



YOUTH STUDY PACK

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LEADER'S GUIDE: SESSION 1

Stories and Symbols of the Nativity

A Youth Christmas Study Pack for Advent

Why Are We Talking about Christmas during Advent?

We all lament the fact that, for many Christians, Advent is so overshadowed by pre-Christmas plans and music that focusing on the importance of waiting is forgotten. For many youth, however, the many stories and theological messages of Christmas are seldom dealt with except for a week right at Christmas when many do not attend because they are off somewhere with family or are away from church.

This study attempts to deal with both the themes of Advent as well as one of the most important themes of the Christmas event, God with us. The leader should keep this in mind and take advantage of opportune moments during the study to explain these themes to the youth.

Introduction for Leaders

Amazing, isn't it, that the Christmas story may be the most familiar story from the Bible, yet if asked to tell it, almost everyone would get at least half of the details wrong! That's because there are really two stories, and, if you put them side by side, you'll wonder if the writers are even telling the same story! And they're not, really. They are telling two very different stories for two different reasons: to kick off two quite different books. And the story most of us know, the story we see enacted in Christmas pageants and movies, the story we see depicted by more artists than we can count, is really a story compiled from the many things we have seen and read and sung and imagined. The story most of us know

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Examine nativity sets

GATHERING

- Name experiences of nativity sets

OPENING

- Introduction and hymn prayer
- "Jesus' birth: true or false"

EXPLORING

- Retell a nativity story
- Tell the two stories

RESPONDING

- Identify differences and meanings

CLOSING

- Personal reflection
- Prayer

is a conglomeration of hymns and children's books and Bible stories and Sunday school plays. So is there a "real" story? If there are four Gospels—four accounts of Jesus' life and ministry—why are there not four stories? Who are we to believe and what are we to believe?

There are four Gospels, but only two of the Gospel writers chose to include a story of the birth of Jesus. The writer of the Gospel of Mark decided to begin with John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus at the ripe old age of thirty, give or take a year or two. The writer of the Gospel of John begins with a very theological tale of a Jesus—"the Word"—who was with God at the beginning of time and space. Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke dare to offer us a tale of Jesus' beginnings on earth; both are theological tales that are much more about who Jesus is and who Jesus will be for us than stories about the day Jesus was born.

In this first session for Advent, while everyone begins waiting for the birth, anticipating the holidays and the gifts and the family gatherings and the food and the packed Christmas worship services, we will focus on the details. On this first Sunday of Advent, we will examine and compare and notice and be surprised and wonder . . . wonder about why in the world God chose to be human in Jesus.

Matthew and Luke were written sometime between 70 and 90 CE, a long time after Jesus' brief ministry on earth. They each tell unique stories. Luke's is the more familiar, containing the census that establishes Rome's power; the too-full inn; the cloth-wrapped Jesus laid in a manger, a feeding trough; shepherds and angels in a farm field, who show us how we should respond to the birth of this child—with joy and praise.

Matthew offers Joseph's perspective, that of a man determined to protect his fiancée from the execution allowed by law when she is found to be pregnant by another man, or so one would think. This story's angel convinces him to marry her. Indeed, this pregnancy is God's action and this birth will be no ordinary birth for ordinary purposes. As events unfold, that becomes perfectly clear. Magi (also translated as wise men) come from the East—therefore Gentiles in search of a Jewish ruler—and they come offering precious gifts and their worship, guided by a star that stops over the house where Jesus can be found. Mary is with him, no mention of Joseph. Their worship offered, they return home on the sly, avoiding King Herod and his dastardly intentions.

Matthew goes to great lengths to let us know that this baby has ties to God's people and God's purposes as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament. This baby is the one spoken of by the prophet Isaiah (7:14).

[Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us."

(Matthew 1:21–23)

If we miss that good news, we get a second chance. The Jewish priests and scribes, who were experts on the Law, know that Bethlehem will be the birthplace of a shepherd-ruler. Rome's puppet king, Herod, perceives that this child is that shepherd-ruler, comprehends the threat, and attempts to kill him before Jesus can become the king he fears. Herod is, of course, too late. Mary, Joseph, and the baby have fled to Egypt. The secret is out: "God is with us" in Jesus. Jesus is our shepherd, our king. He will save us from our sins.

Luke, similarly, does not miss the opportunity of using his nativity story to tell us who Jesus is. God's angels know: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10–11). A baby now, but this baby is our Savior.

The comparison of these two stories in this session is intended to help the youth separate them into the two distinct stories they are. Each tells us something very important about who Jesus is and what he intends for us:

- Jesus is God with us, Jesus guides us as a shepherd guides, Jesus is our king, Jesus saves us from our sins (Matthew).
- Jesus is our Savior, our Messiah, our Lord (Luke).

All that the youth do in this session moves them toward examining for themselves what these stories reveal to them about who Jesus is, especially who Jesus is for them. It must mean something that Jesus became

human, a vulnerable baby. It must mean something that shepherds and angels experience joy and offer praise. It must mean something that the magi bow down and worship. It must mean something that Jesus was one of us, that he understands us only as one can who has lived our life, known our limitations, seen our temptations, experienced our pain. It must mean something, but what? Your task as leader is to help them ask that question and not offer them your answers—they need to find their own answers. They may wrestle with these questions for a lifetime. Faith grows through wrestling.

Goal for the Session

Comparing the Matthew and Luke nativity stories will help the youth consider what these stories tell us about God, about Jesus, and about us. This will lead to their own reflection on why it matters that God became human in Jesus.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray that your preparation and leadership will invite your youth to consider what it means to them that God sent Jesus to us as a baby, a human just like us, so that we are never alone. Consider how, each week, you can make that message central to their explorations of the stories of Jesus' birth.
- Set up your room with a circle of chairs for the discussion times and two tables with chairs for two groups so that they have a work surface. Lay the nativity sets around the room ahead of time so that the youth can move from one to another and spend time looking at each one.
- After reading "Exploring" and "Teaching Alternatives," collect the materials you will need: Modeling materials appropriate for youth if you choose to create nativity figures (I love Crayola Model Magic because it is very pliable, clean, easy to work with, and it hardens into figures that will last); mural paper, markers, and tape if you choose drawing; or a box of costume props if you choose acting out the story. You might even choose to assign the stories and allow the youth to choose the way they will retell it. That will require having all the materials on hand to support any choice they make.
- In "Explore," if you choose the alternate mural activity, post the mural paper on a long wall and provide

markers and any other materials you have on hand to enhance the creation of the mural.

- Print enough copies of the Participant Handout for your group and have pens or pencils available for the true or false quiz activity and for the journaling activity.

Looking Ahead to Session 4

Session 4 explores the story of the magi and their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It suggests that you have samples to show and use. Begin your search for frankincense and myrrh now by checking local health food stores or specialty shops for fragrances and oils. You only need a small sample. An Internet search will likely tell you where you can find them in your area.

Materials Needed

- Hymnbooks tape (optional)
- Costumes and props (optional)

Teaching Tip

This session may raise lots of questions about the nativity story that the youth have not considered before and many you feel you cannot adequately answer. That's absolutely OK! The purpose of the session is not to answer all the questions but to separate the real story from the fanciful additions that come from hymns and stories about the story. Your main task is to keep the focus on the main point of the birth stories—God became one of us in Jesus Christ, a human. God is with us, we are not alone. Look to the group for answers they might have and help them go looking for responses to questions that can be answered. Be straightforward and honest in saying you yourself don't know or we can't ever know because the story doesn't tell us. Keep coming back to what we learn about God in the stories—that's what matters.

Arriving (5–10 minutes)

Examine Nativity Sets

Display five or six nativity scenes around the room. As youth arrive, ask them to look at the nativity scenes and notice differences in persons present, country and culture suggested. Invite the youth to wonder aloud with

a partner what the nativity scene attempts to emphasize and why that might be so.

Gathering (5 minutes)

Name Experiences of Nativity Sets

Bring everyone together and tell them that during these four weeks of Advent they will explore the Christmas stories in the Bible. Ask how many of them have nativity sets displayed at home and where they came from. Since many people collect nativity sets, be prepared to limit responses to the naming of one of two per person. If your church has a pageant each year, ask each person to name a favorite part they have played or seen in a pageant and why it was their favorite.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Introduction and Hymn Prayer

Tell the youth they will find the stories of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke, compare them, and wonder together and on their own what difference it makes that Jesus came to earth as a baby, as one of us. Remind them that today begins the season of Advent, the first of four Sundays when we anticipate the birth of Jesus and await his coming. Invite the youth to pray or sing together verse one of the hymn, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" as an opening prayer:

"Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free;

From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in Thee." **Amen.**

Use hymnbooks, or post the words for all to see.

2. "Jesus' Birth: True or False"

Direct the youth to the "Jesus' Birth: True or False" on the Participant Handout. Allow time to complete it alone or in pairs. Don't go over it together. Simply allow it to help them focus on the stories they will explore.

Exploring (15 minutes)

3. Retell a Nativity Story

Divide into two smaller groups. If you have more than twelve youth present, create small groups of five or so, and have more than one group work with each story.

Assign one group Matthew 1:18–2:12 and the second group Luke 2:1–20 and give them these instructions:

- Read your story aloud in your group, listening for who is present, what happens, where the action takes place, when it takes place, and what reasons are given for any of the action.
- List all the characters in your story. Then using the modeling materials provided, create a nativity based only on your story. You may not add anything to your scene not specifically named in your story. As you work, make a plan for telling your story to the other group using your nativity figures. As nearly as you can, include in your story what happened, where, when, who is present, and for what reason, if that information is actually in your story.

4. Tell the Two Stories

Ask participants to listen for differences from the story they tell as they listen to the other group tell their story.

Responding (10 minutes)

5. Identify Differences and Meanings

Lead a discussion using your choice of these questions or ones you write that you believe are useful and important for your group.

- What is common in these two stories?
- What are the major differences?
- What does each story say or imply about who Jesus is and what he will do or be?

The four Gospels in the Bible are mostly stories of Jesus' ministry as an adult, beginning with his baptism and ending with his resurrection and appearances to his disciples and others. Mark and John only have stories about Jesus as an adult. So what might Matthew and Luke want to tell us about God, about Jesus, and about us by including these stories at the beginning of their Gospels?

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Personal Reflection

Read Matthew 1:23 aloud. Then ask the youth to use the space on their Participant Handout to reflect on the question "What difference does it make to me that Jesus,

God's son, became a human?" Ask them to think about that this week when they see babies and toddlers and imagine Jesus as one.

7. Prayer

Pray together the prayer on the Participant Handout.

Come to us, long expected Jesus. As we wait for the celebration of Christmas, help us to reflect on why it matters that you became human just like us. Help us remember your name, "Emmanuel—God is with us," each day, so that we can remember you walk beside us and with us and we are never alone. **Amen.**

Teaching Alternatives

- Use pictures of nativities instead of actual nativities for the arriving activity, especially ones from different countries.
- In "Exploring," if you think your group will not enjoy creating the figures for their story, post mural paper by their group space and have them draw their story for their retelling or offer them the choice of using their time to prepare to act out their story. No matter what activity you or they choose, insist that they include only the action from their own biblical text in their retelling.
- The most recent movie to portray these stories is *The Nativity*. A movie does not have to be great, or even good, to be useful. Rent it or borrow it from a library

and watch it with the intention of noticing what it does with these two stories. One fun way to use a movie is to compare its telling of the story with the real story. You might find a clip for each of the four weeks of Advent that will help to bring clarity to the biblical story by contrasting the theatrical one.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 1:18–2:12

Luke 2:1–20

For More Information

Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

Walter J. Harrelson, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003). Study the notes on the two passages.

About the Writer

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Stories and Symbols of the Nativity

A Youth Christmas Study Pack for Advent

Two Versions of One Event

[Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.
All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.”

Matthew 1:21–23

But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’

Luke 2:10–11

Why Did God Come as a Human?

This week we look at the differences between the stories of Jesus’ birth at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel and the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. Let’s wonder together what they tell us about who God is and about why it matters that Jesus became human, became just like us.

PRAYER

Come to us, long-expected Jesus. As we wait for the celebration of Christmas, help us to reflect on why it matters that you became human just like us. Help us remember your name, “Emmanuel—God is with us,” each day, so that we can remember you walk beside us and with us and we are never alone. **Amen.**

Jesus' Birth: True or False

Circle the correct answer T (true) or F (false).

- T F Three magi (sometimes translated wise men) came to visit Jesus.
- T F A little drummer boy was present to serenade the Christ child.
- T F The innkeeper sent Mary and Joseph to his stable to have the baby.
- T F The magi visited Jesus at the manger.
- T F An ox and a donkey were at the manger when Christ was born.
- T F The angels sang, "Noel, Noel."
- T F Jesus was born on December 25th.
- T F The shepherds and the magi visited the Christ child at the same time.
- T F All four Gospels tell the story of the birth of Jesus.
- T F Angels led the shepherds to the manger.
- T F Jesus was born at midnight.
- T F Mary and Joseph were very poor.

What difference does it make to me that Jesus, God's son, became a human?

I imagine the baby Jesus . . .

Mary must have wondered if . . .

Joseph must have worried that . . .

Here's the bad news . . .

Here's the good news . . .