

Good News of Great Joy

Advent Storytelling for Families with Young Children



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Dear Cornerstone Families,

Christmas is such a fun time of year: the lights, the decorations, the music, the food, the parties, the gifts! Even more than that, for those of us who follow Jesus, Christmas is a celebration of the Incarnation: the reality that the God who created everything entered into His creation—“became flesh” (John 1:14)—in order to save us. But in the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, it can be easy for *what* we do at Christmas to obscure the point of *why* we do it. Moreover, as parents, our children’s understanding of Christmas is shaped by what they see us do, say, and drag them along to do with us (This is true not just for Christmas, but for all of life. We are always teaching our children, whether we’re aware of it or not).

The first time that we became aware that we were shaping our children’s understanding of Christmas was when only 2 of our 4 children had been born. Our boys were only 2 and 1 at the time, and we realized that, if we wanted them to understand that Christmas is ultimately about Jesus, then we needed to make Jesus obvious and unmistakable in how we taught them to celebrate.

Christian grew up in a church that celebrated Advent – a traditional practice of setting aside the four weeks before Christmas to remember different aspects of the story of Jesus’ birth. Many church traditions celebrate Advent differently, and since we never see observance of Advent commanded in Scripture, we felt we had the freedom to shape our Advent devotions to fit our family. We looked at the biblical accounts of Jesus’ birth in Matthew and Luke, and we saw that it breaks down pretty easily into four parts: 1) The Angel comes to Mary, 2) Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, 3) The Angel Appears to the Shepherds, and 4) The Magi Travel to Bethlehem.

We developed a simple script to tell this story with our kids. We got creative with some of the storytelling, but when it came to what the angel says to each person, we tried to stick pretty much word-for-word to the biblical text, and only adjusted some vocabulary to make it easier to understand. After a few years of doing this with our kids (and adding a couple more kids along the way), we have been amazed at how much they enjoy this, and how quickly they are able to memorize and repeat their parts. We know this won’t last forever (our oldest will probably outgrow this in a year or two), but we feel like it has provided a great foundation for the rest of our Christmas celebration. By repeating this story together just about every night, we are able to rest in the midst of the bustle of the season. Rather than looking forward to the next big thing or the perfect gift, we look backward and remember God has already given us the perfect gift by sending his Son to rescue us.

We hope that this tool will be helpful to you and your family. We’ve included some pointers on how to use it, but feel free to get creative and make it your own. If you have questions or come up with great ideas, we’d love to hear about them! Contact us at cburkhardt@cornerstonesimi.com.

Merry Christmas!

Christian & Jennifer Burkhardt

Instructions

Tell the Story Each Night You're Home:

- We've found that the easiest time to protect for these family devotions is **in the evening, between dinner and bedtime**. Sometimes we'll bring the wreath and the nativity set to the dinner table once we've cleared our plates. Other times, we'll do it right before bed. The trick is to do it before the kids get too tired. No one learns anything during "meltdown time."
- **When You're Out:** Of course, there will be evenings when you're out at parties, etc. Don't feel like you have to squeeze in these devotions every night. The point is to make this the focus of your evening together when you *are* at home. But at the same time, as you build this rhythm as a family, it may make you rethink how often you're out of the house at night. Could it be that you may actually celebrate Jesus better this Christmas by *missing* a party or two in order to protect this time of rest with your family?
- **When You Have People Over:** We usually have people join us for dinner about once a week, and we ask them to join us for our advent devotions too, rather than waiting until after they leave. Even if they're not Christians, we've found that most people are gracious and even appreciative that we would include them in our family's tradition. It provides a great opportunity to share some gospel truth with those who come into our home.

A Growing Story:

- We've designed this story to be cumulative. You may notice that the first week's story is rather short. That's on purpose. Start small. Build the rhythm with your kids. If you stick with it, you'll probably find that by the last couple days of this first week, you don't need the script anymore. Each time Sunday rolls around, don't just move on to the next week's story, retell the parts of the story you've already covered, then add on the next week's portion. Come Christmas Eve, you'll be surprised how much your kids are able to recite from memory.

Story, Sing, Pray:

- The rhythm for each week is *Story, Sing, Pray*. We've integrated some favorite Christmas Hymns at the end of each week's story. Feel free to sing these *a cappella*, or, if one of you plays an instrument, you can find simple chord sheets for these hymns online.
- If your children are very young, you may want to lead them in prayer at the end. We usually ask if any of our children would like to pray and thank God for what we've learned. If the prayer is a little "off topic," we may add one of our own at the end. Sometimes, though, we are surprised by how heart-felt and honest their prayers can be.

What You'll Need

An Advent Wreath (optional):

- If you want to use an advent wreath, you can make one very easily. Here's what you'll need:
 - **A wreath**
 - **4 colored candles** (any color and size. You can pick 4 different colors, or all the same.)
 - **1 white candle.** This one goes in the middle of the wreath, with the other 4 candles around it. It's called the "Jesus Candle" and is lit on Christmas Eve.
- **How to use it:**
 - Starting 4 Sundays before Christmas, light the first candle. Then on each following Sunday, light an additional candle. On Christmas Eve, you will light all 4 candles and the "Jesus Candle."
 - We recite **John 8:12** together as we light the candles: *"Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'"*
 - The lighting of candles is meant to represent this idea of Jesus as the "Light of the World." Each week, as you light an additional candle, the light gets brighter and brighter as we get closer to Christmas Day.

The Characters:

- To act out the stories, you'll need the following characters:
 - **Narrator** (this one does most of the talking.)
 - **Angel**
 - **Mary**
 - **Joseph**
 - **Baby Jesus**
 - **Shepherds** (at least 2)
 - **Magi** (at least 3)
- You can create these characters in a number of ways: You can create **puppets**, make **costumes**, or use a **kid-friendly nativity set**.
 - We use a Fisher-Price *Little People* nativity set. It comes with all the necessary characters, as well as animals and a little baby Jesus in a manger. You can find one at the local Christian bookstore or online for \$30-\$90.
 - We keep this nativity set where the kids can see it throughout the month, either on the coffee table or under the Christmas tree. It's not uncommon to find one or more of the kids over there throughout the day, retelling the story on their own.

Week 1: The Angel Visits Mary

(from Luke 1:26-38)

Light the first candle, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

STORY:

NARRATOR: The story of Jesus' birth happened like this: There was a young girl named Mary who lived in a town called Nazareth. Mary loved her mommy and daddy, Mary loved God, and Mary loved Joseph. She was going to marry Joseph!

But one day, before they got married, as Mary was busy working around her Father's house, ALL OF A SUDDEN, OUT OF THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE...

[Angel appears; Mary yells and hides]

An angel of the Lord appeared to her! Mary was terrified, but the angel said,

ANGEL: "Don't be afraid, Mary. I have good news for you! You're going to have a baby! You shall call his name Jesus. He will be **GREAT**, the **SON OF GOD**, and the **FOREVER KING!**"

EVERYONE: When the Angel says each word in **BOLD**:

"GREAT" - raise your hands as high as you can!

"SON OF GOD" - pretend to rock a baby in your arms

"FOREVER KING" - pretend to put a crown on your head

MARY: "But how can this be since I'm not married, and I've never been with a man?"

ANGEL: "The Spirit of God will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so the baby will be called the Son of God...For nothing is impossible with God."

MARY: "I am the Lord's servant. I will do what God wants me to do."

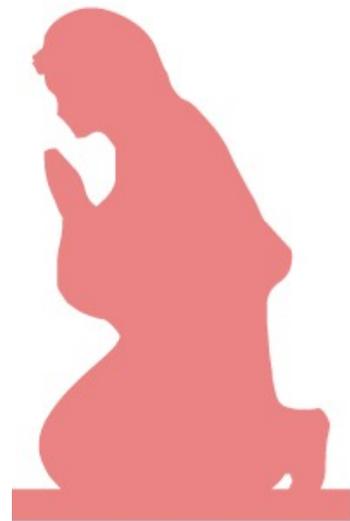
NARRATOR: And then the angel left her.

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SING: *O Come, O Come, Immanuel*

*O come, O come Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lowly exile here, until the Son of God appears
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.*

PRAY: Thank Jesus for being GREAT, the SON OF GOD, and our FOREVER KING.



Week 2: The Angel Visits Joseph, the Birth of Jesus

(based on Matthew 1:18-25 & Luke 2:1-7)

Light two candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

STORY: Repeat the story and song from week 1, then add this next part:

NARRATOR: Now a little while later, Joseph came to see Mary...

JOSEPH: "Mary I'm so happy to see you! I have so much to tell you! I've been working hard, and saving money, and getting our house ready. I can't wait for us to be married!"

MARY: "Joseph, there's something I have to tell you. I...uh...I'm...pregnant."

JOSEPH: "What?! How can this be?! I thought you loved me! I thought you wanted to marry me! I can't believe you would do this! I don't understand, but I can't marry you. I have to go."

[Joseph runs off. Mary calls after him; then runs crying in the opposite direction.]

NARRATOR: But that night while Joseph was sleeping, ALL OF A SUDDEN, OUT OF THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE...

[Angel appears; Joseph yells and sits up in his bed]

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying:

ANGEL: "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the baby inside of her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will give him the name Jesus, which means 'The LORD Saves,' for he will save his people from their sins."

NARRATOR: And then the Angel left him. When Joseph woke up the next morning, he was so excited. He ran as fast as he could into town until he found Mary.

JOSEPH: "Mary! Mary! An angel appeared to me in a dream last night, and he explained everything! You do love me, and you haven't been unfaithful to me! Even more, he told me



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that the baby inside of you is from the Holy Spirit, and he is the one who will save us from our sins! Oh Mary, I love you, and I want to help you do this. Let's get married!"

[Joseph and Mary hug, and walk off together]

NARRATOR: So Joseph and Mary got married. But as the time got closer for the baby to be born, they had to travel all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register to pay their taxes. This was a journey of about 90 miles...on foot...with a *very* pregnant wife, which is why Mary probably rode on a donkey or some other kind of animal.

As they reached Bethlehem, Mary knew it was almost time for her baby to be born.

MARY: "Joseph, please hurry. It's almost time."

JOSEPH: "Okay, Mary, we're here. Let me just find us a place to stay."

*[Joseph goes around to each person, asking, "Do you have any room?"
Each person responds, "No room."]*

JOSEPH: "I'm sorry, Mary. I can't find us any place to stay. Wait! Here's a stable. I know it's a place for animals, but at least it's warm and dry."

NARRATOR: So Joseph brought Mary into the stable. Mary worked long and hard that night. She had a lot of pain, and Joseph was helping her. Mary pushed and pushed. And then finally, in the quiet of the still night air, they heard a sound. What do you think they heard?

[mimic the sound of a baby's cry]

It was the sound of a newborn baby's cry! Baby Jesus had been born! Mary held him close and kissed his head, and then she wrapped him up tightly to keep him warm, and laid him in a manger – an animals' feeding trough! And that's why we sing the song...

SING: *Away in a Manger*

*Away in a Manger, no crib for a bed
The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay*



PRAY: Thank God for sending His Son, and giving him the name Jesus, which means "The LORD Saves". Thank Jesus for coming to "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Week 3: The Angel Visits the Shepherds

(from Luke 2:8-20)

Light three candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

STORY: Repeat the stories and songs from weeks 1 & 2, then add this next part:

NARRATOR: Now meanwhile, out in the fields nearby, some shepherds were keeping watch over their sheep by night, when ALL OF A SUDDEN, OUT OF THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE...

[Angel appears; Shepherds scream and hide]

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were terrified! But the angels said to them:

ANGEL: "Don't be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord! And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

NARRATOR: Suddenly, there was with the angel a whole army of angels, praising God & saying:

EVERYONE SING:

*Glory to God, all glory in the highest!
O come, let us adore him. O come, let us adore him
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.*

NARRATOR: Then just as quickly as the angels had appeared—WHOOSH—they were gone! The shepherds looked at each other, and said:

SHEPHERDS: "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us!"

NARRATOR: So they ran and ran as fast as they could, across the fields, through the gates, into the city, down one street after another after another, until finally they found the Baby Jesus, wrapped up in cloths and lying in a manger, just as the angel had said.



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What do you think the shepherds said when they saw Jesus? They may have said something like this:

SING: *What Child Is This?*

*What Child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping
Whom angels greet with anthem sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping
This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing
Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary*

PRAY: Later in the story, we learn that the shepherds praised God for what they saw and heard that night (Luke 2:20). Let's praise God for letting us see and hear the good news about Jesus too! We also learn that the shepherds told others about what they had seen and heard (v. 17-18). Ask God to show you someone with whom you can share the good news of Jesus birth.



Week 4: The Magi Journey to Bethlehem

(from Matthew 2:1-12)

Light four candles, and recite John 8:12 -

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

STORY: Repeat the stories and songs from weeks 1-3, then add this next part:

[Note: There is no dialogue in this part of the story, but your children can still act it out]

NARRATOR: Now, while all of this was happening in Bethlehem, far away in the east, there lived some wise men, called Magi, who studied the way stars moved across the sky. Around the time that Jesus was born, a new star suddenly rose up in the sky. The Magi knew about God's promise that a king would one day be born in Judea, and they knew that this new star meant that this promised King had been born! They were so excited! They made plans to leave as soon as possible to go meet this new king.

They traveled through hills and valleys, over rivers and streams, through crowded cities and empty deserts, for days that turned into weeks, that turned into months or even years, until finally they arrived in Bethlehem. The star guided them right to the house where Jesus was. And when they entered the home, they saw him – only he wasn't a little baby in a manger anymore. By the time the Magi got to Bethlehem, Jesus might have been as much as two years old!

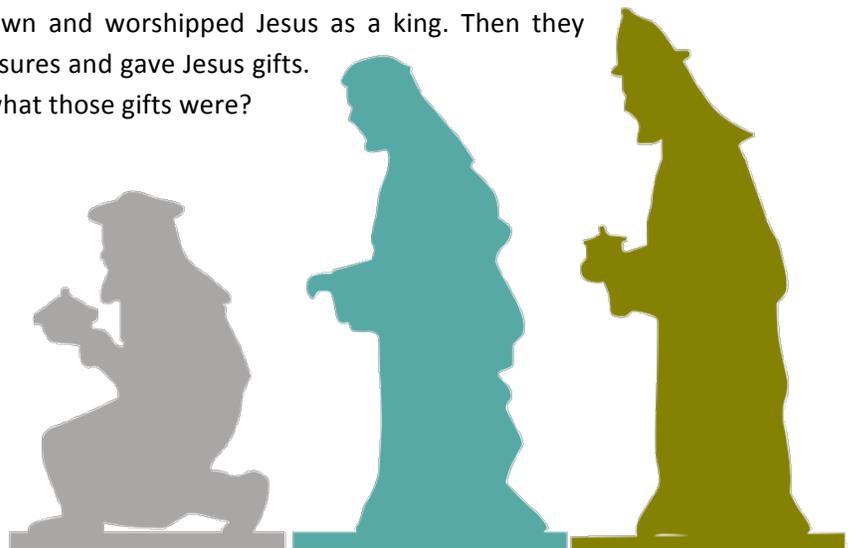
[If you have a child who is close to two years old, point out that Jesus may have been their age at the time of this story. It gives them a great frame of reference.]

The Magi bowed down and worshipped Jesus as a king. Then they opened up their treasures and gave Jesus gifts.

Does anyone know what those gifts were?

**GOLD,
FRANKINSENSE,
and MYRRH**

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These were kingly gifts that the Magi brought to honor Jesus. After such a long journey, they must have been so happy when they finally got to see Jesus. They might have sung a song—maybe even danced!

SING: ***Joy to the World*** (Since this is the last part of the story, we even do a little dance party while we sing.)
*Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing, and heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.
He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness
And wonders of his love, and wonders of his love, and wonders, wonders of his love.*

PRAY: Thank God for the time you've gotten to spend telling the story of Jesus' birth during Advent. Most importantly, thank God for who Jesus is: GREAT, the SON OF GOD, and the FOREVER KING. His name means "the LORD saves," because Jesus was born to "save His people from their sins." Remember what the angel said to the shepherds: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." May you rejoice in this good news, and share it with others.

CHRISTMAS EVE / CHRISTMAS DAY:

If you've been using an Advent Wreath, on Christmas Eve you will light all four candles *and* the "Jesus Candle" in the center of the wreath. Once you finish the story, turn off all the other lights in the room, so that all that's left is the light from the candles (unless this will frighten your children). Ask your children if they can remember back to the first week of advent, when only one candle was lit. How much brighter is the light now? That's because the wait is finally over! Christmas is here – the day when we celebrate that Jesus, the "Light of the World" was born.

Gather around the wreath, and sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus, just like you would at a birthday party. Then when you're done singing, blow out the candles (make sure to tell the kids not to blow too hard. You don't want hot wax flying around!) This is a great thing to do just before it's time to open presents. It reminds our children (and us) that Jesus is still the one we're celebrating as we give gifts to one another.

