



## **Stories on the Way: Lesson Plans for Small Sunday Schools**

### **The Christmas Story**

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### **The Lessons**

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## **Notes for the Christmas Pageant**

The Christmas lessons are designed to allow for pageant prep without pageant prep becoming all the Sunday School does for the whole month. This means that if you are not presenting a pageant or are preparing for it outside of Sunday School time or you have your own script, you can still use these lessons as straight-up Sunday School lessons. The first lesson only uses the story, the second adds the stage directions, and the third adds the music. The fourth lesson does something completely different.

The story offered here (a “mash-up” of Matthew and Luke) doubles very nicely as a simple Christmas pageant script . It can be performed by one or more narrators doing all the speaking, including the dialogue. If you have older or eager or reliable actors, you could have them speak the dialogue. It would also work for Mary and Joseph, for example, to say their lines but have the narrator(s) read everyone else’s.

The number of actors can be increased by adding sheep, angels, and barn animals. These actors can even be added minutes before the pageant starts if you have some extra halos or animal ears on hand – something I highly recommend. It can be reduced by cutting out Herod and the innkeeper (i.e. just reading about them). Don’t forget that you can use adult actors, too – there’s something really lovely about intergenerational Christmas pageants, in my opinion.

You can cut the whole pageant by ending it before the wise ones make their appearance. In that case, don’t send the shepherds off stage before bringing the whole cast out for the final song.

The included stage directions are simply suggestions and may need to be changed to suit the layout of your church. For reference, I wrote them while thinking of a church with a centre aisle, two side aisles, and a raised choir in front of the altar. The song suggestions are also, of course, simply suggestions. You may want fewer songs, more songs, no songs or just different songs.

The pageant is simple enough that, with a few well-informed stage managers at the performance, you can probably manage to produce it even if you only have these four lessons plus a dress rehearsal (which could even happen an hour or so before the main event itself). Of course, everything's better with a little more practice...

## **The Story of Christmas (also a Pageant Script)**

*[Mary is sitting centre stage, perhaps pretending to sew. ]*

God sent the angel Gabriel to a young woman named Mary who lived in the town of Nazareth.

*[Gabriel enters and stands beside Mary. They look at each other as if in conversation]*

Mary was frightened when she saw the angel but he said, “Do not be afraid, Mary – God is happy with you! You are going to have a baby and you will call him Jesus. This baby will become a great man and people will call him the Son of God.”

Mary was very surprised and very confused. She asked the angel, “How is this possible? I am a virgin.”

The angel explained, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you for nothing is impossible with God! The baby will be holy. He will be called the Son of God.”

Mary still didn’t really understand but she said, “I am God’s servant. Let it be as you said.”

*[Angel turns back to audience. Mary leaves the stage. Joseph enters and lies down at centre stage]*

At this time, Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendent of King David. When Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, he was very angry and sad and he decided to break the engagement off.

*[Angel turns to face audience, looks down on sleeping Joseph]*

But that night, an angel of God appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, do not be afraid to marry Mary and do not be sad or angry about the baby. He comes from the Holy Spirit. You will name him Jesus and he will save his people from their sins.”

*[Angel leaves. Joseph wakes up and leaves the stage]*

When Joseph woke up, he did as God had told him, even though he didn't understand it any better than Mary did.

*[Mary and Joseph make their way quietly to the back of the church and then return, walking slowly up the centre aisle, while the narrator continues. **O Little Town of Bethlehem** could be sung]*

While Mary was still pregnant, the Emperor Augustus decided he needed to count everyone in the country. Everyone had to go to the town their family came from to be counted so Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem. It was a long way from Nazareth to Bethlehem and it took them a long time to get there. They were both very tired when they finally arrived – and poor Mary was completely exhausted.

*[Mary and Joseph meet the innkeeper at the top of the aisle]*

To make matters worse, all the hotels and inns were full because of all the people travelling around because of the Emperor's order. No one had any room for even two more tired travellers. Finally, they found someone who let them sleep in his barn with the animals.

*[Mary and Joseph continue to centre stage and take their places in the 'barn']*

Mary and Joseph didn't care – they were just glad to be somewhere warm and dry where they could get some rest. But they didn't get very much rest that night because that was the night that Mary gave birth to a baby – to their son – to the Son of God – to Jesus.

After Jesus was born, Mary wrapped him in cloths and Joseph put clean straw in a manger, an animal feedbox. Jesus fell asleep and Mary laid him in the manger. Mary and Joseph could hardly believe what had happened. They could hardly take their eyes off their new son.

*[**What Child is This** could be sung. Shepherds enter (perhaps beyond or to the side of the*

*sleeping family – ideally, they would face the choir). **While Shepherds Watched their Flocks** could be sung]*

For the shepherds in Bethlehem, though, that night was just like any other night. They were outside in the fields, watching their sheep to make sure that nothing hurt them in the dark.

*[Angel enters and stands in front of shepherds]*

Suddenly, a bright light appeared in the sky and they saw an angel standing in front of them. The shepherds were terrified but the angel said, “Do not be afraid. I have joyful news for the whole world. The Lord’s chosen one, the saviour of the world, was born today in Bethlehem. You will find him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

*[the choir of angels (perhaps the actual choir?) joins the angel]*

Then a whole choir of angels appeared, praising God and saying  
“Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth.

*[Angels We Have Heard on High could be sung. Angels sit/leave]*

When the angels had gone, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem to see this baby that the Lord has told us about!”

*[shepherds go to family and kneel before them]*

They hurried to Bethlehem and found the barn with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. They knelt down before them and gave thanks to God for the gift of the baby Jesus.

*[shepherds leave]*

Then the shepherds returned to their sheep, praising God and telling everyone about the amazing things they had seen.

*[The star is held up at the front of the church (perhaps by a server) and the wise ones begin walking up the centre aisle. **The First Noel** could be sung.]*

Soon after Jesus was born, some people from the East came to Jerusalem. These were people who knew how to read messages in the stars and they had seen a special star rise – the star of the new King of the Jews, Jesus.

*[Herod stands from his place in a pew near the front and pretends to talk to his neighbours]*

King Herod was the king in Jerusalem in those days and, when he heard about what these wise people were saying, he got worried about this new king. He asked his advisors where the new king would have been born. His advisors told him that the prophets said that a special ruler who would take care of all the people would be born in Bethlehem.

*[wise ones reach Herod's pew and 'talk' to Herod]*

Herod called the wise people to a secret meeting and found out when they had first seen the star. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search for the baby and then tell me where he is. I want to go visit him, too.”

*[wise ones continue to the holy family and kneel down]*

The wise people set off and, there, ahead of them, was the star. It shone down on the place where the baby Jesus was. The wise people were filled with joy and they went in and saw Jesus with Mary and Joseph. They knelt down and gave them expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

*[wise ones leave]*

When the wise people left, they did not return to Jerusalem and they did not tell Herod where the baby was. They were wise and they knew that old kings do not often like new kings very much.

Mary and Joseph never forgot the wonderful events of that night, the night when their son, Jesus, the Saviour of the World, was born.

*[cast returns for photo op/applause. **Joy to the World** could be sung.]*

## **A Modern Day Nativity (The Christmas Story Lesson 1)**

This first Christmas lesson is pre-pageant prep. You will use the story purely as story and not as script – ignore the stage directions and songs for this week. It's primary objective is to get the students to see the people in the Christmas story as real people. Hopefully, this will help the students enter into the experience of that miraculous night in Bethlehem and rescue the story from the dull familiarity it can too easily acquire.

Things to know about this lesson:

- This is one of the few “draw a picture” lessons I will present. You are going to spend quite a lot of time talking in this class and I don't think you have time for much more in terms of an activity.

### **Materials**

- pencils
- markers/crayons
- paper

### **Open with prayer.**

### **Introduce the Story**

Even though it is still a month away, we are going to start talking about Christmas. What can you tell me about Christmas? (let the students go on for a bit – make sure something about Jesus is at least mentioned)

Christmas is one of the most important festivals in Christianity. It is a celebration of this amazing and strange thing that happened – God became a human baby and was born, just like you were born and I was born. Can you think of anything more helpless and weak than a newborn baby? (no) Can you think of anything more powerful than God? (no) But God chose to become a baby so that we could have Jesus, the one who can save the world.

Of course, Jesus birth was not quite like yours or mine. He was not born in a hospital or even in a house and he had lots of unusual visitors after he was born.

The Christmas story that we are going to use is actually a combination of the stories that two different writers gave us and that were both collected in the bible. Parts of the story – the angel's visit to Joseph, the wise ones, King Herod – come from the writer we call Matthew and parts – the angel's visit to Mary, the trip to Bethlehem, the shepherds – come from Luke. But we don't want to miss anything from either story so we're putting it all together!

In a few weeks (give date, if possible), we are going to present this story to everybody in church at the Christmas pageant. So listen carefully!

## **Read the Story (see page 2 – ignore stage directions)**

### **Discussion**

Let's review what happened in the story.

Who can tell me what happened first? (an angel visited Mary)

How do you think Mary felt? Why did she feel that way?

What happened next? (Joseph)

How did Joseph feel? Why?

(continue outlining the story, drawing attention to the reactions of the characters as you go along)

### **Introduce the Activity**

This is an amazing and one-of-a-kind story but the people in it were just like us. Your challenge is to draw a picture of the one or all of the people in the story as if they were modern people. For example, there are no shepherds working at night in our city but there are what working at night? (truck drivers; security guards; gas station attendants; etc). Draw the shepherds as security guards.

### **Modern Day Nativity Scenes**

Pass out pencils, markers, and paper. Help students come up with modern day counterparts as necessary.

### **Regrouping**

Invite students to share their pictures and explain why they chose what they chose.

### **Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for the gift of your Son, the son of Mary and Joseph. Help us see the wonder and the beauty of the Christmas story even after we've heard it a million times. Amen.

## **A Dramatic Nativity (The Christmas Story Lesson 2)**

This lesson begins the Christmas pageant prep in earnest (although I think it would still be a good lesson without a pageant in the future) by getting students involved in a dramatization of the story.

Things to know about this lesson:

- You do not need to prepare any materials!
- You do need to give some thought to where you will “stage” the story in the Sunday School space.
- You also should think about how you will distribute parts. Are you simply going to assign them? Do the students present have a say? Knowing how you want to handle it in advance will help head off any conflict over who plays what.

**Open with prayer.**

### **Introduce the Story**

(If this is your first lesson on the Christmas story, you might like to use all or part of the introduction from A Modern Day Nativity.)

Who can remember what happens in the Christmas story? (help the group identify the key elements of the story)

Can you show me how Mary felt when the angel told her about Jesus? How about how Joseph felt when he heard that Mary was pregnant? When the angel came to him? How did they feel on their journey to Bethlehem? (Continue through the emotions in the story).

Today we are going to begin getting ready for the Christmas pageant by acting out the story as I read it. I’ll read it slowly and we can decide what should happen as we go along. Be sure to show lots of emotion!

Distribute roles (these needn’t be the final actors) and designate a stage area.

Read the story and help the group act it out (without speaking parts). Go through it a few times until it can be performed with minimal prompting from you. Remember that this isn’t an actual practice so don’t worry about whether the staging is “right” – the directions given below are simply to help out.

**Act the Story (see page 2 – ignore the music for this lesson)**

### **Discussion/Regrouping**

If you have time after running through the story enough times that people can do it smoothly or if the group is too bored to keep going:

Do you have any questions about the story?

What is your favourite part of the story? Why?

Who is your favourite person in the story? Why?

Remind the group of when the pageant will be, as well as any other rehearsals you are scheduling. If you need people to bring supplies for sets or costumes, start asking now. This may also be a good time to assign roles for the actual pageant, if you haven't already done so.

### **Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for the power of drama. May we enter into the story of Jesus' birth through our gifts of imagination and acting. Amen.

## **A Musical Nativity (The Christmas Story Lesson 3)**

If you are lucky, you will not have had your love for Christmas music destroyed by the terrible versions so often preferred by the people who program music for shopping malls. If you are not so lucky, perhaps revisiting some of that music in the context of the story it is actually about will help restore it to its rightful place in your heart. Maybe.

Things to know about this lesson:

- A musician and his/her instrument would be a wonderful asset – otherwise, you'll have to muddle along as best you can.
- It's only Christmas carols. Everybody can sing Christmas carols. If I can do it, so can you.
- This lesson *could* stand alone but it would probably be a little short because you wouldn't spend so much time on the story itself. You could fill more time with more music, though.

### **Materials**

- song sheets with the words to either the carols you will be using or the carols you suspect the students will ask for (optional)

### **Open with prayer.**

### **Introduce the Story**

(If this is your first lesson on the Christmas story, you might like to use all or part of the introduction from A Modern Day Nativity.)

What are your favourite Christmas carols? (accept secular Christmas songs but point students back to the sacred)

Why do you like them?

Are there any you don't like? Why?

Today, we are going to act out (or just read) our story again. While we do that, I want you to think about which songs match up with which parts of the story. For example, **While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night** could go with the part of the story where the shepherds are watching their sheep.

If you are going to run through the dramatization of the story, remind/assign roles and sketch out the stage area.

## **Read/Act the Story (see page 2 - ignore the suggested songs for one more go-through)**

### **Discussion**

If the songs that will be used are up for discussion, invite students to make suggestions of what could be sung where. If the decisions have already been made, explain what will be sung where.

### **Introduce the Activity**

Hand out song lyrics. Announce the start of the Christmas sing-a-long!

### **Christmas Sing-a-long**

You can either just sing the songs or you can read the story (probably skipping the acting) and sing them in the rights spots.

### **Regrouping**

How did the songs make you feel? What did they make you think about?

Which song was your favourite? Why?

If you are genuinely open to the possibility of change you can ask if there are any songs that they would like to change.

### **Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for the power of music. May our thoughts be of you and your son, the baby Jesus, every time we hear a Christmas carol – no matter where we are or what we are doing. Amen.

## **Messengers from God (The Christmas Story Lesson 4)**

This is the lesson for the last Sunday before Christmas. If you are not actually performing your pageant on this day, you will certainly have plenty to do. Do a run-through of the show, music and all, in your Sunday School space with whoever is around. If you've got everything ready, make it a dress rehearsal. If you don't have everything ready, put the Sunday School to work making halos, angel wings, a star, sheep ears, and whatever else you have in the works.

Just in case you are not doing a pageant at all (or you are super-organized!), the lesson below will fill the time without feeling like filler.

Things to know about this lesson:

- The angel craft could be used to make puppets for your pageant.
- You may want to take the time to make one angel in advance to serve as an example.
- The lesson would work beautifully on December 26th or on the Sunday after your pageant. Celebrate the pageant – it was the message delivered by the angels.

### **Materials**

- construction paper
- white paper or paper doilies
- scissors
- glue/tape
- pencils
- markers/crayons
- glitter (optional)
- wooden dowels (optional)

### **Open with prayer.**

### **Introduce the Story**

If you think it would be helpful, you could have the kids tell the story in their own words before you begin rehearsing.

You could also introduce today's topic – angels.

What do you have on the top of your Christmas tree? (If no one has an angel, bring it up as a possibility)

Do you know what angels do? (bring messages)

The word "angel" comes from a Greek word, *angelos* ('g' as in grape) which means "messenger". Angels are God's messengers.

Pay attention to the angels in the story as we read it today.

Even if you are not doing a pageant, you could have the kids act out the story while you read it.

Sing or not, as you choose and as your time allows.

## **Read/Act the Story (see page 2)**

### **Discussion**

Who remembers where the word “angel” comes from?

Who do the angels talk to?

How do people react to seeing the angels?

What are the messages the angels bring? (the good news of Jesus’ birth; praises to God; peace on earth)

We are called to bring that same message to the world. When we do it, we are being messengers for God – we are being angels!

### **Introduce the Activity**

We’re making angels today – angels with a message for the world that we will help them deliver.

### **Making Angels**

Distribute construction paper, pencils, markers, scissors, and glue (and glitter, if you like).

Decorate the construction paper and shape it into a cone (angel body). You may want to trim the bottom of the cone to make it stand on its own.

Cut circles out of white paper or use paper doilies (wings). Fold the circle in half and glue it to the back of the cone. Again, decorations could be added first.

Cut out small circles and draw faces on them (heads). Glue the faces to the front of the cone, near the point. A nice touch might be to make the angels self-portraits.

You could use these angels as puppets for your angel choir. If that is your plan, attach wooden dowels (or rulers or spoons) up the centre of the cone.

### **Regrouping**

Gather the angels and their makers into an angel choir. Join together in the proclamation:

**“Glory to God in the highest and peace to God’s people on earth”**

and/or sing a Christmas carol about angels. Get good and loud about it.

### **Closing Prayer**

Dear God, thank you for the message of the angels. Make us your messengers too, bringing news of Jesus to the whole world. Amen.