
- If you plan to break up into small groups for discussion after viewing each segment of the video program, choose your discussion leaders before the group meets. Encourage discussion leaders to preview each video segment with you to familiarize themselves with the content and style.
- It will also be very helpful to provide participants with the text of the Infancy Narratives, (Matthew 1:1-2:23 and Luke 1:5-2:52) for ease in locating the passages. It is important that all participants are using the same translation of the Bible with identical pagination. (Unless this is an established Scripture study group, do not assume that all

participants will be able to locate a passage by simply giving them the book, chapter and verse.)

- While the video program can be viewed in one session, there is so much material presented that we strongly suggest spreading it out over four gatherings. This fits nicely into four weekly sessions during the four weeks of Advent or over four sessions of a Scripture study group any time of the year. Consider offering sessions between or after Sunday Masses or at the same time as the parish's religious education classes for children.

Sample Process

We offer here a sample process to use with each of the four presentations in this program. You may choose to adapt this process to fit your needs and those of your parish participants.

1. Opening Prayer

If you are meeting during Advent, you may wish to begin your gathering with an appropriate Advent prayer or song.

2. Overview of the Program

Begin the first session with an overview of the goal of this process: to explore the Infancy Narratives, the Gospel stories of Jesus' birth, to see what they have to tell us about Jesus, the Church and each other.

The key question for the overall program is: *How are the Christmas stories truly "good news" for us?*

By applying contemporary Scripture study to the Christmas stories we know and love, we may discover new meaning in them for our lives now. We may also discover a new way to read the Bible. And, if we are open, we are bound to hear God speaking to us in new ways through these treasured stories of

Jesus' birth.

In his book *An Adult Christ at Christmas* (Liturgical Press, 1988) Scripture scholar Raymond Brown says that studying about the Infancy Narratives is an effort to put an adult Christ into Christmas, to show how the Jesus who died and rose is the one Matthew and Luke are describing in their accounts of the Christmas story.

3. Overview of the Session

- Presentation One: *The Christmas Story: An Introduction*
- Presentation Two: *The Promise Fulfilled: The Annunciation Stories*
- Presentation Three: *And It Came to Pass: The Birth of the Messiah*
- Presentation Four: *What Child Is This? The Messiah Is Recognized*

4. Opening Activity from *Suggestions for Use* for each Presentation

5. View the Video Segment

6. Reflection and Sharing using *Questions for Reflection and Sharing* for each Presentation

7. Short Recap of Information presented in video and additional information catechist would like to share with this group.

8. Reflection and Sharing on Key Question for each Session:

- Presentation One: *How do we, here in our parish, become a "living Gospel community"?*
- Presentation Two: *What is our response to what we have heard about who is born at Christmastime – not just the Prince of Peace, but the Messiah (Old*

*Testament) and the Son of God (New Testament)?
How do we act on that recognition?*

- Presentation Three: *As you contemplate the manger scene this Christmas, ask yourself: “Where am I in this scene?” and “Which character from the story am I?”*
- Presentation Four: *What does the Christmas story teach me about the implications of following Jesus as a mature Christian?*

9. Closing Prayer

Presentation One

The Christmas Story: An Introduction

Summary

The Christmas Story as we know it is really a combination of the accounts told by Matthew and Luke, who wrote different stories for different audiences, at different times. Matthew did not mean to write a biography, or even a collection of memoirs, but rather a teaching tool for Jewish Christians that would explain Christ in terms of the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Luke, on the other hand, wrote for Gentiles and stressed the universality of the Good News. His account was dramatic, in the tradition of the Greek drama in which he grew up.

Luke wanted to excite and inspire his audience. Matthew wanted to teach the truths needed to defend Jesus as the Messiah to quarrelsome religious leaders. Together, the infancy narratives provide us with a richness of meaning.

Suggestions for Use

Opening Activity

Say to those gathered the following or similar words:

Most of us have heard the Christmas story every Christmas all of our lives, and we probably think we know and understand this part of the Bible pretty well, that really there is not much about the Christmas story that we have to learn. Just to test yourself, answer the following true/false questions.

True-False Questions (handout)

1. All four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) described the birth of Christ in detail in their Gospels.
2. The Christmas Gospels are more important for the religious concepts they teach than for the biographical facts they present.
3. Most of the important scenes in the Christmas story (the Shepherds, the Kings, the Presentation in the Temple, the Flight into Egypt) were included in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels.
4. Most of the Gospel accounts were written for the same reasons and for the same audience.

After viewing the video presentation, have everyone look at his/her answers and correct them together in light of the information presented on the video.

Questions for Reflection and Sharing

1. What was your strongest feeling while viewing the video?
2. What new information stands out most in your mind?
3. Does the fact that some stories in the Bible may not be literally true affect your faith in the truth of their message? Why or why not?
4. Think of a story you know or have heard about the *childhood* of one of your parents. Describe the incident; who was present; what happened as a result, etc. Ask yourself: Where did I hear this story? Who are my sources? When I tell the story to someone, is it the same with each telling? Do I add or subtract details? How much influence on the story comes from what I know about my parents as *adults*?

Presentation Two

The Promise Fulfilled: The Annunciation Stories

Summary

Matthew and Luke each combined tradition, memory and his own poetic sense to tell his particular version of the birth of Christ. They reached far back into the collective memory of the Jewish Christian community for the roots of their stories.

Matthew listed Christ's family tree. Each member was included for the special significance the name had for the Jews. Even the numbers used in the genealogy helped to stress Jesus was the Messiah, the promised one.

But the dramatic parade of names had a larger

purpose. With it, Matthew introduced two heroes of the New Testament, Mary and Joseph. Joseph, a familiar name to Matthew's listeners, was portrayed as a *dreamer* like the Joseph of the Old Testament who, after being sold into slavery by his own brothers, managed to save his whole world from a disastrous famine.

For Matthew, it is Joseph who hears the all-important message that Mary is to have a child, not his child, but one conceived through the Holy Spirit.

Luke tells essentially the same annunciation story, but it is Mary who hears the good news, most likely because Luke thinks he can move his audience more by telling the story through Mary's eyes. Since Luke's audience has less experience with the ancient Jewish tradition, Luke feels no need to trace Christ's ancestry. Instead, he begins with the birth of John the Baptist, the prophet most familiar to his Gentile audience. Both Matthew and Luke, with different approaches and different details, directed to different audiences, leave no doubt that Jesus is the Savior, promised through the ages.

Suggestions for Use

Opening Activity

If you have many new people who did not attend the first session or if the contextual approach to reading Scripture was new to many of the participants in the group, it would be worthwhile to offer a brief review of the last session, emphasizing the fact that Matthew and Luke used different literary styles to write different accounts for different audiences.

Make sure that everyone in the group has a copy of each Gospel account to follow and compare. Read aloud, or have someone else (preferably a parish lector) read, Matthew's account of the Annunciation and then

Luke's account. Invite the participants to note any differences in detail or tone they found in the two accounts. It is hoped that someone will observe that the feeling, the literary style of each of the evangelists is as different as the details included, giving versions of the story that would touch and move different people.

Introduce the video segment by suggesting the participants listen closely to see what symbolism and traditions lie behind each account, giving reason for the differences in style and detail.

Questions for Reflection and Sharing

1. What was your strongest feeling while viewing the video?
2. What new information stands out most in your mind?
3. What kind of people today would find Matthew's account more illuminating, more emotionally and intellectually stimulating? Who would prefer Luke's account?
4. Both writers stressed the work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Christ. Why did they do so? What feelings does this message bring to you today?
5. What concepts does the video presentation bring out that are useful to us today?

Presentation Three

And It Came to Pass: The Birth of the Messiah

Summary

Matthew and Luke felt the need to tell the story of Christ from his beginning, his birth. But they had no real history to go on, no birth certificate, no family pictures. And so they told the story backwards, as “it must have been,” in light of what they knew about the Christ of the resurrection.

Matthew goes into few details about the actual birth. It is enough for him to say “she gave birth to a son, and he called his name *Jesus*.” For Matthew’s Jewish-Christian audience, the name “Jesus” was what they had been longing to hear, the name destined for the Messiah from the beginning of the prophecies.

Luke, on the other hand, could not depend upon centuries of tradition, based around the name “Jesus,” to excite his audience. He wrote for people who were anxious to learn every detail about Christ. They wanted to hear more, to be able to close their eyes and see the birth of the Christ child unfold before them.

For them, the “good old days” really began with John the Baptist.

Luke’s Infancy Narrative is less a biography than a proclamation of Jesus’ meaning to the whole world. Luke’s story showed that the message of salvation was meant for everyone, not just the Jews, and it emphasized God’s special love for the poor and homeless. The manger, the shepherds, even the angels, were characters important to his story, but even more, they were symbols of the new Church and the role of Christians in the world.

Suggestions for Use

Opening Activity

Ask participants to think for a moment about the Christmas story. What characters and elements do they remember? List their responses on a chalkboard or easel: the shepherds, the angels, the manger, the journey into Bethlehem, etc.

Now ask everyone to think about these elements for a moment. Could they also be symbols of something more? Record the participants' ideas about what each person, object or event could also symbolize.

Come back to this list *after viewing the video presentation*. Reread your list of symbols. Do you have any new ones to add? Are there any new meanings to add to the symbols you listed?

Now take each symbol as it has been explained in the video presentation and explore what meaning, what significance each one has for us in our lives today.

Questions for Reflection and Sharing

1. What was your strongest feeling while viewing the video?
2. What new information stands out most in your mind?
3. Was religion for the early Christians an emotional or an intellectual experience, or a combination of both?
Is religion for you an emotional or intellectual experience, or a combination of both?
4. When have you used symbols to convey a message—to your spouse, a child, a friend?
5. We are a Church that draws heavily on symbols in our sacraments and liturgy. What is one of your favorites? What special meaning does it hold for you?

Presentation Four

What Child is This? The Messiah is Recognized

Summary

In Matthew's version of the Christmas Story, the scenes around the coming of the Magi have many meanings. For his Jewish audience, the two strongest memories of the past were the Exodus and the Exile. Both were experiences of great communal sorrow, yet both held within them the message of God's undying care. To this, Matthew adds the good news that salvation was meant to reach beyond Israel into the whole world. The Magi's journey, guided by a star as Israel was guided out of Egypt by a pillar of fire, meant that the Messiah had come for all people. The three Kings' brush with Herod, and his subsequent killing of holy innocents, echoes the plotting of the Egyptian Pharaoh against the infant Moses.

The killing of the children underlines for Matthew's Jewish audience the whole history of oppression and foreshadows the sufferings of the Cross. And Jesus himself relives the experiences of his people in the Flight into Egypt and then, upon Herod's death, retraces the steps of the Exodus. He travels out of Egypt, the land of slavery, to Nazareth, where, 30 years later, he brings forth the good news of freedom.

Luke too used the events surrounding Jesus' birth as a means of exploring his significance for all people. But Luke's audience had not grown up with the blood and fury of the Exile and the Exodus. Instead, Luke's quiet tale is told through the eyes of Mary. In it the Holy Family brings the child to the Temple where he meets Simeon and Anna.

Luke's point is that Jesus meant to fulfill the Law, not overthrow it. Like a modern-day New Year's Eve

symbol, we see the newborn infant in the arms of the man close to death. The Old and New Covenant come together. Luke's audiences no longer must feel "left out" of the traditions of the Jewish past. They are now included in a beginning.

The story, which Luke began with the birth of John the Baptist, is completed with the recognition by Anna and Simeon that Christ is the Messiah. The message does not die with them, but instead will grow with Jesus as he grows, until it is time for him to reveal himself.

Suggestions for Use

Opening Activity

Read aloud Matthew's account of the Magi. Ask participants to share what this part of the Christmas story means to them. What do they think it symbolizes? How does it make them feel?

Read Luke's account of the Presentation in the Temple. What does this part of the story mean to the participants? Does it symbolize anything beyond just telling a story? How does it make them feel?

Questions for Reflection and Sharing

1. What was your strongest feeling while viewing the video?
2. What new information stands out most in your mind?
3. What significance do the Magi have for us today?
What does the Magi story tell us about different cultures? Ethnic groups? Different religions?
4. Give some examples of how finding Christ is often a lifelong journey.
5. Simeon and Anna offer a contrast between the old and the young. What can we learn from the elderly

- about life in general? About God and religion?
6. We are often disappointed and discouraged when progress doesn't happen rapidly. Using some of the insights gained from these video presentations, what did Christ's life, even his infancy, tell us about the way to fulfillment and salvation?

Resources for Further Study

Catechism of the Catholic Church

References to Sacred Scripture are found in the *Catechism* from 101-141. We find references to the Annunciation to Mary and the Birth of Jesus in 484-511. The section on The Mysteries of Christ's Life (512-534) touches on the Christmas mystery, his infancy and "hidden life" of his childhood. The section 422-455 speaks of the identity and titles of Jesus.

2) Available from Other Publishers (used as resources in the preparation of this material)

An Adult Christ at Christmas by Raymond E. Brown, Liturgical Press, 1988

The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke by Raymond E. Brown, Bantam Books, 1999

A Coming Christ in Advent by Raymond E. Brown, Liturgical Press, 1988

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