



a Kendall Hunt Company

## Nativity of the Lord, A-C, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



### Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session, read all the readings.

### Readings for Mass at Midnight

Isaiah 9:1-6

Ps. 96:1-3, 11-13

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Is there a particular reading that appeals to you? Is there a word or image that engages you?

Read the following **Word in Liturgy** and **Catholic Doctrine** sections. Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need.

### The Word In Liturgy

It is virtually impossible to listen to the words of today's famous passage from Isaiah without hearing the stirring rhythms of Handel's *Messiah* in the background. In the minds of many people, this is the quintessential text announcing the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ, and one would be hard-pressed to find a better reading for Midnight Mass. However, knowing the background to this passage can give us a deeper appreciation for how Divine Revelation operates throughout history in the inspired utterances of the prophets, with each succeeding generation finding new meaning in ancient texts.

The prophet Isaiah lived at a very troubled time in Jewish history, and he was deeply involved in the political and military affairs swirling about the tiny southern kingdom of Judah, where he resided. Chapters seven and following describe how the young king Ahaz was being tempted to form an alliance with the various pagan factions in revolt against Assyria, the super-power of the day. The prophet insisted that the king rely solely on Yahweh's power to deliver the nation, and have nothing to do with foreign entanglements. Such an alliance would be tantamount to idolatry, since it required reliance on the gods of the pagan nations, not just on their military might. As a "sign" of Yahweh's promise of protection, the prophet pointed to the imminent birth of an heir to the throne who would insure the survival of the royal dynasty. Today's reading is part of the glowing description that the prophet offers to the king, urging him to trust in Yahweh's power at work in the unfolding of history—even in his own offspring's birth. Christian tradition, of course, has long seen a deeper significance in these ancient words, reading them in light of the Christ-event and applying them to the

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salvific role of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

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Today's psalm urges us to "sing to the Lord a new song," and we do so in light of our conviction that in the birth of Jesus a new era has dawned on the world. We take an ancient song, in which the Jewish people rejoiced over current events long-since forgotten, and we make its words our own, singing this "new song" with a freshness that proclaims God's continuing presence and deliverance today, here and now in our midst.

The Letter to Titus is one of the so-called "pastoral epistles," written (probably by a disciple of Paul) to someone entrusted with care over a particular community. The author reminds Titus of the two-fold "coming" ("*adventus*") of the Lord that we have been celebrating throughout Advent: his historical coming in the flesh at Bethlehem, described in verse 11 ("The grace of God has appeared...") and his final coming at the end of time, described in verse 13 ("we await...the appearance...of our savior Jesus Christ"). This reprise of the Advent motif of the two comings nicely links together the two festal seasons of Advent and Christmas.

Today's Gospel reading is so familiar to us that we easily forget what a carefully constructed theological narrative it represents. Both Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with distinctive chapters that are called the "infancy narratives." These writings are quite different from the more historical records of the Gospels proper. Rather, they are more like reflections on the *meaning* of Jesus' birth—carefully drawn from Old Testament themes and imagery—to construct an initial proclamation of Christian faith regarding the identity of Jesus and his role in history as Savior and Lord. We misunderstand today's text if we read it as a mere record of historical fact. It is much, much more: a faith-proclamation, written in the style of Jewish *midrash* (i.e., a meditation on the *meaning* of a saving event), designed to stir our own faith-response to God's grace that has come about by way of the events narrated.