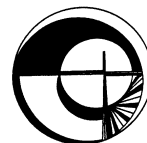




Come
and
Worship

Year A

by Carolyn
Wheeler and
David Bateman



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David Bateman
Carolyn Wheeler

Pentecost 1995

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Carolyn Wheeler
Carolyn Foster

Epiphany 2009

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INTRODUCTION

You are beginning to explore a complete program for Sunday morning children's worship. It has evolved over a period of several years and has worked very well in our parish. We decided it should be shared because we consider it a very workable and adaptable model for congregations of any size.

In 1989, when we came on staff at Holy Trinity Parish in Clemson, South Carolina — David Bateman as Curate and Carolyn Wheeler as Coordinator of Christian Education — our pre-school children were, for the most part, left in the church school rooms during the family service. On the first Sunday of each month the children attended this service with their families. When they entered first grade, they were suddenly expected to sit through the entire service every Sunday. We had parents who wanted their children to receive communion as early in their lives as possible. We had other parents who wanted to leave their children in a church school environment so that they (the parents) could worship "in peace." In addition to other problems, this led to confusion between worship and education.

In any case, by 1990 we knew that our children were not being served as well as they could be. So we began to think of ways to improve the situation. We were aware of parishes which included a children's homily in the adult service, but that only lengthened the service for the children. We also knew that even young children were readily participating in the drama and movement of the Eucharist.

Consequently, we decided that a more appropriate tack would be to give the children their own Liturgy of the Word, parallel to the adult liturgy but geared to their level, and to return the children to the Liturgy of the Table at the natural transition point, the exchange of the Peace.

Our approach to the service

We struggled with the details of how the whole process would work and finally found a usable model. (The specifics of this service are listed in the Order of Worship immediately following this introduction.) When our children arrive on Sunday morning, they gather with their families and the entire worshipping community in the nave of the church. Having the children with their parents for a short period at the beginning of the adult service solves the problem of the children not knowing where their parents are seated. We also think this gathering communicates to everyone the important message that children are part of the whole worshipping body: coming back is different from coming in. The children return to the same place where they began their worship.

After the Collect of the Day, the celebrant invites "those children who wish to" to go to their service of the Word. (We have made no policy about the age a child must be to attend the children's liturgy. We have a few toddlers who come with their parents, and they enjoy the music. The service seems to hold the most appeal for children from preschool through the intermediate grades. We have found that most children graduate themselves after about sixth grade.) When the children leave the adult service, the leader of the children's service leaves with them, with another adult following the group to bring along any stragglers. We always welcome other adults who go with the children.

Earlier in our history at Holy Trinity, the parish hall became a sacred space for the children; now we have a children's chapel. It is defined by an altar with fair linen, cross, and candles; by a Bible on a stand; and sometimes by flowers. Above the altar we have used a picture of a stained glass window created by members of one of the church school classes. We have chairs or floor space for any who wish to sit there. We also are fortunate to have a dedicated guitarist who greets the children every Sunday with the song "Enter, Rejoice, and Come In."

At this point, after most of the children are seated, the leader greets them. This greeting has become a habit with us and consists of a "Good morning" and perhaps some brief comment about the weather, the beginning of school, or some other similar item of interest. Then we begin the service

for the children with their own opening prayer. We have made a deliberate attempt to integrate the themes of the day and to stick closely to the classic format for collects: statement about God, petition, and Trinitarian ending. We also have tried to keep the prayer quite short.

Next come the readings. While the adults in most churches will hear three readings, we have only two. The choice of readings and the form they take is addressed in the next section. We almost always use an Old Testament passage for the first reading, except as indicated below. The Psalm follows the first reading, just as it does in the adult service. The children receive a psalm sheet with a graphic image (which can be colored) on one side and a responsive form of the Psalm on the other. (Reproducible psalms in responsive form are found in Appendix 4.) Perhaps you have an artist in your parish who would like to create images to go on the reverse of the psalm sheets. There are also many commercially available sources of religious graphics. The words of the refrain for everyone to say are printed in bold type, and, for the benefit of non-readers, the leader reads these words to the group before beginning the psalm. The leader reads the verses of the Psalm, the children say the refrain, and even the children who do not read can participate once the others begin. (Parishes that regularly sing the psalms can easily set our form of the psalm to music for their children.) We stand to sing the Doxology, and the children remain standing for the reading of the gospel. All readings are introduced and concluded with the same responses used by the adults and found in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

An interactive homily with the children follows the readings. We usually try to have the children re-tell the Bible story by asking some leading questions. Sometimes we let ideas develop by posing open-ended questions beginning with “I wonder,” as Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman suggest in their book *Young Children and Worship*. We then try to pull out a short point or two, keeping the homily time to about five minutes. We find that concrete things used as visual aids always work well, although we feel that it is unnecessary to force these just to “have something every week.” In fact, we have found that visuals are more effective if they are used less frequently. On occasion we do say something about the first reading immediately after reading it, especially if there is not an obvious connection between the two readings. We will also occasionally say a few words by way of introduction if there is something in a reading that we want the children to listen for or to understand as they go along. (One example comes to mind: we explained the term “plumb line” before a reading from the prophet Amos.) Our emphasis in the homily — and in the readings — is to make the children’s experience of God and of worship a positive one. We have tried to be thorough in our suggestions for the homilies, but we encourage leaders to take time with the readings. Leaders should be confident that the scriptures will speak to them regardless of their own experience and training. They should approach the readings and the homilies with an open heart and mind to allow for the creative work of the Spirit.

We fill the breaks in our children’s service with music, an area we would like to expand. Currently we use music that is geared more toward the younger children. The children always have requests. (A list of our children’s favorites is in Appendix 2.) After the homily, we have the first interval of music. After a few songs, we stand for the Children’s Creed. (This can be found in Appendix 1 and in the Order of Worship.) We then ask for any special prayers of concern or thanksgiving or for birthdays during the next week. When these requests have been heard, we have Prayers of the Young People, an adaptation of the forms found on page 393 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. (These prayers, too, are found in Appendix 1 and in the Order of Worship.) We conclude the children’s service with more music. Finally, we all return to the nave at the exchange of the Peace. We adjust this pattern as needed for special occasions. For example, on those Sundays on which there is a Baptism, we omit the Creed and the Prayers of the People because these are part of the baptismal rite. We bring the children back into the church before the Thanksgiving over the Water. Other parishes may want to adapt this to their own needs.

For the children's return to the adult service, help with timing is essential. We have someone who leaves the adult service after the sermon and signals us. Another parish uses a wireless doorbell. We then know that the amount of time remaining for us is whatever time it takes the adults for the Creed, the Prayers of the People, the Confession, and perhaps the announcements. Timing could be a problem, but it has never been a major one for us. We are often waiting a minute or two outside the nave and listening for the Peace before we enter, or we sometimes find the door open and the adults already waiting as we enter. Each parish should work out its own details of timing.

We believe that churches of any size can successfully use this model. At a minimum, it requires one adult leader. This person could lead every Sunday or work as part of a rotating team. If necessary, this same person could lead unaccompanied singing or use recorded music to support the children's singing. We believe it is best, however, to have an additional person who plays a musical instrument. One other adult should be delegated to handle distractions. This can be any adult: a parent who has accompanied a child to the children's liturgy, or the person who followed the group and brought along the stragglers.

Parishes may want to enhance the drama of the children's procession out of the church. This procession could be led by an acolyte carrying a cross or a banner, or by the leader carrying this book, signifying the Word of God, held high for everyone to see.

Nearly all churches suspend Sunday school/Christian education during the summer months because of sporadic attendance and the difficulty of maintaining a teaching staff during that period. However, recognizing the children's continuing need for accessible worship, we are committed to continuing the program uninterrupted throughout the year.

Our approach to the scripture readings

Our rendering of the scripture readings is the main focus and content of this volume. For several years, we have examined and edited these readings to make them suitable for children. We have directed our words toward the average comprehension level of a second grader, although in the case of the psalms, we have often retained more traditional language to preserve the beautiful poetry. Whenever possible, we have retained the appointed lectionary readings, except, as stated before, we have usually eliminated the reading of the epistle.

If we have found that a reading is too harsh or too negative for young listeners or that it casts God in an unfavorable light, we have made a change. Usually this problem occurs in the Old Testament readings; it is much less frequent in the gospels. An adult can integrate and look at the Old Testament from the viewpoint of one who has read the gospel of Jesus Christ, and an adult has more resources, in general, for handling difficult passages. Children, however, are more concrete and literal in their thinking, and they are sensitive to words of doom or of punishment. We think that the unedited Bible is an adult book and that some of the harsher passages can actually damage young children's relationships with God. Sometimes we have been able to edit readings of this nature by softening the language or by eliminating some verses and retaining only those that are more suitable. However, if we did not find this to be possible, or if little of value remained for the children after our editing, we have made a complete substitution. For the first reading this is usually another Old Testament story, but occasionally we have chosen an epistle that seemed appropriate. During Easter we have generally used an alternative reading from Acts. Any substitutions made for the second reading are, of course, taken from the gospels.

Our rendering of the scripture passages combines elements of both translation and paraphrase. In this we used many sources, including all the principal modern translations, translations aimed at readers with limited vocabulary, the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and other resources for translators. We examined various resources geared toward children, needing more than a Bible storybook but very often less than a complete children's Bible. Our two-fold aim at all times was

clarity and edification. Whenever possible, we have rendered passages as real translations, following the originals quite closely. Elsewhere, we have used paraphrase in order to make the meaning clear or to soften a very harsh tone.

We have used two readings, rather than three, for two main reasons. First, it can be difficult for children to keep three readings separate and distinct. Second, we feel that, of all the different kinds of material in the Bible, narratives — stories — are most accessible to children. Therefore, we have used stories from the Old Testament and from the gospels, the principal sources of stories in the Bible.

These scripture renderings are for listeners rather than readers. Hence, we have taken into consideration such things as how a passage will sound to an unprepared child, whether a passage contains any well-known phrases (which we have tried to keep), and whether a passage might contain homophones or other words which children might not hear correctly. For example, we do not use the phrase “the presence of the Lord” because it sounds like “the presents of the Lord.” In all our work we have tried to balance a respect for the text with the needs of listening children. In light of this, you may even choose to shorten some of the readings if many of your children are younger with shorter attention spans.

As a rule, the readings and suggestions for the homily for each Sunday are printed in this book on two facing pages. On those occasions when more than two pages are needed, we have used three or four. There are blank pages inserted into the file so that when the resource is printed and placed into a notebook, the session always begins on the left page. We have inserted brackets [] in the text for two purposes. One is to designate optional parts of scripture — either those we considered optional or those considered so in the adult lectionary. The other purpose is to point out introductions or other words that we have added to clarify meaning or to provide context for a particular passage.

The other changes we have made in this children’s lectionary involve philosophy. When we have a story that expresses the theme of the day or the season and is more suited to children than the designated reading for that day, then we have substituted the story that we consider more appropriate, or at least offered an option. The first Sunday of Advent is an example of this, as are several Sundays in the seasons of Lent and Easter. (The introductions to these seasons describe in more detail what we have done, and the charts in Appendix 3 index the readings.) We have also decided to use some of the great stories, both from the Old Testament and from the gospels, more often than the lectionary itself includes them. In the case of the gospels, if we have used the same story more than once, we have told parallel versions whenever possible. In addition, we have included some parts of scripture that are missing from the regular Sunday adult lectionary. The prime example is the omission of the famous “Let the children come to me,” and this is the verse which has most inspired us to take on this project.*

David Bateman
Carolyn Wheeler

*We were pleased to note that this portion of scripture is now included in the Revised Common Lectionary at Proper 22, Year B.

ORDER FOR THE CHILDREN'S SERVICE OF THE WORD

- Procession** Following the Collect of the Day, children leave the nave of the church. They enter their own worship space singing "Enter, Rejoice and Come In."
- Welcome** The leader usually greets the children as the last ones are settling into their seats.
- Opening prayer** Leader says, "The Lord be with you." Children respond, "And also with you." Leader reads the prayer of the day.
- First reading** Leader says, "A reading from the Book of _____." Leader then reads the first lesson of the day, and ends by saying, "The Word of the Lord." Children respond, "Thanks be to God."
- Psalm** Psalm sheets may be handed out at this time or placed on the seats ahead of time. Before beginning the psalm, the leader reads the children's response, for the benefit of the non-readers.
- Doxology** Leader asks the children to stand for the Doxology and the Gospel.
- Gospel reading** Leader begins with "The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to . ." Children respond with "Glory to you, Lord Christ." Leader reads the lesson and ends with "The Gospel of the Lord." Children respond, "Praise to you, Lord Christ."
- Homily** Leader prompts the children to retell the story by asking them leading questions about the sequence of events, the people in the stories, the words spoken, etc. Leader should try to pull out main points, perhaps asking what God might want us to know from this story. A visual aid is sometimes helpful. Each day in this book has specific comments to assist the leader.
- Music** Our experience shows that a musical interlude is helpful here before going on with the creed and the prayers. Children usually have requests. Even very young children can often relate to the music. See Appendix 2.
- Children's Creed** At some point, after a few songs, the leader asks the children to stand for the Children's Creed:
- I believe in God above;
I believe in Jesus' love;
I believe his Spirit, too,
Comes to teach me what to do.
I believe that I should be
Kind and loving, Lord, like thee (you).*

Prayers of the Young People

The leader asks the children for any special concerns or reasons for thanksgiving they may wish to share, or for the blessing of any birthdays this week. Then, after all these have been heard, the leader says, "The Lord be with you," and the children respond, "And also with you." The prayers follow, with the children responding to each petition, "Lord, hear our prayer." (These prayers have been adapted for children from the list of six categories of intercession found on page 383 of the *Book of Common Prayer*.)

We pray for the people of God's whole church. We pray especially for the people of _____ Church, and for our bishop(s) _____ and for our clergy _____.

We pray for the United States and for our President. We pray for the other countries of the world and their leaders. May they all work for peace.

We pray for this city (town, etc.) of _____ and for the people who live and work and go to school here. We pray for the other cities and towns like it and for the people who live in them.

We pray for the good earth which God has given us. May we help to take care of the land, the air, the water, the plants, and the animals.

We pray for all people who are sick or sad or lonely or afraid. May we always remember them and be kind.

We pray for all people who have died. May they have a place with you.

We thank you for your many blessings.

Lord, hear the prayers of your young people and strengthen all of us to do your will. Amen.

Confession (optional)

You will want to consult your clergy about whether to include the Confession or not. If you desire, what follows is a simple form of confession and lay declaration of forgiveness.

(all)

O God, we confess that we have said, we have done, and we have thought things that are not right. Help us to be very sorry and forgive us. We ask you this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

(leader)

May God have mercy on us and forgive us all our sins through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Music and return We fill the time at the end of the service with more music. Timing is of the essence here, and it helps to have someone from the adult service who will signal the leader of the children's service immediately following the sermon for adults. Then the leader knows the time which remains is whatever time is needed to complete the Creed, the Prayers of the People, the Confession, and the Peace. Children move to the door leading into the nave and enter the nave at the exchange of the Peace.

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**THE INCARNATION:
ADVENT / CHRISTMAS / EPIPHANY**

We have generally adhered to the designated readings from the standard lectionary during the season of Advent. The readings have, of course, been adapted for children. We would make several suggestions for the Sundays of the Christmas season. The first thing to note is that in some years there is only one Sunday after Christmas, but in others there are two. Then afterwards, the official celebration of Epiphany (the story of the three wise men) falls nearly always on a weekday when children are often not present (January 6), and the following Sunday has us celebrating the baptism of an already grown Jesus! Therefore, knowing how many Sundays after Christmas you have to work with will help you a great deal in planning how you will arrive at the First Sunday after the Epiphany (the Baptism of Jesus).

There are five appropriate gospel stories which can be used during this time: the naming of the infant Jesus (Holy Name), the parents bringing the baby Jesus to the temple (Presentation), the arrival of the three wise men (Epiphany itself), the escape of the holy family from a murderous King Herod (Flight into Egypt), and finally the remarkable interaction of the twelve-year-old Jesus with the elders in the temple while his frantic parents are scouring Jerusalem for him. First of all, we have combined the flight into Egypt with the Epiphany reading, and we think this should be the first choice of readings for the season. If your parish has a strong tradition of having children present on Epiphany (January 6), then that is the obvious place for the reading. (It would automatically be used when Epiphany falls on a Sunday.) We think it should also be used on that day when there is only one Sunday after Christmas, and on the second Sunday after Christmas when there are two. In the case in which there are two Sundays, our next suggestion is to use the Presentation in the Temple for the first Sunday. The one exception to this is any year in which the designated date for this feast (February 2) falls on a Sunday.

The Epiphany/Flight into Egypt material is in this section. The other above-cited material for use after Christmas is in the Other Celebrations section.



Opening prayer

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.)

O God, you have shown us your wonderful love in your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to wait patiently for him and to be ready for that time when he will come to us. We ask you this through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

First reading**Isaiah 2:1-5**

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

These are the words which God spoke to his prophet Isaiah:

In days to come the mountain where the Lord's temple stands will become the highest mountain of all. It will rise high above all the other hills. People from many nations will stream to it, and they will say, "Come, let us go up the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Israel. Then he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths. For the teaching of the Lord goes forth from Jerusalem; the Word of the Lord goes forth from Israel."

He will judge between the peoples and settle arguments among the great nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plows and turn their spears into hooks for pruning trees. Nations will never again fight other nations; they will not even learn war anymore. Come, people of God, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Psalm 122

ALL: Let us go to the house of the Lord.

I was glad when they said to me, * "Let us go to the house of the Lord."
Now our feet are standing * within your gates, O Jerusalem.

ALL: Let us go to the house of the Lord.

Jerusalem is built as a city * that is in harmony with itself;
To Jerusalem all the people go up * to praise the Name of the Lord.

ALL: Let us go to the house of the Lord.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; * "May those who love you be blessed.
Peace be within your walls * and quietness within your towers."

ALL: Let us go to the house of the Lord.

"For the sake of my family and my friends, * I wish you peace.
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, * I will pray for you."

ALL: Let us go to the house of the Lord.

Gospel reading**Matthew 25:1-13***

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew. (Glory to you, Lord Christ.)

One day Jesus told his disciples this parable:

The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Once there were ten young women who were bridesmaids for a wedding. It was their job to wait for the bridegroom with their oil lamps and light his way to the wedding feast. Five of these young women were foolish and the other five were wise. The foolish ones took only their lamps with them. But the wise ones took not only their lamps but extra oil as well. Now the bridegroom was very late in coming, and all of the bridesmaids became drowsy and fell asleep. Then at midnight there was a shout, "Look! The bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" The ten bridesmaids woke up and began to get their lamps ready. Then the foolish ones said to the wise ones, "Give us some of your oil, because our lamps are going out."

But the wise ones answered, "If we do, there may not be enough for you and for us. Go to the people who sell oil and buy some for yourselves."

And while the foolish bridesmaids were gone to buy oil, the bridegroom came. The five wise bridesmaids were ready and went in with him to the wedding feast. Then the door was closed.

And Jesus concluded, "Watch then, because you do not know the day or the hour when the bridegroom is coming."

The Gospel of the Lord. (Praise to you, Lord Christ.)

*Note: We think the Matthew 24 reading is too harsh for young listeners, so we have substituted this Matthew 25 reading because it carries the theme of waiting and watchfulness appropriate for the season.

Comments for the leader:

(You may wish to have an Advent wreath for the children's worship space. You may want to begin with no candles lighted at the beginning of the service, then light the first candle at the end of the homily.)

Remind the children that we are entering a new season and a new church year today, and remind them that the church keeps time in a different way. If your church uses colors on the altar, pulpit, and lectern, ask the children if they noticed them. The colors will be this way for four Sundays. Tell the children that Advent is a time for preparation, for getting ready, not just for Christmas, but also for Jesus in our lives. This is a difficult concept for them, but with time, it will begin to ring true for them. Tell them that today is the first Sunday in Advent, and that we will think about being ready. Jesus told a story or parable about being ready. Have the children retell the story by asking questions such as:

- What was the special event people were getting ready for?
- What did the bridesmaids have to do?
- Tell them that five were foolish and five were wise. What did the wise ones do that the others did not do?
- What happened next?
- Make the scene real for the children by telling them that the bridesmaids were so sleepy and it was very late. They have all felt like this.
- But just at midnight there was a shout that the bridegroom was coming, and then what happened?

Finish by telling the children that we are all getting ready. Ask them what they would do if they knew Jesus were coming. Share what you might do — like fixing some special food or getting the house clean and ready. Tell them that is often what people do when they prepare for Christmas. But beyond that, ask them, if Jesus were coming, would they want to be fighting or angry with anyone. As you light the first candle on the wreath, tell the children to think about being ready as we begin this new season of Advent.

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Opening prayer

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.)

O God, you have sent your prophets to prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to listen to their message so that we may be ready to welcome your son Jesus when he comes to us. We make this prayer to you through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

First reading

Isaiah 11:1-10

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

This is what the prophet Isaiah said to the people of Israel:

Just as new branches will sprout from the stump of a tree that was cut down, so a branch will grow out of the roots of the family of Jesse, and a new king will come forth from the royal family of David.

The spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of guidance and strength, the spirit of knowledge and love of God. He will be glad to obey the Lord. The new king will not judge by the way things look. He will not decide by what people say. Instead he will judge fairly those who are poor, and he will defend the rights of those who are helpless. Goodness and faithfulness will be like belts around his waist.

Then wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards will lie down with young goats. Calves and lion cubs will feed together, and a little child shall lead them. Cows and bears will eat together, and their calves and cubs will lie down together. Lions will eat straw as cattle do. Even a baby will not be harmed if it plays near a poisonous snake. No hurt or harm will be done on all my holy mountain. The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, just as the sea is full of water. On that day, the new king from the family of Jesse will stand as a symbol to the people. All nations shall come to him, and he shall live in glory.

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Psalm 72

ALL: Blessed be the Lord God.

Give the King justice, O God, * and give righteousness to the King's Son.
May he rule your people with fairness * and govern the poor with justice.

ALL: Blessed be the Lord God.

May he defend the needy among the people; * may he help the poor.
May he come down like rain upon the field, * like showers that water the earth.

ALL: Blessed be the Lord God.

May he live as long as the sun shines * and as long as the moon glows, for ages to come.
May goodness be plentiful in his time; * may there be peace as long as the moon shall shine.
May he rule from sea to sea, * to the very ends of the earth.

ALL: Blessed be the Lord God.

Gospel reading

Matthew 3:1-12

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew. (Glory to you, Lord Christ.)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness and started preaching. He said, “Change your lives because the kingdom of heaven is near!” John was the one the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said, “In the wilderness a voice is crying out, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord; make a straight path for him!’ ” John's clothing was made of camel’s hair, he wore a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. People came to him from all over the country near the Jordan River. They confessed their sins, and John baptized them in the river. He said to them, “I baptize you with water to show that you have changed your lives, but the one who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. He is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to carry his sandals.”

The Gospel of the Lord. (Praise to you, Lord Christ.)

Comments for the leader:

(You may wish to light only one candle on the Advent wreath, then light the second at the end of the homily.)

A Jesse tree would be appropriate for this and subsequent Sundays of Advent quoting the reference to Jesse in Isaiah. Another possibility would be a picture of a lion and a lamb together.

You may want to spend a little time on both readings since the imagery in Isaiah is so wonderful. (Also remember that the readings on the third Sunday of Advent also focus on John the Baptist, so you will have to speak about him next week as well.) Tell the children that God was preparing a new king who would be kind and fair and good to all people. Ask them if they know who this new king is. If not, remind them of the things Isaiah said about him, and try to lead them to the answer. If they do know, focus on the details about Jesus. Ask them if they remember the other things the prophet said about the way the world would be at that time. Ask them if they would like to live in a world like that.

Then tell the children that John the Baptist was also preparing for a new king, God’s Messiah. Do not assume that the children know anything about John since he is not part of the popular Christmas culture. Help them to become more familiar with John by asking them questions about what he wore and ate, and what he said to people and then what he did for them. All the people had been waiting for the Messiah for a long time. (Isaiah had lived over seven hundred years before John was born.) God had made this promise, but Isaiah knew it would be a long time in the future before the Messiah was coming; John knew the Messiah was coming soon. Ask the children what John said about the one who would come after him, and remind them again who this was. Conclude by saying that Advent is the time when we are also waiting for Jesus to come into our lives. As you say this, you may then want to light the second candle on the wreath to emphasize the waiting and the mystery of Advent.

Opening prayer

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.)

O God, you have promised a new world to all who listen to your message. Give us grace to hear your promise and to help this new world come to be. We ask you this through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

First reading

Isaiah 35:1-10

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

This is what our God tells us:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and bloom. It shall burst into flower. It shall sing for joy. The beauty of the mountains and plains will be given to the desert. They all will see the glory of the Lord and the wonder of our God.

And God says:

Make the weak hands strong. Make the trembling knees steady. Say to those who are afraid, "Be strong! Have courage! Do not fear! Your God is coming with justice to reward and save you!"

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then those who are crippled shall leap like deer, and the tongues of those who cannot speak shall sing for joy.

For water shall gush forth in the dry lands, and streams shall flow in the desert. The burning sands shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground shall have springs of water. Where wild dogs once lived, marsh grass and water plants shall grow. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way. It shall be for God's people. And no travelers, not even foolish ones, shall lose their way on that road. No lions will be there, and no fierce animals will set foot on it. The road shall be for the people God has saved, and those whom God has set free will travel home, singing and shouting for joy. Gladness and joy shall fill them completely, and sadness and sorrow shall fly away.

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Psalm 146

ALL: Praise the Lord, O my soul!

Hallelujah! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; *

I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

Happy are they who have God to help them; * their hope is in the Lord their God.

ALL: Praise the Lord, O my soul!

The Lord made the heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; *

he keeps his promise forever.

He gives justice to those who are oppressed, * and food to those who are hungry.

ALL: Praise the Lord, O my soul!

The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; *

the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; *

he sustains the orphan and the widow.

The Lord shall be King forever; * he is your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.

Hallelujah!

ALL: Praise the Lord, O my soul!

Gospel reading

Matthew 11:2-11

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew. (Glory to you, Lord Christ.)

When John the Baptist was in prison, he heard about the things that Jesus was doing. So he sent some of his followers to Jesus, and they said to him, “Tell us, are you the one we have been waiting for, or should we watch for someone else?”

Jesus answered, “Go back and tell John what you hear and see — the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the poor have good news brought to them. How happy are those who have no doubts about me!”

[As John’s followers were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John. He said, “When you went out to John the Baptist in the wilderness, what did you expect to see? A blade of tall grass shaken by the wind? What did you go out to see? Someone dressed up in fancy clothing? Look, people who dress like that live in palaces! So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, and I tell you, John is much more than a prophet. For it was written in the scriptures that John would be God’s messenger, and that he would go ahead of me to prepare my way. And I tell you that John the Baptist is greater than anyone who has ever lived. But even the least important person in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.”]

The Gospel of the Lord. (Praise to you, Lord Christ.)

Comments for the leader:

(You may wish to light only two candles on the Advent wreath and light the third candle at the end of the homily.)

Remind the children that we always hear about John the Baptist on the second and third Sundays in Advent. Many children, but not all, may have been present on the preceding Sunday; however, do not assume that everyone knows about John, since he is not part of the Christmas culture. Therefore, you may want to begin with a brief recounting of last week’s reading — how John looked and the message he preached as he baptized in the wilderness. Then come up to today’s reading. Ask the children questions such as “Where was John?” and “What questions were his followers to ask Jesus?” He had been waiting for the Messiah to come for a long time. He had been so sure about Jesus before, but now he was wondering if he had made a mistake.

You might ask the children what Jesus told the followers they should tell John. What were the signs? What is it about these signs that would answer John’s question? Here you may want to refer to the passage from Isaiah.

You may not want to read or to explore the bracketed ending of the reading about John’s place in the kingdom of heaven except to say that even though John wasn’t sure about Jesus, Jesus was sure about John. Ask the children again whom we are getting ready for during Advent, and then remind them that God sent John with his message and his questions to help us get ready for Jesus, too. Then you may want to light the third candle on the Advent wreath as you remind the children that Jesus is coming closer to all of us on this third Sunday of Advent.

Opening prayer

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.)

O God, you have chosen ordinary people like Mary to give life to your Word. Make our hearts pure so that we too will be ready to welcome your Son Jesus when he comes to us. We ask you this through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

First reading

Isaiah 7:10-14

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

The Lord sent a message to the king of Judah through the prophet Isaiah. He said, "Ask the Lord your God to give you a sign. It can be anything you wish, great or small."

But the king answered, "I will not ask for a sign. I will not put the Lord to the test."

Then Isaiah said, "Hear then, O family of King David. Isn't it bad enough for you to wear out your people? Must you try to wear out God as well? So then, the Lord himself will give you a sign anyway, and this is what it is: Look! A young woman will give birth to a son and will name him 'Emmanuel.' "

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Psalm 80

ALL: Bring us back to you, O Lord God.

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, * stir up your strength and come to help us.
Show us the light of your face * and we shall be saved.

ALL: Bring us back to you, O Lord God.

You have brought a vine out of Egypt; * behold and tend this vine.
You prepared the ground for it and planted it; * it took root and filled the land.

ALL: Bring us back to you, O Lord God.

The mountains were covered by its shadow * and the towering cedar trees by its boughs.
You stretched out its tendrils to the sea, * and its branches to the river.

ALL: Bring us back to you, O Lord God.

Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; *
preserve what your right hand has planted;
And so will we never turn away from you; * give us life that we may call upon your Name.

ALL: Bring us back to you, O Lord God.

Gospel reading

Matthew 1:18-25

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew. (Glory to you, Lord Christ.)

This was how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph. But before they were married, she learned that she was going to

have a baby, and that this would happen through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph was a good man, and he did not want to embarrass Mary in front of everyone. So he quietly planned to call off the wedding. But just when Joseph had made up his mind to do this, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel said, “Joseph, you are from the family of King David. Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that she is going to have a baby. She will give birth to a son. You are to give him the name Jesus.” Now all this happened so that God’s promise might come true. God had said, through the prophet Isaiah, “A virgin will give birth to a son, and he will be called ‘Emmanuel,’ ” which means “God is with us.” When Joseph woke up, he took Mary to be his wife, just as the angel of the Lord had told him to do.

The Gospel of the Lord. (Praise to you, Lord Christ.)

Comments for the leader:

(You may want to begin with three lighted candles on the Advent wreath, then light the fourth candle at the end of the homily.)

The leader should be prepared for questions about words or about Joseph’s problem. Thinking through a situation before it arises is always helpful. If no questions arise, however, it is best to let the story stand without elaboration. If questions do arise, it will suffice for young children to have the word “virgin” defined as a woman who has never been married. It can also be said that in those days it would have been embarrassing for a woman to have a child before she was married. Today even fairly young children know that these situations do arise, but usually they are not concerned with details and a simple answer will be sufficient.

The focus of the comments should be on the angelic visitation in the dream, and on God’s Holy Spirit. Begin by telling the children that Matthew wrote down for all of us the way Jesus’ birth happened. Ask them who the mother of Jesus was. To all of us it may be perfectly obvious, but the children, especially the young ones, are just beginning to absorb the Christmas stories. Mary was engaged to be married. Ask the children the name of this man. Then ask who visited Joseph in his dream. Ask what the angel said about the baby who was to be born from God’s Holy Spirit. Tell them that all babies are wonderful and special but that this baby was even more special. Nothing like this had ever happened before. This baby was directly from God, a special gift. An important part of this story is the name Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” Ask the children if they think people of the world need God with them. Tell them that having God with us is like having a friend or someone to love us.

Conclude by telling the children that Mary and Joseph were also waiting and wondering about this child who would be “God with us.” Light the fourth candle as you say that we are *all* waiting for the birth of Jesus.

Opening prayer

The Lord be with you. (And also with you.)

O God, you have sent your Son Jesus to live as one of us, and you make us joyful as we celebrate his birth. Help us to know him here on earth and to praise you for sending him into the world. We ask you this through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

First reading**Isaiah 9:2, 6-7**

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

These are the words which the prophet Isaiah spoke:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Light is shining on those who lived in a land deep in darkness. The people rejoice in what the Lord has done. For a child has been born for us! son has been given to us! And he will be our leader. He will be called, “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” “Prince of Peace.” Power and endless peace will grow in his kingdom. He will sit on King David’s throne and rule over David’s kingdom. He will rule with justice and righteousness from now until the end of time. The Lord Almighty is determined to make this happen.

The Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Psalm 96

ALL: Sing to the Lord and bless his Name!

Sing to the Lord a new song; * sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.
Tell of his glory among the nations * and his wonders among all peoples.

ALL: Sing to the Lord and bless his Name!

For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; * it is the Lord who made the heavens.
Give to the Lord, you families of the peoples; * give to the Lord honor and power.
Give to the Lord the honor due his Name; * bring offerings and come into his courts.

ALL: Sing to the Lord and bless his Name!

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; * let the whole earth stand in awe of him.
Tell it out among the nations: * “The Lord is King!”

ALL: Sing to the Lord and bless his Name!

Let the heavens rejoice, * and let the earth be glad.
Let the sea thunder and all that is in it; * let the field be joyful and all that is therein.
Let all the trees of the wood shout for joy * before the Lord when he comes.

ALL: Sing to the Lord and bless his Name!

Gospel reading**Luke 2:1-20**

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke. (Glory to you, Lord Christ.)