

Growing in God's Love

A Story Bible Curriculum

The Birth of Jesus



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The free At-Home Kit Guide provides instructions and suggestions for at-home faith formation. Download it at www.pcusastore.com/StoryBibleCurriculum or www.thethoughtfulchristian.com/StoryBibleCurriculum. Click on the unit title, and then click on the download button found at the bottom of the product page for this unit.

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Introduction

How do you get to know someone and form a relationship? You meet them. Get to know them. Ask questions. Discover things about them. Talk with each other. Share stories. Wrestle with what you learn. Discern your place in the relationship, with others, and with the world. Repeat.

One of the first ways we begin to understand God's self-revelation is to hear, engage, and wrestle with the written Word. In other words, it is through the stories of the Bible that we get to know God. It is through the stories of the things Jesus did and said that we get to know Jesus. It is through the Holy Spirit that we live and learn together. We get to know ourselves as beloved children of God and our place in the faith community.

In this curriculum, children will:

- read and hear stories from the Bible, adapted and told as age-appropriate stories using *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*;
- pause to let each story find its way into their hearts and minds;
- engage their curiosity and imagination with the Bible story through wondering questions and activities exploring God's presence, actions, and grace in the story; and
- wrestle with how they fit in the story, what God is calling them to do, and how they follow God's way of loving and living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Benefits of a Multiage Setting

Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible Curriculum is intentionally a multiage children's curriculum. Multiage curriculum places spiritual development in a church family model and recognizes that age and development are not synonymous. It can appeal to all church sizes, with "family groups" spanning the various ages found in larger groups. There is the opportunity for the development of skills and character through encouraging disciples who support and care for one another; providing leadership and mentoring occasions; and supporting cooperation, rather than competition, as well as patience, tolerance, and compassion for those who are of different age or ability. Multiage curriculum provides a change from the typical school day and model of education. It offers open-ended materials that can challenge children and allows for developmental diversity and individual

differences. Children can develop a strong sense of community as they offer and receive support and encouragement.

Note about Supplies

Basic supplies, such as paper, newsprint, card stock, pencils, pens, markers, crayons, colored pencils, glue, glue sticks, scissors, and tape, will not be listed in the "Gathering Supplies" section. These items are considered general supplies to have on hand. Specific items required for the lesson will be noted in each session.

Flyaway Books

Flyaway Books (www.flyawaybooks.com) is a children's picture book imprint from Presbyterian Publishing Corporation and the publisher of *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*. It features books that reflect themes of diversity, inclusivity, kindness, compassion, self-esteem, and care for our world and that retell familiar religious stories in new ways. Flyaway Books titles are available at www.pcusastore.com.

Including Children with Disabilities and Special Needs

Create an environment that helps children of all abilities experience God's grace by making a space welcoming and accessible. You can adapt an activity by process, product, or environment—the way something is done, what is done, or where it is done. If you think a child may struggle with an activity, ask the question "How can I help this child be successful?"

Adapting the Process: Giving extra support to complete activities is an example of changing the process.

Adapting the Product: Having children make or do something different is an example of changing the product when the original plan is inaccessible for a child.

Adapting the Environment: Thinking about the room where you gather helps children feel welcome and included. Considering lighting, space, and furniture; displaying children's projects; and using liturgical seasons and symbols help children feel that the room is a place where they belong.

Unit Overview: The Birth of Jesus

Remembering These Stories

Of the Gospels, only Luke and Matthew have stories of Jesus' birth. The five stories in this unit might be five stories that Mary kept in her heart as Jesus grew up. These stories are so familiar that you will probably find it helpful to consider them in the various scenes as presented in this session. Four of the stories focus on the birth of Jesus, but one story, "A Prophet Is Born," is about John the baptizer. John, who is just months older than Jesus, is the prophet God sent to prepare the people for the Messiah.

Christmas pageants usually mash the four stories about Jesus—the Annunciation, the birth, the visit of the shepherds, and the visit of the magi—together into one climactic scene, showing everyone at the manger at the same time. Taking these parts of the story one at a time gives a better sense of the time line on which they hang.

Remembering How These Stories Connect with One Another

Unlike in some other units, the connections between these stories are obvious. The first four come from the Gospel of Luke and are found there in the same order. Only the story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple is omitted, though it is in the unit "Jesus: Beginnings." These stories are found only in Luke's Gospel.

The final story of the unit, "Visitors from the East" is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. While it usually appears at the end of traditional Christmas pageants, it actually occurs sometime later, when the family of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus live in a house and Jesus is a toddler, not an infant. This setting is depicted in the illustration for this story in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*.

Remembering Why These Stories Are Important to Our Faith

Apparently, these stories weren't important to the other Gospel writers, Mark and John. We see even Luke and Matthew didn't include the same birth stories. Nevertheless, they hold a special place in the spiritual lives of most Christians in the twenty-first century. They are wonderful stories to tell our children, until you get to the part where Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape the death threat of Herod that follows the story of the visitors from the east. That story rarely makes it into the Christmas pageant.

But more than stories we can tell children, the stories of Jesus' birth begin this journey of a man who was the Son of God, the Messiah,

the one sent from God who was born as a vulnerable baby. They are stories that gather us in and beg us to listen—every year.



Remembering to Wonder

While these stories are familiar, their familiarity gives us a reason to stop and wonder about them.

- ✦ I wonder how Mary told her parents about the message Gabriel gave her.
- ✦ I wonder who the shepherds told about the angels and the baby in the manger and who believed them.
- ✦ I wonder what Mary said when the visitors from the east showed up at her door.
- ✦ I wonder where Joseph was when the magi came.
- ✦ I wonder how to get beyond the Christmas trappings and celebrate the essence of these stories.

How Can This Happen?—Luke 1:26-38

Worship

- It's a Surprise!
 - ✦ In your worship space, have a wrapped box where people can see it.
 - ✦ As people enter the worship space, invite them to walk by the box and wonder what it might be. Have a leader sit near the box in case anyone has questions. Without touching it or picking it up, ask people to wonder what may be inside and have the leader respond only with, "It's a surprise!"
 - ✦ During worship, use the box to tell the story from Luke 1:26–38 or read "How Can This Happen?" from *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 186). Put a tea light candle inside the box and, after it is removed, turn it on and read the words the angel said to Mary.
 - ✦ At the end of the service, invite the congregation to say together, "God gives us many gifts. We watch and wait for the greatest surprise of all: Jesus!"

Education

- What about Mary?
 - ✦ Read the story from Luke 1:26–38. This story is familiar to many adults, and most likely children and youth have heard this story in its various forms in Advent and Christmas services. Talk together about the fact that Mary was most likely a young teenager (around thirteen or fourteen years old), she was unmarried, and she was not a person with a powerful family or wealth. Young girls in this time in history without power or much money would not have been listened to or given much worth by societal standards. Wonder together:
 - Why do you think Mary was chosen by God to be the mother of God's son, Jesus?
 - What would it have been like for a young girl to hear this news?
 - ✦ Invite anyone who is a parent to share the feelings they had when they found out that they were going to have a child.
 - ✦ Form small groups and invite each group to choose one of the following ways to engage with the story:

- Put Gabriel's words to Mary into their own words.
- Act out the scene between Gabriel and Mary.
- Sculpt with play dough, pipe cleaners, or their own bodies, depicting scenes between Gabriel and Mary.

Connections

- Being Brave
 - ✦ Mary was brave when she said yes to Gabriel's news that she would be the mother of God's son, Jesus. She was brave when she told Joseph the news. She was brave when she told her family the news. Mary could do brave things. Brainstorm a list of things that are brave to do. Here are a few suggestions: stand in front of people and sing, act, be funny, or deliver a talk; have your own opinion and voice it; ask for help; tell someone you love them; stand up for someone else; eat unfamiliar food. Invite everyone to choose one item on the list to try. Encourage everyone to keep trying new items on the list.
 - ✦ Mary wasn't alone. She knew God was with her every step of the way. Joseph also stuck by her side. We don't know about most of her family or friends, except Elizabeth, her relative who you can read about in Luke 1:39–56. Brainstorm a list of what makes you brave. Here are a few suggestions: when I hold someone's hand, when I won't let someone define who I am, when I help someone else to be brave, when I ask God for help.

Service

- Surprising Presence
 - ✦ Talk together about who may need the gift of presence. The gift of presence is to be with someone who may not be expecting it and may need someone to come sit with them. This could be a person in a nursing home, a homebound church member, a neighbor, a friend, or even a family member. Wonder together what might be some ways to do something new and surprising that shows God's love to others.

A Prophet Is Born—Luke 1:5-21, 57-80

Worship

- Incense
 - ✦ At the beginning of worship, burn incense at the front of the sanctuary. Invite people to come forward to write a prayer on a strip of paper and smell the incense. Collect the prayers in a bowl and pray over them during the service.
- Path of Peace
 - ✦ In Luke 1:76–79, Zechariah prophesies that his son, John, will guide God’s people “into the path to peace” (v. 79). Use brown craft paper to create the shape of a winding path and write “Path of Peace” on it. Hang the path on a wall in your sanctuary or set it on the communion table. Before worship or during the prayers of the people, invite people to write prayers for peace or action words that represent to them what the path to peace involves.

Education

- Pairings in Luke
 - ✦ The author of Luke uses pairings as a literary technique. Pairings are when two similar stories are told one after the other. We see this when the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that he is going to have a son and later, the angel Gabriel tells Mary she is going to have a son. We see this literary technique again with Mary’s song of praise and prophesy (Luke 1:46–55) and Zechariah’s similar song (Luke 1:67–79).
 - ✦ Read Luke 1:5-25 and Luke 1:26-38. What are the similarities between these two stories? What are the differences? How are Zechariah and Mary’s reactions to the angel Gabriel similar or different?
 - ✦ Read Luke 1:46–55 and Luke 1:67–79. What are the similarities and differences between Mary and Zechariah’s songs? What words, phrases, or images stand out the most to you and why? Draw or paint a picture of this word, image, or phrase.

Connections

- Names
 - ✦ The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that his son is to be named John. Look up the meaning of your

first and middle name online. Share stories of who participants were named after and why.

- Baby Stories at Home
 - ✦ Elizabeth and Zechariah prayed for a baby for a long time. Invite children and youth to ask their parents to share pictures—or a baby book—of them when they were little. Invite them to have their parents tell stories about when they were born and the hopes they had for them then and now.

Service

- Baby Name Gift
 - ✦ Is there a new baby in your church or neighborhood community? Make a gift with the baby’s name (and the meaning, if space allows) on it, such as a quilt, picture, collage, and so forth. Welcome the new baby to your community.

A Baby Is Born—Luke 2:1-7

Worship

- Making Room for a New Baby
 - ✦ In your sanctuary space, set aside a place for the baby Jesus. This could be a mat or a pillow or a flat space that is surrounded on all sides. You could surround the soft place with brown strips of paper to make it look like a trough or a manger.
 - ✦ Hand out tea lights and a quarter-sized sheet of paper to congregants as they enter the space. During an opening hymn, invite the congregation to bring forward their light and place it around the manger.
 - ✦ In response to the gift of Jesus in the world, invite the congregation to respond with their gifts. Before the offering, invite the congregation to write on the pieces of paper the spiritual gifts they bring to the church family and to the world. During the offering, have people lay their papers in the manger.
 - ✦ At the end of the service, invite the congregation to say together, “God is with us! *Glory to God* in the highest! Amen.”

Education

- Reading about the Journey
 - ✦ Take turns reading the article from the *Los Angeles Times*, “A Long, Cold Road to Bethlehem: Nativity: Gospel Accounts of Mary and Joseph’s Journey Gloss Over the Arduous Reality of Life and Travel in Ancient Galilee, Scholars Say” (bit.ly/RoadToBethlehemArticle). After the first three paragraphs, pause after each paragraph and reflect on the information provided about the journey.
 - Consider how far ninety miles is from your location to give the distance perspective. Note how far ten miles of difficult terrain walking might be.
 - Eat together. Share bread and herbed olive oil.

Connections

- The Census
 - ✦ Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem because the Emperor Augustus decreed that everyone be registered, or counted. The Roman ruler wanted a census taken. Watch the YouTube video “Getting an Accurate Count—2020 Census” (bit.ly/GettingAnAccurateCount, 2:22) to see how the census is taken in the United States today and why it is important.
 - ✦ Count the people in your family or group. Count the people in your congregation using the church directory. Wonder together how you can find out if anyone is missing from your count.

Service

- Giving a Gift
 - ✦ You are a gift to your family. You are a gift to your church community. God has given us the gift of God’s son Jesus in the world. Wonder together how you can show God’s love by giving gifts to others.
 - ✦ Collect clothes, toys, or other items for babies in your community. Talk to your pastor or church leaders about families in need in your church or in your community that may be welcoming a new baby soon.

Surprise Visitors—Luke 2:8-20

Worship

- Praising God with the Shepherds and Angels
 - ✦ Plan a participatory Scripture reading using bit.ly/ChristmasParticipation as an idea. Gather a variety of bells to hand out and have people ring whenever they hear the word *angel* or *angels* in the Scripture reading.
- Sanctuary Decorations
 - ✦ Before worship, invite people to draw pictures to go with parts of the message. These drawings then can be used to decorate the sanctuary or as bulletin covers. Phrases of the announcement to be illustrated might include:
 - “Don’t be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.”
 - “This very day in David’s town your Savior was born—Christ the Lord!”
 - “And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”
 - “*Glory to God* in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!”

Education

- Digging Deeper: Shepherds and Angels
 - ✦ Form small groups and assign each group one of the following studies: shepherds or angels. Have each group read the passages and then have a conversation using the questions provided. Gather as a large group and share findings.
 - Explore Bible stories about shepherds.
 - Read Psalm 23: What does a shepherd do?
 - Read John 10:7–16: How does Jesus serve as a shepherd?
 - Read John 21:15–17: How does Jesus call us to be shepherds?
 - Explore Bible stories about angels.
 - Read Luke 1:8–14: What do angels do?
 - Read Luke 1:26–38: How might we feel when met by an angel?
 - ✦ Reflect together on why the shepherds would be given the message first and run to see the baby Jesus.

Connections

- Field Trip
 - ✦ Take a trip to an open field or pasture at night. If you cannot travel to a field, do this activity in a darkened room.
 - Experience the darkness.
 - Read Luke 2:8–14.
 - Imagine how the shepherds felt when the darkness was dispelled by the “glory of the Lord” and an angel appeared. Think about how you would feel. If possible, have someone light the darkness with a bright light.
 - ✦ Talk together about times when something unexpected happened. Maybe it was an unexpected phone call, an unexpected message, or an unexpected visit.
 - What did you do?
 - How did it change your life?
 - Who did you want to tell?
 - Did you ponder it as Mary did?

Service

- Messenger for God
 - ✦ Tell someone the message you heard from the angel in today’s story.
- Being a Shepherd
 - ✦ Offer someone care by offering food, giving protection, guiding and helping, or providing shelter. If unable to do this firsthand, you can shepherd by supporting a mission.
 - ✦ Make cookies and take them to a homebound person in your congregation.
 - ✦ Help a new friend in school or work.
 - ✦ Play a game together as a family or do something fun with another family.
 - ✦ Sit in worship with someone who is sitting alone.

Visitors from the East—Matthew 2:1-12

Worship

- Sharing Our Gifts
 - ✦ Before worship, cut out stars and have them, along with markers, available in baskets near the entrance to the sanctuary. As people come in, invite them to pick up a star.
 - ✦ At the end of worship, invite people to think about a gift—whether that be a talent, spiritual gift, or material gift—that they want to give to someone else to honor Jesus. Invite people to write that word or commitment on the star and take it home with them.
 - ✦ Encourage people to put the star on their bathroom mirror or refrigerator as a reminder to honor Jesus by giving that gift to someone this week.

Education

- Stars
 - ✦ Share what you know about stars. Watch the YouTube video “What Are Stars?” (bit.ly/WhatAreStars, 3:38). Ask the group when they have seen stars that are really bright.
 - ✦ Learn about different constellations. Watch the YouTube video “Constellations: Connect the Dots in the Sky” (bit.ly/ConnectTheDotsInTheSky, 3:44). Wonder together how the magi knew what star to follow and why God used a star to guide the magi. If you’re able to, go outside to look at the stars and search for a constellation such as Orion’s Belt or the Big Dipper.

Connections

- Geography: The Magi's Travels
 - ✦ The biblical text says that the magi came from the east, but it doesn't say exactly where they are from. Some traditions suggest the magi were from Persia (modern-day Iran), Arabia, India, or even China.
 - Do an internet search of a map of the world (or use www.google.com/earth) to see where Persia (modern-day Iran), Arabia (the Arabian Peninsula), India, and China are in relationship to Bethlehem.
 - Use www.google.com/earth to see what the geography is like in these areas. What geographical features, like mountains, deserts, or rivers, might have made traveling through these areas difficult for the magi?

Service

- Providing Care for Travelers and People Who Are Far from Home
 - ✦ The magi had to travel a long time—over two years—to reach Jesus. Discuss how your church or family can care for people in your community who have to travel away from their homes. These people may be patients seeking treatment at a local hospital, refugees, college students, new students, immigrants, or someone who has recently moved to your area to begin a new job. Discuss how you can care for and offer hospitality to these travelers. Commit to doing one or two things to care for the travelers in your community.
- Giving to Others
 - ✦ The magi bring gifts to the child Jesus to honor him. What gifts can you give to others? Consider sending a card or a text to a loved one, spending the afternoon with someone who is lonely, or baking cookies or another treat for someone you care about.

✦ **Goal:** To explore feelings of surprise, confusion, and wonder when hearing the story of the angel's news to Mary.

Connecting with the Biblical Text

A young woman, a teenager really, is told she is going to have God's baby. Right! What teenager do you know who would be a likely candidate for this task? And the message comes via an angel named Gabriel no less. Are you kidding me? What would this young woman be thinking? One of the most spectacular paintings of this moment is *The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner* (bit.ly/TannerAnnunciation). The column of light representing Gabriel moves us away from the winged angel, and the look on Mary's face helps us imagine her reaction. Most translations of Luke describe Mary's reaction to Gabriel's greeting, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" with words like *perplexed* or *confused*. But the Greek work might also be translated as *terrified*, which makes Gabriel's next words, "Don't be afraid, Mary," sound more appropriate.

For more thoughts about this story, go to bit.ly/AnnunciationCommentary.

Connecting with the World

The choice of Mary to bear God's son seems so unlikely. She is everything that you might not expect: young, poor, from an unremarkable village.

- ✦ What contemporary leaders have come from obscurity to prominence? How did this happen?
- ✦ While many teenage parents do a pretty good job of parenting, most teenage moms and dads need a lot of support for this new role. What organizations in your community provide the support needed? How can you or your family help? Here is one model: bit.ly/SupportForYoungParents.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

Most children in the church learn something about the story of the birth of Jesus before they reach kindergarten or first grade. However, the story of how Mary found out she was going to have a baby may not be so familiar. Children are often nonplussed about the angel appearing from nowhere, instead being used to it as a common occurrence in Bible stories. Older children may have questions about the story. Listen to their questions and talk about them together, rather than cutting off their wondering by providing answers.

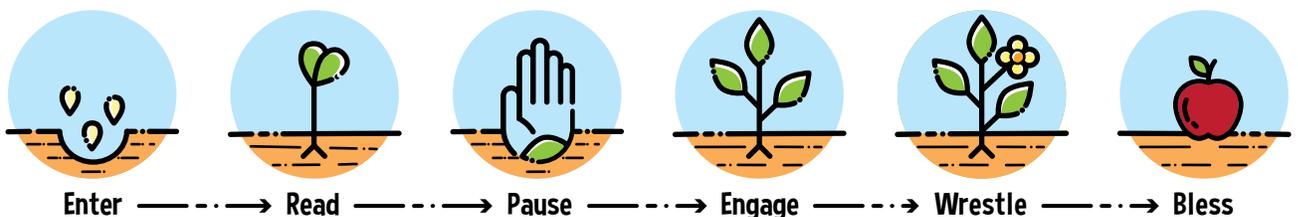
This is another family faith story, and knowing it strengthens children's connection to the faith community. Invite them to tell it as their own story so that it becomes just that.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

As adults, we have heard this story of the Annunciation so often that we don't really listen to the details, assuming that we already know the story well. Take a moment to sit with Luke 1:26-38, noting the details from the dating of the story to Mary's decision.

- ✦ How long do you think Gabriel waited between verses 37 and 38? What do you think went through Mary's mind?
- ✦ What would it mean to you to know that you are a "favored one" of God?
- ✦ "Nothing will be impossible with God." Do you believe this statement from Gabriel? Why or why not?
- ✦ During this Advent week, spend time each day thinking about Mary and her willingness to put herself in God's hands. What does that feel like to you?

*God of surprises, you chose a young woman in an unknown place to bear your son.
Open our eyes to your surprises around us this Advent season. Amen.*



Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✦ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✦ *Nobody Rides the Unicorn* by Adrian Mitchell (Arthur A. Levine, 2000)
- ✦ Mural paper
- ✦ Battery-operated candle
- ✦ Drawing supplies, such as crayons, markers, and colored pencils
- ✦ Resource Pages 1, 2, and 3
- ✦ Internet-connected device
- ✦ Bandanas
- ✦ Permanent markers
- ✦ Scissors

Preparing to Lead

Take a deep breath, in and out. Repeat three times. Center yourself in this moment. Then pray this prayer:

Dear God, help me to hear this Scripture in a new way. Fill me with creativity and compassion as I prepare to lead your children. Amen.

Read the Bible story in Luke 1:26–38. As you explore the text, note things that are surprising about this familiar story. Keep in mind that the children may have heard this story before, so it will be helpful if you point out new insights from the background information in this curriculum and from the text. Then read the story “How Can This Happen?” in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 186). Note the differences in the stories and think about what questions the children may ask you.

Think about the following as you engage with this text:

- ✦ What would the teenage Mary have told Joseph about this encounter with the angel?
- ✦ What would she have told Elizabeth or other members of her family?
- ✦ What must she have been thinking and feeling as the angel appeared to her?
- ✦ We know that this story and the virgin birth is difficult to comprehend for many, even for people of faith. What questions might the children ask about this miraculous event?
- ✦ In many translations, the angel tells Mary, “Do not be afraid.” This is easier said than done. How

can you help the children you are leading to know that scary times will happen, but that God is present?

- ✦ Mary was young, poor, and not from a powerful family. What does that say about the people who God uses in the lineage of Jesus? What does this say about vulnerable people in our communities today?
- ✦ Advent and Christmas is often a season of frantic schedules and consumerism. How can we slow down to think about God's presence in this story and the remarkable nature of a brave young woman chosen to carry the son of God into the world?

Elementary-age children are concrete learners, and this story is far from concrete. Focus on elements they can comprehend: Would they feel surprised and confused if they were asked to do something new and seemingly impossible, as Mary was? What does it mean to know God is with you?

As you think about this story in relationship to Advent (a time of waiting and preparation) and the often busy lives of people in congregations, think about how to make this story real for the children you are leading.

The questions at the bottom of p. 186 in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* are helpful to guide conversation. Help the children remember that in the story, Gabriel says that Jesus is a gift from God. Gabriel also says God can do anything! Help them work through the tough feelings that may come from this story. Help them to remember that even Mary was scared, confused, and unsure of what to do, but God was there to help her figure it out.

Cover a table with mural paper and place drawing supplies, such as crayons, markers, and colored pencils, on the table.



Enter into sacred space together.

As each child arrives, ask them to sit around the table with the mural paper. Invite them to think about things that have happened in the last month or so. Wonder if anything has happened in their lives that has been confusing, surprising, or even scary. Invite them to draw a picture on the mural paper.

Leading

Sometimes children are not quick to share something scary, especially if they are visitors or new to the class. Be sure to invite them to draw a surprise instead, if that is more comfortable. As children finish, invite them to go around the room and look at the drawings, asking questions such as, “Will you tell me more about this drawing?” or “How did you feel when this happened?”

Once the entire class has gathered and has had some time to draw, turn on the candle and ask the children to repeat after you as you pray:

Creator God, /
you know us. /
You knew us before we were born /
and you know us now. /
Open our ears to this story of Jesus. /
May we remember that you are with us, always. /
Amen. /

There are a variety of art supplies for this lesson. Help children find what they need, and be ready to adapt to those who need help.



Read a story of God’s people.

Invite the children to sit in a comfortable position to listen to the story of the angel appearing to Mary. Read the first two paragraphs of the story in *Growing in God’s Love: A Story Bible* (p. 186).

Have a conversation using the questions in the first paragraph:

- Have you ever been asked to do something that sounded impossible or scary or confusing?
- What did you do?

Invite older children to lead a discussion about the drawings on the butcher paper.

Read the rest of the story.



Pause to let God’s Word enter into hearts and minds.

Ask the children to sit with this story for a few moments of silence. Watch as they ponder the story.

They may wiggle or start to touch the child next to them, and that is OK. Ask them to turn their imaginations on, while staying quiet, as the group continues to imagine what Mary may have been thinking as the angel Gabriel appeared in her room.



Engage curiosity and imagination with God’s story.

Engage the children in what it may have been like to be Mary in this situation. Wonder together:

- Start with the “Hear” question at the end of the story on page 186:
 - “Have you ever done something that you had never done before? How did you feel after you did it?”
 - What were you asked to do?
- Use the “See” question on page 186:
 - Turn to the person next to you and make the face Mary may have made while the angel was talking to her.
 - Explain to the group why you made the face you made.
- Use the “Act” question:
 - Mary was brave in saying yes. What brave thing have you done lately?

Telling the Story

- Provide paper and drawing supplies. Have the children form groups of two or three. Ask one child to retell the story and other children in the group to draw the story as they hear it. Share the stories around the circle. Talk about what is similar and what is different among the retellings and the pictures.
- Show the pictures on Resource Pages 1, 2, and 3. Pass them around so that everyone has a chance to see the pictures. Tell the children that these are different artist’s ideas of the same story they told and drew pictures about. Wonder what these pictures say about the angel’s news and Mary’s feelings.
 - Do any of the pictures show Mary the way you imagined her?
 - What feelings do you see in Mary?
 - What is similar and different in your pictures and these artists’ pictures?



Wrestle with our place in God's story.

Since this story can be difficult to grasp, invite the children to think about the new, surprising, or scary feelings they have discussed and explored throughout the session. Wonder when they felt that God was with them.

Choose one or both options:

- Saying Yes
 - ✔ God chose Mary, an ordinary girl from a small town, to be the mother of Jesus. Ask the children to think about what they can do to be brave and follow what God wants us to do. When they are faced with big moments of injustice or doing the right thing, some children think they are too young or too little. Remind them of their power and their voice.
 - ✔ Provide paper and colored pencils. Have the children write "I will..." in the middle of a piece of paper. Invite them to take a moment to think about something they could do or try that requires them to be brave. Using the colored pencils, ask the children to draw or write something new that they will be brave about. Assist with writing as needed.
- Brave Decisions
 - ✔ Wonder together how Mary was brave.
 - ✔ Read *Nobody Rides the Unicorn* by Adrian Mitchell (Arthur A. Levine, 2000) or watch the YouTube video "Nobody Rides the Unicorn" (bit.ly/NobodyRidesTheUnicorn, 7:17).
 - How is Zoe like Mary?
 - How can we use our voices to be brave and outspoken, saying yes to God's call to do what is right in our world?



Bless one another with God's grace.

Gather in a circle and close with the following prayer, asking the children to repeat after you:

God who speaks /
to the young and the old, /
thank you for /
the gift of your son in this world. /
Thank you for /

using ordinary people /
to do extraordinary things. /
Help us to feel your presence /
when life feels scary or confusing. /
Amen. /



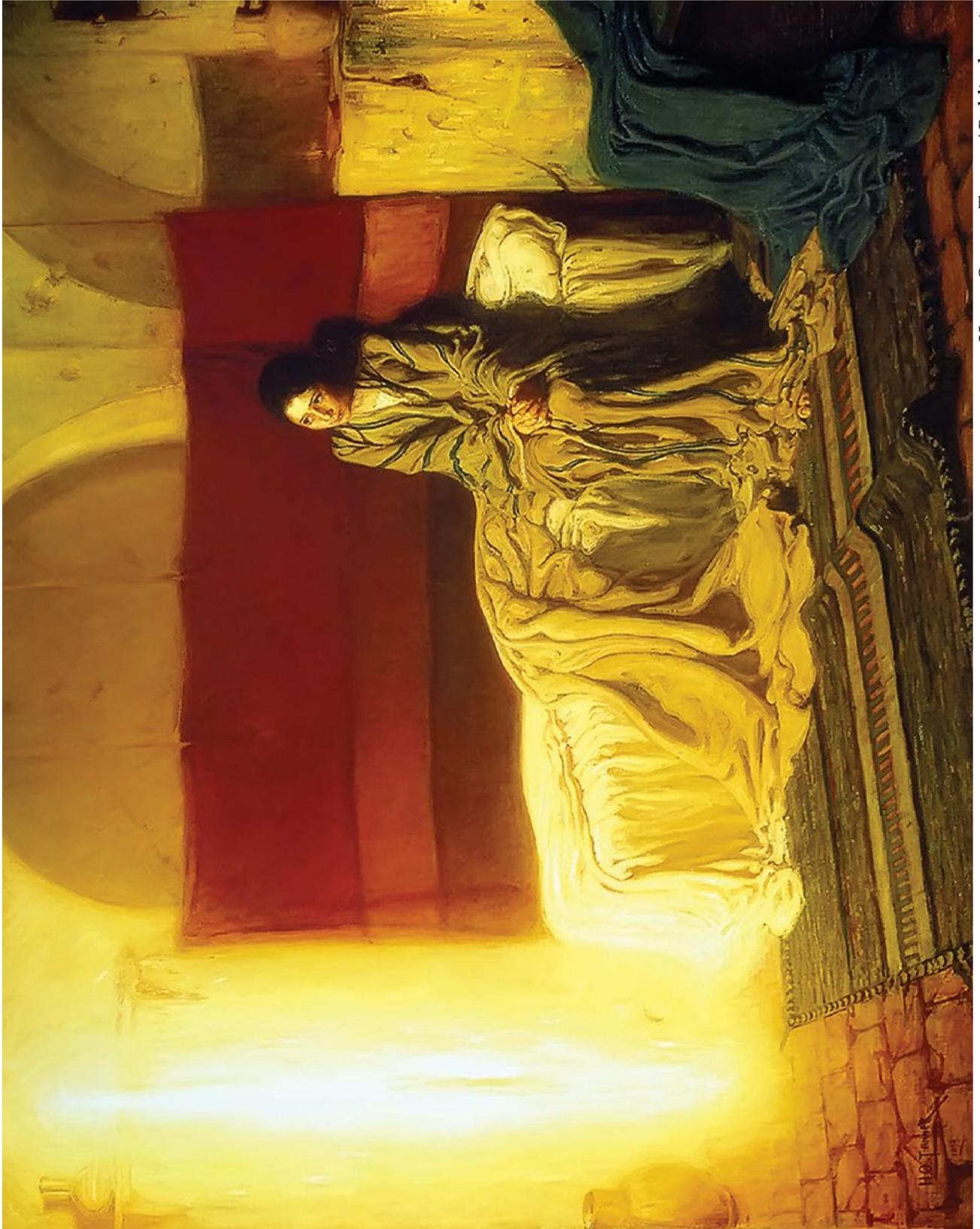
Grow with more.

- Listening
 - ✔ This activity will help the children to explore feelings of confusion, listening, and trust-building. They have to listen closely to the instructions they are being given. Remind them that if this is something new for them, they can be brave and try a new thing.
 - ✔ Place the children in two parallel lines. Ask a child to volunteer to walk between the two lines while blindfolded with a bandana. Ask another child to stand opposite and give clear instructions on how to move forward (for example, keep walking, turn right, turn left, go slowly, and so forth). The goal is to have the walker make it through the lines to the person calling out the instructions. Ask the children in the lines to hold both hands out to help gently guide the person walking in case they veer off course. Invite the children to take turns being the one who walks and the one giving instructions. Remind them that, similar to our story, Mary was not alone; we walk through new or scary experiences together, as a community of faith.

If you have some children who do not want to be blindfolded, remind them that being in the lines and helping to guide people is an important job too!

- Ordinary People, Extraordinary Circumstances in Our World
 - ✔ Invite the children to think about people who they may know or have learned about who are everyday people doing remarkable things. Have the children tell the stories of these people. They may know the stories of Malala Yousufzai, Ruby Bridges, Greta Thunberg, or other such people who have been written about in the news and books, but they may also know stories of their friends, neighbors, and schoolmates.

How Can This Happen?
Resource Page 1

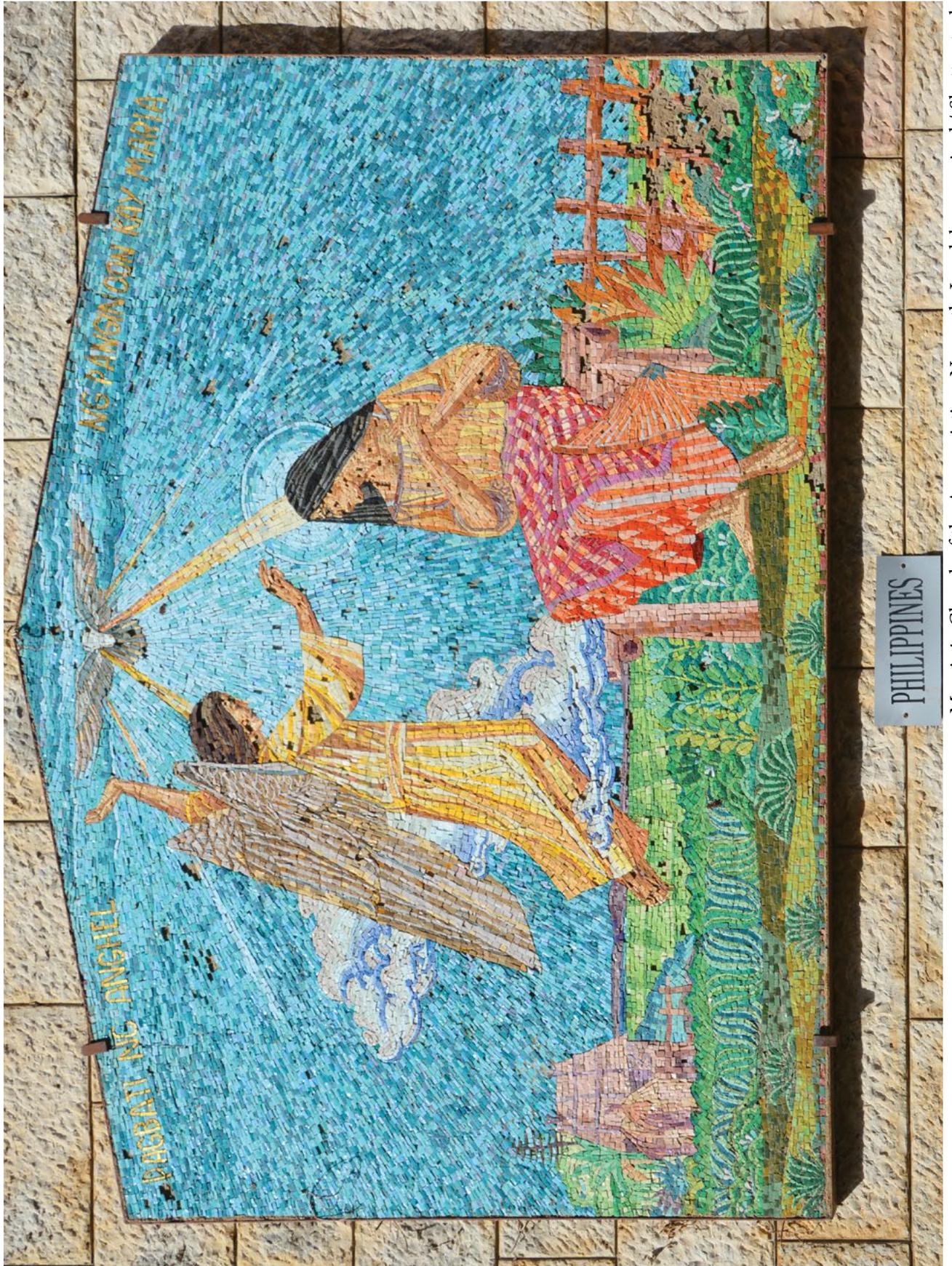


Henry Ossawa Tanner / Public domain

How Can This Happen?
Resource Page 2



The Annunciation, by Adriaen van de Velde, 1667 / Shutterstock



Mosaic in Church of the Annunciation, Nazareth, Israel, by meunierd / Shutterstock

Connecting with the Biblical Text

Yet another baby is born to a couple beyond children-bearing years (remember Abraham and Sarah!). God certainly is full of surprises. In Luke, we have a woman yet to be married who is told she will have God's son; now we have an older woman who has prayed for a child for years and is about to give birth to a prophet of God. That's not the only contrast in this story. Mary questions how it could be possible for her to be pregnant when she has not had sexual relations with a man, and Gabriel answers her and gives her time to consider what God is asking of her. But when Zechariah questions the ability of his wife to have a baby at her age, the same Gabriel silences his mouth for expressing an obvious doubt.

When Mary visits Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant (Luke 1:39-55), she says the now-famous Magnificat (vv. 46-55) about her future son. When John is born and being circumcised, Zechariah tells everyone what this tiny boy will accomplish for God. Both mother-to-be and new father are fully aware of what the future holds for their sons.

For more on Zechariah's words about this son, go to bit.ly/ZechariahCommentary.

Connecting with the World

What can we take from Zechariah's message in Luke 1:68-79 of peace, unity, and salvation for the Christian life today?

- ✦ Study the effects of gun violence using the DVD *Trigger: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence* available at triggerdoc.com. A four-session study guide is also available on the website.
- ✦ Join a neighborhood or community group that seeks to improve communication among neighbors.

- ✦ **Goal:** To consider what God's plan for us may be.
- ✦ Learn about interfaith relations in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at www.presbyterianmission.org/interfaith, or explore your denominational equivalent.

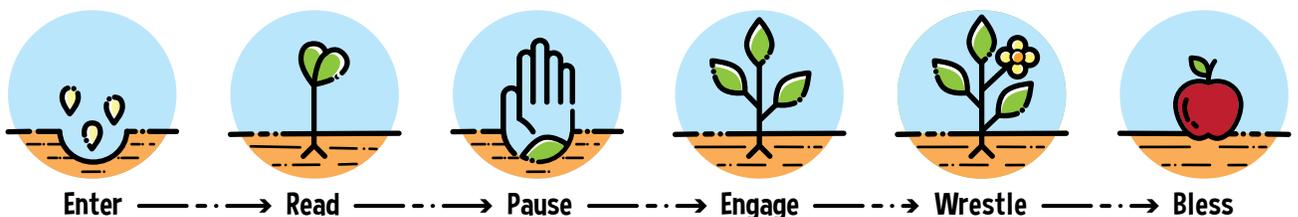
Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

Aside from this being another faith family story to help children connect with the church, this story reveals the plan God has for creation, and particularly humanity. Research in the spiritual lives of children and adolescents by Lisa Miller and reported in *The Spiritual Child* (Picador Paper, 2016) supports what we have always believed in the church: children who grow up knowing that there is a larger purpose for the world and a sense of the divine are prepared to engage with all of life in a positive way. As you talk about this story with children, help them think of Zechariah's speech as a vision rather than a plan to be accomplished in the lifetime of John and Jesus.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

- ✦ What hopes do you have for the children in your life, your own or those of others?
- ✦ Elizabeth and Zechariah waited a long time for a baby. When have you waited for something for a long time? What sustained you during that wait? How was your faith part of it?
- ✦ Meditate on Luke 1:78-79 this week. Pray for peace, God's shalom in its many forms.

Compassionate God, look on us with your steadfast mercy and break open our darkness with your light. Amen.



Enter — — — —> Read — — — —> Pause — — — —> Engage — — — —> Wrestle — — — —> Bless

Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✦ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✦ Battery-operated candle
- ✦ Resource Page 1
- ✦ Paper lunch bag
- ✦ Biblical costumes
- ✦ Copies of Resource Page 2
- ✦ Props, such as a tablet or pad of paper and a baby doll
- ✦ Incense or fragrant potpourri

Preparing to Lead

Take a deep breath, in and out. Repeat three times. Center yourself in this moment. Then pray this prayer:

Dear God, help me to hear this Scripture in a new way. Fill me with creativity and compassion as I prepare to lead your children. Amen.

Read the story from the Bible, Luke 1:5–21, 57–80 twice, using two different translations. Note any differences in words or phrases between translations. What stands out to you? How do these differences change your understanding of this Scripture? Then read the story “A Prophet Is Born” in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 188).

Engage with this passage by reflecting on these questions:

- ✦ When have you had to wait a long time for a prayer to be answered? What was this experience of waiting like? How was your faith challenged or changed?
- ✦ Zechariah is startled by the angel Gabriel appearing in the sanctuary. How would you react to an angel appearing to you at church?
- ✦ Why do you think Zechariah asks the angel Gabriel for a sign?
- ✦ How do you think Zechariah felt when he was unable to speak after receiving the good news that his and Elizabeth's prayers had been answered? How might this forced silence have been challenging? How might it have been a gift?
- ✦ What is the most surprising part of this story?
- ✦ What is the story of your birth?
- ✦ Who are you named after and why?
- ✦ What does it feel like to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

- ✦ What parts of Zechariah's vision (vv. 68–79) speak to you most and why?

Now think about the children with whom you will share this story. What questions might they have? What might surprise them? Consider what words or ideas might need to be explained or explored together, such as *temple*, *priest*, *prophet*, and *prophecy*. Imagine the face of each child you will be teaching, and pray for them by name.

Cut apart the cards from Resource Page 1 to use for a game of charades.



Enter into sacred space together.

Invite the children to gather in the seating area. Welcome them each by name, and tell them that you are glad they are there. Sing “My God Is So Big” together. You can learn it by watching the YouTube video “16 My God Is So Big Lyrics 1080pMQ” (bit.ly/MyGodIsSoBigVideo, 2:43) and inviting the children to sing and follow the motions in the video. When the singers hold up stars, have the children wiggle their fingers over their heads, and when the singers play inflatable guitars, invite the children to play the “air guitar.”

Turn on the candle. Invite the children to repeat after you and follow your motions as you pray:

Holy God, (*raise hands in air*) /
 help us to listen to your story, (*make cup around ear*) /
 to feel your love in our hearts, (*place both hands over heart*) /
 and to show your love with our hands. (*extend both hands out with palms up*) /
 Amen. /

The Bible refers to God using many names and metaphors, including Yahweh, Mother, Father, Rock, Creator, and Water. Using diverse language for God broadens our understanding of who God is. Throughout the session, consider incorporating a variety of ways of talking about God. For example, in “My God Is So Big,” suggest that the children sing, “The mountains are God’s” rather than “the mountains are his.”

Leading



Read a story of God's people.

Invite the children to listen to a story about Elizabeth and Zechariah and the birth of their son, John. Read the story, "A Prophet Is Born" (p. 188). Pause after the first paragraph. Wonder about stories the children know regarding what their parents or caregivers have said about what their children may grow up to be.

Read the rest of the story.



Pause to let God's Word enter into hearts and minds.

Ask the children to take three deep breaths in and out. Invite them to spend a few minutes in quiet time so that they can think about the story they just heard. Encourage them to wonder about how Zechariah and Elizabeth felt when they were waiting for their prayers to be answered and how they felt when their prayers were answered.



Engage curiosity and imagination with God's story.

Explain that John was Jesus' older relative and that he was born before Jesus. Ask the children if they have any cousins. Share that John was also a prophet. Explain that a prophet is a special person who shares important messages from God. Share that God had a special plan for John's life as a prophet, preparing the way for Jesus. Engage the children in conversation about the story using the following questions to check for understanding:

- What did Elizabeth and Zechariah pray for?
- How long did they wait for their prayers to be answered?
- Where was Zechariah when the angel Gabriel appeared to him?
- What did the angel Gabriel tell Zechariah?
- What happened to Zechariah?
- What was the baby's name?
- What did Zechariah tell his son, John, about his future?

Wonder together:

- How old do you think Zechariah and Elizabeth were?
- How do you think Zechariah felt when he heard the angel Gabriel's message?

- What might it have felt like for Zechariah to be unable to speak and share the big news from the angel?
- How do you think Zechariah felt when he was able to speak again?
- What do you think it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit as Zechariah was? What do you think it feels like?
- How do you think John felt about his future as he grew up knowing God had a special plan for him?

Playing Charades

- Remind the children that Zechariah could not speak until his baby was born. Play a game of charades with the children, explaining that they cannot speak but need to use actions to get others to guess words.
- Fold the cards cut from Resource Page 1 and place them in a paper lunch bag.
- Form two teams. Take turns between teams acting out and guessing the words. Give everyone who would like to act out a word an opportunity to do so.
- After the game, reflect on what it was like not being able to talk and what Zechariah's experience must have been like. Wonder together what would have been fun and what would have been challenging about being unable to speak.

For younger children, rather than breaking into teams, pick one word from the bag, read it aloud, and invite everyone to act it out.



Wrestle with our place in God's story.

Remind the children that God had a special plan for John, the baby born to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Ask them what that special plan was. (*God had a special job for John: to be a prophet.*) Tell the children that John would one day tell people about God sending someone else special for all people: Jesus. And John would baptize Jesus in the Jordan River, preparing him for his ministry.

Choose one or both options:

- When I Grow Up
 - Wonder together what special plan God has for the children. Tell the children that each one of

Leading

them is a child of God, is loved by God, and has a purpose in God's world. Hand out copies of Resource Page 2. Read the prompts aloud, and invite the children to write or draw in the spaces provided. Encourage the children to share, as they wish, what their thoughts are about their futures.

- Singing a Song
 - ✦ Learn the song "Blessed Be the God of Israel," also known as "The Song of Zechariah." It follows Zechariah's prophecy in Luke 1:68–79, praising God for what God will do through John and, ultimately, through a savior.
 - ✦ Read aloud, or invite volunteers to read, the words to the song using the YouTube video "CCS 396 Blessed Be the God of Israel" (bit.ly/BlessedBeHymn, 2:21). The song can also be found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #602. Invite the children to raise a hand or call out any word for which they would like a definition. Use a smartphone or computer to look up definitions, such as "harbinger means a person or thing that announces the approach of another." As definitions are provided, wonder how knowing what that word means helps us understand Zechariah's words. For example, knowing that *redeems* means "to get something back," especially through paying back what is owed, tells us about God getting us, God's people, back after we have turned away to sin.
 - ✦ Play the video again and sing the song together.



Bless one another with God's grace.

Encourage the children to tell the story they heard about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John to someone during the week.

Invite the children to do a circle prayer. Lead two rounds of prayer requests. For the first round, ask each child to share one thing they are thankful for. For the second round, ask everyone to share someone or something they would like to pray for. Let the children know that they can pass but that you are inviting everyone to participate. To close the prayer, invite everyone to say "Amen" loudly together.



Grow with more.

- Acting It Out
 - ✦ Invite the children to retell the story in their own words, using biblical costumes and props, if desired.
- Picturing the Story
 - ✦ Invite the children to draw or paint a picture of their choice from the list below. Once they have finished their pictures, have them display them in order and tell the story in their own words.
 - The angel Gabriel
 - A picture of Zechariah and Elizabeth
 - Zechariah at the temple
 - A birth announcement for John
 - The community celebrating John's birth
 - A part of Zechariah's prophecy from Luke 1:76–79
- Prayers Ascending
 - ✦ Remind the children that Zechariah was lighting incense and praying when the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the temple. Light incense or pass around fragrant potpourri so that children can experience what it smells like. Hand out paper and have the children write or draw prayers to offer. Then have the children put them in a bowl. After all the prayers are written, sit in a circle, pass around the bowl, and invite each person to pick out a prayer. Pray together, with each child offering another child's prayers. Invite the children to take their friend's prayer home and continue praying for them this week.

Check if any children have sensitivities to fragrance before burning incense or using potpourri.

baby

praise

parents

family

grow

son

daughter

pray

love

old

temple

angel

happy

prophet

good news

speak

name

write

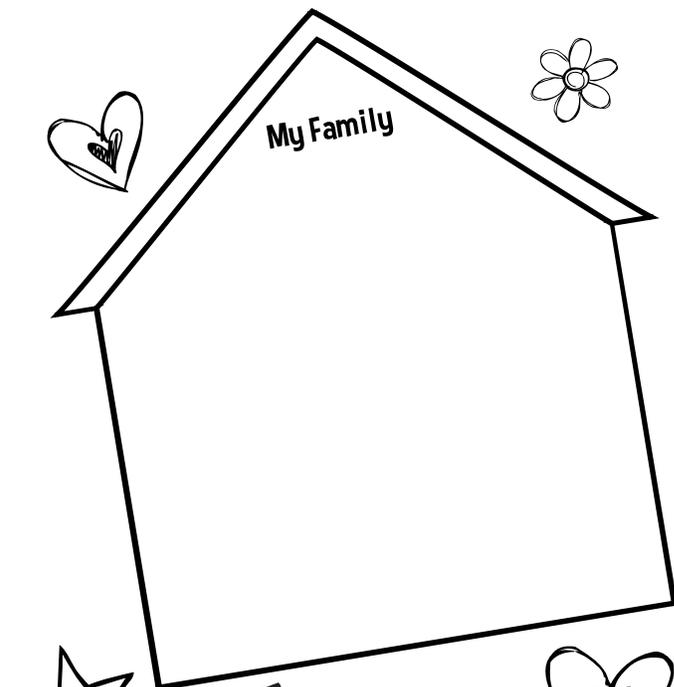
tablet

prepare

When I Grow Up

Name _____

My Family



My Job

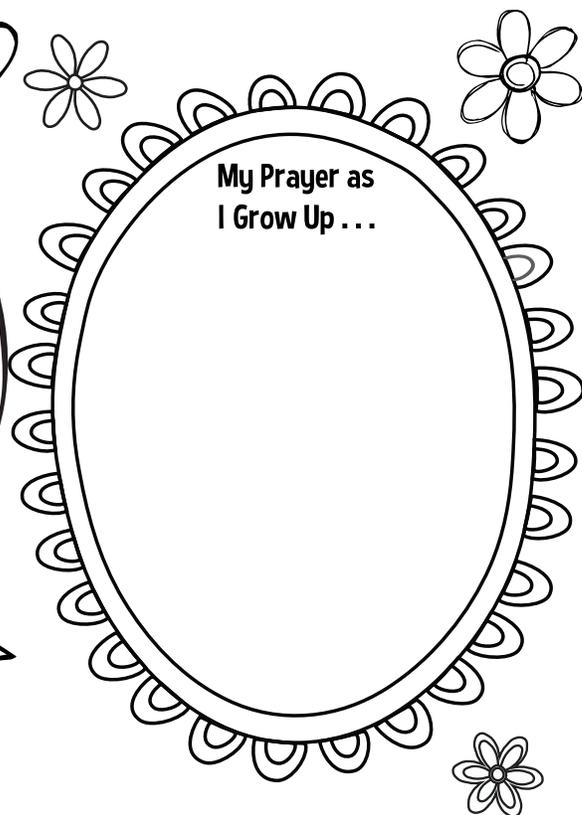
“ ”



I will make God's world a better place by ...



My Prayer as I Grow Up ...



Connecting

✦ **Goal:** To marvel at the gift a baby brings and to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Connecting with the Biblical Text

Try to put aside all that you know about the birth narrative of Jesus and focus on only these seven verses. Read the text. The first four verses of the seven are about the political situation at the time. And did you notice that Mary and Joseph are engaged, or Mary “was promised to him in marriage” (v. 5, CEB)? She is about to become an unwed mother.

A closer look at the Greek suggests that the couple didn't go to an inn in Bethlehem but to a private home, maybe the home of a relative of Joseph. The guest room was taken, and the only private place for a woman about to give birth was the stable, likely the back of the ground floor where the animals were kept. In this space away from the family and guests, Mary gives birth and wraps her newborn son in strips of cloth, which was the custom at the time. She lays him in a manger, a feeding trough for the animals. All this reminds us of his humble origin.

If you stop with verse 7, the picture is of a new family, parents and baby, poised to begin a new life together. But we know the backstory to this birth, and this is no ordinary family.

Read Luke 2:1–7 again with this information in mind. What else do you imagine?

Connecting with the World

- ✦ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the infant mortality rate (death during the first year of life) in the United States is the highest among comparable countries. The health and care of children in the first three years of life is so important.

- What programs for parents are available in your community?
- How can you or your congregation support what exists or advocate for new programs?

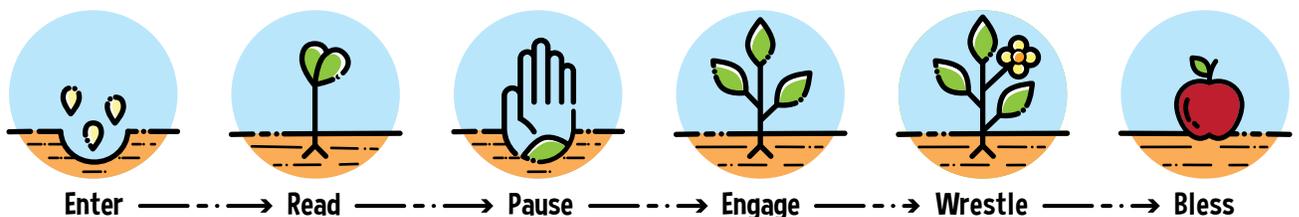
Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

Children usually hear this story followed immediately by the arrival of the shepherds. As they put this birth story alongside the births of Ishmael, Isaac, Samuel, and John, they also are constructing a faith history. But this birth story is the ultimate and final one recorded in the Bible. Naming the divine in Jesus adds to their spiritual development and prepares them to hear about his ministry. Most children have not yet begun to question the divine/human natures of Jesus but accept this story as it is told. If older children question how this can be, encourage them to continue to think about this question, which has spurred theological discussions for centuries.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

- ✦ What new or recurring thought came to you as you read this brief account of Jesus' birth without the inclusion of the stories of the shepherds and the magi?
- ✦ How might focusing on these seven verses orient the remaining weeks of Advent for you and your family?
- ✦ Think about Mary and Joseph. As they welcome their son, what might they talk about together?

Loving God, the story of Jesus' birth is both simple and amazingly profound. As we approach the celebration of Christmas, keep us mindful of the message of hope and peace that he brought to the world. Amen.



Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✦ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✦ Mural paper
- ✦ Decorative items, such as glitter glue, stickers, sequins, and pom-poms
- ✦ Battery-operated candle
- ✦ Construction paper
- ✦ *Song of the Stars* by Sally Lloyd-Jones (Zonderkidz, 2011)
- ✦ *On the Night You Were Born* by Nancy Tillman (Feiwel & Friends, 2006)
- ✦ Stapler
- ✦ Card-stock copies of Resource Page 1
- ✦ Copies of Resource Page 2

Preparing to Lead

Read the story of Luke 2:1–7 from different translations of the Bible, such as the New Revised Standard Version and the Common English Bible. As you explore the text, note things that are surprising about this familiar story. Keep in mind that the children will have heard this story many times as well, so you may want to point out new insights from the “Unit Overview” (p. 3) and “Connecting” (p. 27) sections for this session. Then read the story “A Baby Is Born” in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 190). Note the differences in translations, and ponder what questions the children may ask you.

Think about the following as you engage with this text:

- ✦ What is the story about your birth or your arrival in your family?
- ✦ What do you think Mary and Joseph were thinking and feeling on their journey to Bethlehem?
- ✦ What do you think the community thought when a young, unwed, pregnant woman arrived in a town where Joseph had friends and family?
- ✦ What did the space look like that housed Mary and Joseph?
- ✦ What is the picture that is painted of the “no room in the inn” version of this story versus the story portrayed in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*?
- ✦ As Advent and Christmas are a time often consumed by gifts in our consumerist culture, how do we share our lives and God's love as gifts to others?

As you think about this story in relationship to Advent (a time of waiting and preparation) and the busy lives of people in congregations, consider how you can help the children think about Jesus as a gift to the world.

Cover a table where the children will sit with mural paper.

For transitions from one activity to the next, tell the children what will be happening next; this is especially important when asking children to try something new.



Enter into sacred space together.

As each child arrives, ask them to sit around the mural paper. Invite them to write their name and then draw three or more different symbols or pictures that describe them or their family, such as games they like to play, family nicknames, Christmas traditions, or hobbies. Let the children be creative as they work on their name design.

Invite older children to engage with younger children and encourage conversation by inviting the younger children to tell them about their drawings.

Once the entire group has gathered in the seating area, turn on the candle, and ask the children to turn their attention toward you. Let them know that they will have an opportunity to continue drawing in a moment. Invite the children to repeat after you as you pray:

Creator God, /
you know us. /
You knew us before we were born, /
and you know us now. /
Open our ears to this story of Jesus. /
May we remember that we are named
and loved by you. /
Amen. /



Read a story of God's people.

Invite a child to turn on the candle, and have the children sit in a comfortable position to listen to the story of Jesus' birth. Read the first two paragraphs of the story in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 190).

Have a conversation using the questions in the first paragraph:

- What do you know about the day you were born or when you were brought home?
- Who was there?
- How did you get your name?

Read the rest of the story.



Pause to let God's Word enter into hearts and minds.

Ask the children to sit with this story for a few moments of silence and imagine being in the room when Jesus was born. Suggest that perhaps they might imagine that they were a helpful neighbor bringing blankets or one of the animals in the stable.



Engage curiosity and imagination with God's story.

Engage the children in what it may have been like to be in the room when Jesus was born. Wonder together who has seen a newborn baby and what a newborn baby is like.

Wonder together what that stable was like as the son of God entered the world as a newborn baby:

- If Mary's baby was born in the room where the animals stayed, what sounds do you think he heard?
- What do you think the room smelled like?
- Who else was in the room?
- What animals do you think were in the room where Jesus was born?
- What noises do you think the animals made?
- How do you think Mary and Joseph were feeling after Jesus was born?

Baby Announcement for Jesus

- Provide construction paper, colored pencils, crayons, or markers. Have other supplies like decorative items, glitter glue, glue sticks, and scissors available.
- Talk together about what an announcement is. Ask if anyone's family has sent a baby announcement or if they have received one. Suggest that an announcement is a way for a family to share that a new baby or child has joined the family. Let them know that families that adopt children sometimes make these announcements as well. Make sure that you are inclusive and share that announcements can be for children of all ages. Tell the children that they will be making one for a special baby: Jesus!
- Encourage the children to imagine what Mary and Joseph would say to their family and friends about the new baby joining their family. Brainstorm phrases that an announcement might say, such as "Welcome to our family, Jesus!" "Happy Birthday, Jesus!" "Jesus is here!" "Our hearts are full because Jesus is with us!" and write them on a sheet of newsprint.
- Encourage the children to draw and decorate their announcement. They can fold it in half like a greeting card or choose to keep it flat. Display the announcements in a church hallway or gathering area so that others may be reminded of the good news of Jesus' birth.

Older children may enjoy writing the story in their own words or making a storyboard, like comic book scenes, on construction paper, complete with drawings. Encourage them to include the imagining and sensory work talked about in the group conversation.



Wrestle with our place in God's story.

Ask the children if anyone knows the story of their birth that they have been told by family, relatives, or friends. Those who would like to should share these stories. Wonder together what is similar and what is different about the children's birth stories and Jesus' birth story. Make a chart on a sheet of newsprint.

Leading

Choose one or both options:

- Creation Sings
 - ✎ Tell the children that Jesus being born into the world was a gift to all creation. Imagine together how different parts of creation might celebrate the birth of Jesus.
 - Read *Song of the Stars* by Sally Lloyd-Jones (Zonderkidz, 2011) or watch the YouTube video “Song of the Stars by Sally Lloyd Jones” (bit.ly/SongOfTheStarsVideo, 4:32) and talk about how creation celebrated the gift of Jesus in the world as this author imagined it.
 - ✎ Wonder together how creation may have rejoiced when each child was born.
 - Read *On the Night You Were Born* by Nancy Tillman (Feiwei & Friends, 2006) or watch the YouTube video “On the Night You Were Born” (bit.ly/OnTheNightYouWereBorn, 4:07) and talk about how each child is a gift to the world.
- Children as a Gift
 - ✎ Tell the children that Jesus’ birth was God’s gift to the whole world, for he came to lead people back to God. He had a purpose that he grew up to do. Suggest that each child is also a gift from God with a purpose yet unknown. Wonder together what the children might grow up to do or be.
 - ✎ Hand out card-stock copies of Resource Page 1 and have the children draw and color a picture of themselves in the center box. Tell them they are going to make a gift box that they can open to remember that they are a special gift from God. On the rest of the inside sections, invite the children to write words about the gifts that they each bring to their family and friends, such as good friend, helpful, dancer, funny, and so forth. Encourage older children to assist younger children with writing.
 - ✎ After they have drawn their picture and written their words, have the children cut out their box template along the solid lines. Encourage older children to assist younger children with cutting.
 - ✎ Demonstrate how to fold the box along the dashed lines, folding the sides inward toward their picture in the center.

- ✎ Once all the folds have been made, show the children how to fold their box, tucking in the side tabs and sliding the two heart flaps together to form the top of the box.
- ✎ Encourage the children to take their gift box home and share how they are a gift to others.



Bless one another with God's grace.

Close with the following prayer:

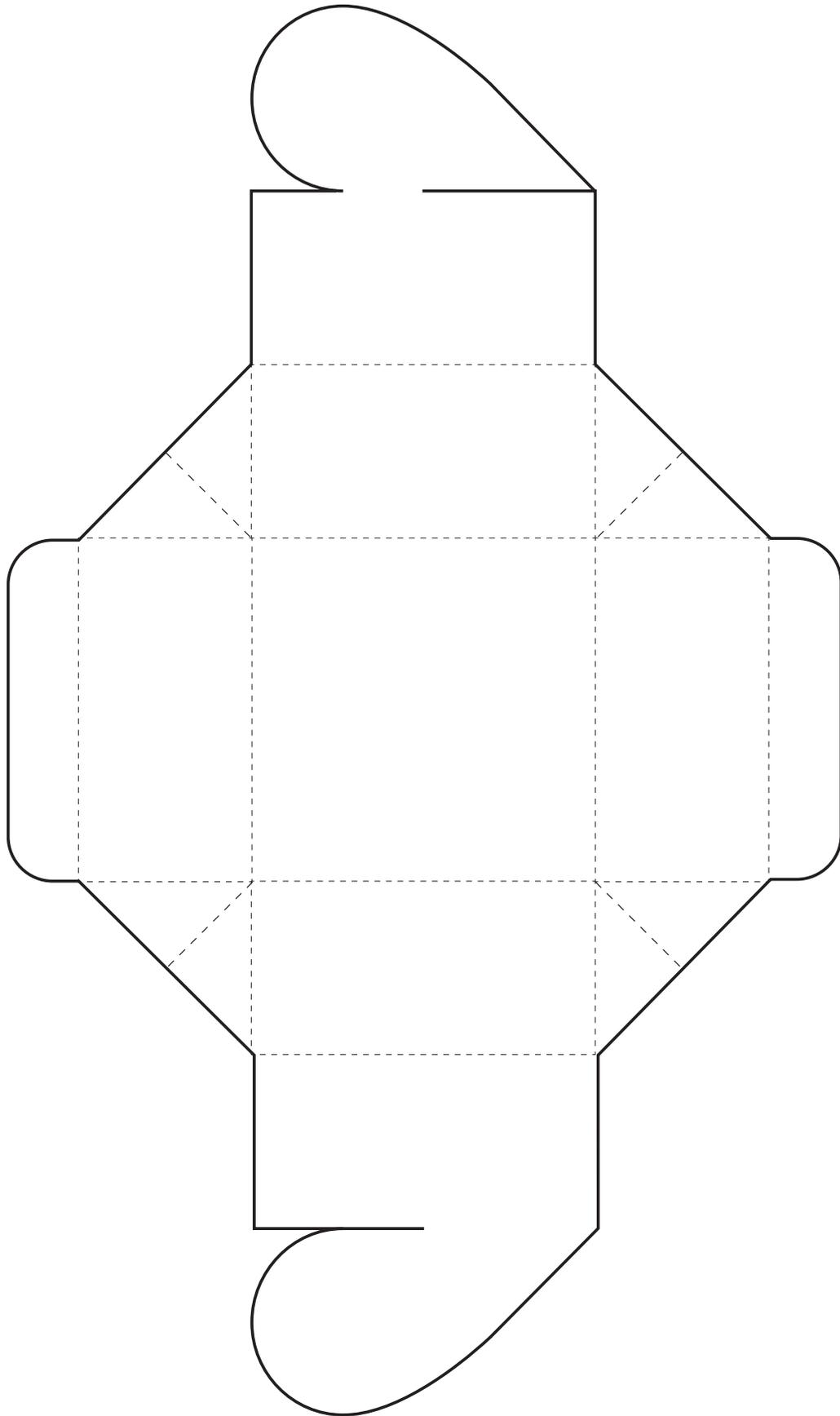
God, who came to be with us on earth /
in the form of a tiny baby, /
thank you for the gift of Jesus in our lives. /
Thank you that we, too, are gifts
to other people. /
Help us bring the gift of Jesus, /
and our own gifts, to others. /
Amen. /



Grow with more.

- Telling Your Arrival Story
 - ✎ Invite the children to make a booklet with the story of their arrival into their family. Cut paper into quarters and have the children draw a picture on each page. Staple the pages together and invite the children to share their stories with the group. Use the following questions and others the children suggest as prompts for their books:
 - What was the day like? (*time of year, day/ month, weather*)
 - What did you look like?
 - Who was waiting for your arrival?
 - What did anyone say or do?
- Telling the Story of Jesus’ Birth
 - ✎ Hand out copies of Resource Page 2 and invite the children to color the picture. As they color, invite them to tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Suggest that they add details about what the journey to Bethlehem was like, the time of day, the weather, Mary and Joseph’s feelings, the scene around them, others who might have been there, and so forth. Encourage them to use their imaginations!

**A Baby Is Born
Resource Page 1**





Connecting

🌿 **Goal:** To imagine what the shepherds heard and saw when they learned of Jesus' birth.

Connecting with the Biblical Text

Scene two of the birth narrative is longer than the story of Jesus' birth. Who are these shepherds? According to *The Gospel of Luke*, a commentary by Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III (Cambridge University Press, 2018), they are not the unclean riffraff of society (pp. 58–59). Certainly, more positive images of shepherds are found in the Bible, notably Psalm 23 and Jesus' parable of the Good Shepherd in John's Gospel. Shepherds are the common folk of the area, and angels bring this unique message to them.

Remember how Luke began this birth narrative with references to the political situation of the day. The description of this good news also resonates with the political world. "Savior" was not a name reserved for the Messiah or for the one sent by God. In Roman circles, "savior" also referred to the emperor.

When the angels depart, the shepherds hurry to find the baby and to continue the praise that the angels began. That praise is echoed in churches throughout the world on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

For additional points to awaken your senses to this story, go to bit.ly/Luke2ShepherdCommentary.

Connecting with the World

Where can the good news of the gospel be found in the world?

- 🌿 Looking for a good news story? Try this website: www.goodnewsnetwork.org.
- 🌿 How does your congregation live the good news of the gospel in your community? In other parts of the world?

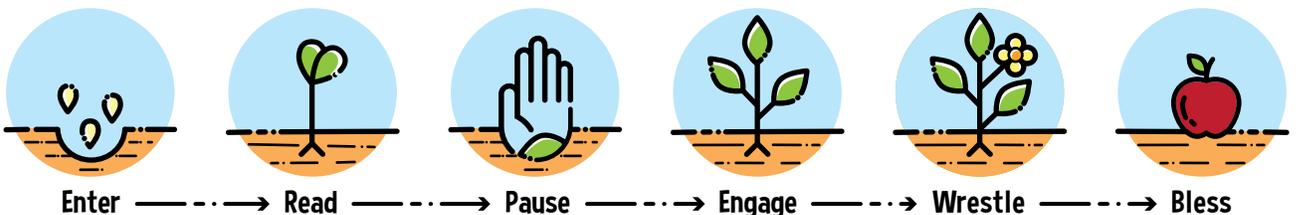
Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

Most of the characters present for the birth of Jesus have now been introduced. The magi haven't arrived yet, as they probably will in the Christmas pageant. The advent of the angels brings the holy and the common together in dramatic fashion. Children may not describe it as such, but they intuit it. Allowing their imagination to soar with the angels and sit among the shepherds enlivens their spirituality and faith.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

- 🌿 Read Luke 2:1–20 aloud. Pause frequently to imagine the sights, sounds, and smells in the story. Take your time to immerse yourself in the scene and setting.
- 🌿 Think back over the last week or so. When did you see or hear about something that felt like God at work in the world?
- 🌿 Continue your Advent meditations by mulling over what conversations the shepherds might have had when they returned to their flocks.
- 🌿 It often takes special attention on our part to recognize the presence of God in our lives. For the next month or as a New Year's resolution, end each day with the spiritual practice of examining. Review your day, recalling the times when you felt apart from God or God's love. Pray for forgiveness of those times and the persons involved. Then review your day, recalling times when you felt God's presence or God's love. Pray, giving thanks for those moments and the people who were part of them. If you wish, jot down your recollections each day and review them at the end of the month.

God, open my ears and eyes and give me voice to speak up for the places in your world that need your love. Amen.



Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✓ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✓ Battery-operated candle
- ✓ Purple or blue cloth
- ✓ Green blanket or sheet
- ✓ Stuffed animals
- ✓ Dark blue or black construction paper
- ✓ Acrylic paints in a variety of colors (including gold and silver) thinned with water
- ✓ Shoeboxes and lids, one of either for each child
- ✓ Marbles
- ✓ Recording of "Angels We Have Heard on High"
- ✓ Manger items, such as hay, wool, dirt, cloth strips, burlap, wood, and so forth
- ✓ Containers with lids
- ✓ Props, such as a stuffed animal lamb, a shepherd's staff, angel wings and/or halo, and a baby doll
- ✓ Play dough
- ✓ Index cards

Preparing to Lead

Read Luke 2:8–20. Read it first in the translation found in your sanctuary. Then read it in another translation. Finally, read the story "Surprise Visitors" in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 192). Practice reading or telling this story.

In what ways do you connect with this part of the birth story?

- ✓ Are you a shepherd, a sheep, or an angel?
- ✓ What are the roles each played in the story?
- ✓ Who do you think are the surprise visitors? The angels? The shepherds? Both?

In thinking about this text, where else in the Bible are references made to shepherds, sheep, and angels? What do you know about shepherds and sheep and the cultural practices of Jesus' day? What are the roles of shepherds, sheep, and angels? When have you taken on each of these roles?

While shepherds are often thought to be unclean and low in social status, they also played an important role in the culture and religious rituals of Jesus' time as they were shepherding the sheep, which provided the staples of daily life: food, wool, and religious sacrifices.

Think about the children with whom you will share this story. What questions might they ask? Perhaps

someone may even ask who was left watching the sheep. What words might not yet be in their vocabulary and need to be explained, such as *glory*, *highest*, *peace*, and so forth. Pray for the children you will lead.

Cut dark blue or black construction paper to fit the inside of the shoeboxes or lids. Place manger items in individual containers with lids.

Spread out a large green blanket or sheet in front of a small table with the candle, the Bible, and the purple (or blue) cloth.



Enter into sacred space together.

Welcome each child with a blessing: "(child's name), I thank God for you," and invite them to sit on the green blanket. Explain that today's story takes place out in a green pasture. Turn on the candle. Invite the children to pray an echo prayer with you, repeating each line after you.

God of surprises, /
open our minds /
that we may think in new ways /
and not be afraid. /
Amen. /

Invite a volunteer to lead the prayer.



Read a story of God's people.

Tell the children that they will hear a story from *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* called "Surprise Visitors." Ask the children who they think the surprise visitors are. Encourage the children to relax on the green pasture and to listen to the story to find out who the surprise visitors are. Read the story found on page 192.



Pause to let God's Word enter into hearts and minds.

Ask the children to imagine quietly how each character felt in the story. Encourage them to think about what God was telling the shepherds and what God is telling them.

If you have predominantly younger children or children who find it difficult to sit in silence, consider giving them a stuffed animal to hold.



Engage curiosity and imagination with God's story.

Engage the children in conversation about the story using the following questions:

- ✓ Where were the shepherds? What were they doing? What time of day was it?
- ✓ Who visited the shepherds?
- ✓ What was the message that was given?
- ✓ What did the shepherds do?
- ✓ Who do you think were the surprise visitors? The shepherds? The angels? Both?

Choose one or both options, or set up stations and invite the children to rotate as they wish.

○ Seeing and Hearing

- ✓ Invite the children to imagine what colors would make the sky as bright as when the angels appeared. Provide dark blue or black paper, a variety of colors of thinned acrylic paints, shoeboxes and lids, and marbles. Tell the children that the dark paper represents the night sky. Have them place the paper inside the shoebox or lid and choose several colors of paint to drip randomly on the paper. Give the children one or more marbles and have them roll them around their box or lid as they listen to “Angels We Have Heard on High.” Encourage them to move their marbles with the music, especially on the refrain of the song. Invite them to sing along with the refrain as it becomes familiar.

○ Smelling and Feeling

- ✓ Invite the children to imagine what the baby Jesus smelled and felt as he was lying in the manger when the shepherds came. Draw the children's attention to the manger items you have placed in containers. Invite the children to explore the smells and textures as they feel comfortable.

Be aware of children with sensory issues or allergies and allow them to pass on any items that may irritate them.



Wrestle with our place in God's story.

There were two groups of surprise visitors in this story. Ask the children to recall who surprised who first with what message. Then the shepherds turned up at the manger. Have a conversation about their visit and the message they shared with others.

- ✓ Why do you think God chose shepherds to be the first visitors to see Jesus?
- ✓ How do you think the shepherds felt as they traveled to see the baby Jesus?
- ✓ How do you think the shepherds felt as they left baby Jesus?
- ✓ How would you feel if you were chosen to be the first visitor?
- ✓ How do you feel when you are given a good message?
- ✓ People love hearing good news. How could you tell the good news of this story to others?
- ✓ What message would you have to give?

Provide crayons, markers, pens, pencils, and paper so that the children can write their message or draw a picture to tell the message. Be open to those who might want to act out their message or make their message into a song. Encourage the children to share their messages with the group and then with others.



Bless one another with God's grace.

Play the recording of “Angels We Have Heard on High” and invite the children to join in singing the refrain. Ask the children who they will share the good news with. Invite the children to repeat after you as you pray the following echo prayer:

God, who tells of great things, /
fill me with surprise and wonder /
that I may praise you /
and tell others of your greatness. /
Amen. /



Grow with more.

○ Telling the Story

- ✦ Invite the children to choose one of the following ways to tell the story again:
 - Use props, such as a stuffed animal lamb, a shepherd's staff, angel wings and/or halo, or a baby doll, to tell the story.
 - Make a comic strip of the story. Provide white paper and have the children brainstorm what scenes they would like to portray. Have them draw that number of boxes on one or more sheets of paper. Simple stick figures and short text work well. This activity could be done by individuals or a group sharing the story panels.
 - Write a skit with characters, dialogue, and stage direction.
 - Create a sculpture of one or more scenes from the story using play dough.

○ Remembering

- ✦ Wonder together what Mary wanted to remember about this special night and what she heard from the shepherds, what the shepherds wanted to remember, and what we want to remember. Provide index cards, and invite the children to write or draw a picture of what they want to remember from this story. Encourage them to take the card home and post it somewhere they can see it each day.

Connecting with the Biblical Text

The story of Jesus' childhood moves to the Gospel of Matthew with "Visitors from the East." No longer in a manger, despite the visual representation at Christmas pageants and nativity sets, these visitors find Mary (no mention of Joseph) and the child (not a baby) in a house (not a stable). It is estimated that their journey took a couple of years, and their only map was the star that they followed.

Tradition gave us the number of three magi or wise men, connected to the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The biblical account, however, gives no number and no names, so all that is sung about in the carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are" has no basis in the text.

In this story, a villain enters. King Herod, sweet and polite to the travelers, gets as much information from them as he can. Then he asks them to return to Jerusalem when they find this new king so that he can honor him too. The reader knows, of course, that he has no intention of worshiping this new king but of getting rid of him. The plot thickens when Herod realizes that the magi are not going to return to him. This part of the story, not found in Christmas pageants and not in the text for today, is an order by King Herod to kill all the children in the territory around Bethlehem under the age of two. Fortunately, God warned Joseph in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they stay until they move to Nazareth.

For a brief commentary on this text, go to bit.ly/Matthew2Commentary.

Connecting with the World

- ✦ The magi brought elaborate gifts to the child Jesus. Where can you provide gifts for children in your community who need basic necessities?

✦ **Goal:** To consider gifts that are not things.

- ✦ Some children would benefit from time with a special adult. Various programs seek volunteers for spending time with children, in the church and in the community. Learn about the Boys and Girls Clubs at their website, www.bgca.org.

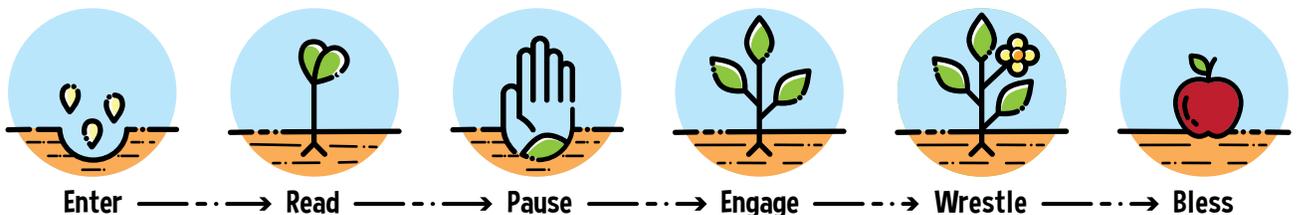
Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

Generosity is a spiritual practice appropriate for children, one they can think about in the context of the story of the magi bringing gifts to Jesus. Children learn generosity, whether by seeing the people around them give affection, things, or time. They practice generosity when they do not fear scarcity. And scarcity isn't always defined by the stuff that they have. Children learn generosity firsthand when their parents include them in conversations about giving to others and causes that are important to them. But they also learn about generosity when they are able to be generous, when they volunteer with their family at a soup kitchen, when they shop with a parent for school supplies and also purchase some for the drive to fill the backpacks of other children, and when they learn about saving and giving financially.

Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

- ✦ If you were looking for a present for Jesus, what would you give him? What does Jesus ask of you?
- ✦ The magi "honored" (CEB) Jesus or "paid him homage" (NRSV). How is it that you honor Jesus each day?
- ✦ In light of the story of the magi, consider what gifts or abilities you have to give to the ministry of your congregation.

God of all good gifts, we honor Jesus with our own gifts and talents. Thank you for them and for the gift of your son, in whose name, we pray. Amen.



Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✦ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✦ Floor pillows, cushions, and a blanket
- ✦ Card-stock copy of Resource Page 1
- ✦ Backpack
- ✦ Water bottle
- ✦ Tray with food to share, such as apples, pita bread, grapes, cheese sticks, olives, and so forth
- ✦ Yellow construction-paper star, one for each person
- ✦ Map
- ✦ Frankincense essential oil, or a potpourri with a woody, earthy, fruity smell
- ✦ Myrrh essential oil, or black licorice
- ✦ Gold-colored object
- ✦ Battery-operated candle
- ✦ Internet-connected device
- ✦ Copies of Resource Page 2

Preparing to Lead

Read the story in Matthew 2:1–12 from a Bible. Note that this story occurs when Jesus is a child, not an infant, and that it also occurs at a house in Bethlehem, not the guesthouse where Jesus was born. As you read this text, note any images or phrases that stand out to you. Note that there are many details that you may feel you know about this story—such as how many magi there were, where they came from, or how long they traveled—that aren't in the biblical text. Tradition has filled in many of these gaps in the text over time. As you read this story, focus on what details are and are not included in the Scripture. Rather than filling in these gaps with answers, use them as spaces for wondering and imagination.

After reading the biblical text, read the story “Visitors from the East” in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 196). Engage with the story by reflecting on these questions:

- ✦ Have you ever felt called by God to go on a journey, even if you did not know exactly where God was leading you? If so, reflect on this journey.
- ✦ What gave you the courage to go on this journey?
- ✦ If you were going on a long journey, who would you invite to go with you?

- ✦ After encountering Jesus, have you ever felt called to take a new route?
- ✦ What gifts can you bring to honor Jesus?
- ✦ How can you use these gifts to care for others?
- ✦ What does it feel like to give a gift to someone else? What emotions do you feel?

Think about the children you will be leading in this lesson. What questions might they have about this story? Which characters might be familiar or new to them? Which characters might they identify with most? What vocabulary words or ideas might be new? How might you explain who the magi were and what it means to honor Jesus with our gifts?

Pray for God's Spirit to be with you and give you wisdom as you prepare to lead. Pray for God to be with the children you will be leading.

Cut out the star from a card-stock copy of Resource Page 1 and use it as a template to make a star for each person out of yellow construction paper.

Arrange comfortable floor pillows, cushions, and a blanket on the floor. In the middle of the blanket, place a backpack, water bottle, tray with food, map, yellow construction-paper stars, gold/gold-colored object, frankincense oil (or potpourri), and myrrh oil (or black licorice).



Enter into sacred space together.

As the children arrive, welcome each by name and tell them you are glad they are here. Invite them to find a place to sit and look at the items in front of them. Encourage them to note which items are familiar and which ones are not. Invite them to wonder what these items might be used for.

Invite the children to repeat after you as you pray the following echo prayer:

God of adventure, /
 you are with us /
 on every path we take. /
 Open our hearts /
 so that we may learn about you today. /
 Amen. /



Read a story of God's people.

Tell the children that today they are going to hear a story about some people who took a long trip to see and bring gifts to Jesus. Ask the children to share stories of going on a long trip, telling where they went and what they took with them.

Turn on the candle and tell the children that the candle reminds us of Jesus' presence with us. Read the first paragraph of the story "Visitors from the East" (p. 196) and then pause. Remind the children that people did not have cars, phones, or tablets during this time. Wonder:

- How do you think the magi knew where to go without phones?
- How do you think they entertained themselves?
- What do you think they talked about?

Hand out the stars to the children. Invite them to raise their star whenever they hear the word *star* or *stars*. Read the next four paragraphs, emphasizing the words *star* and *stars*. Pause and ask the children:

- What special stars or constellations do you know?
- When have you seen a really bright star?

Read the remaining two paragraphs.



Pause to let God's Word enter into hearts and minds.

Ask the children to hold the star in their hand and think about this story silently. Let the story settle into their hearts. Encourage the children to imagine in their own minds what the magi might have felt as they followed the star.



Engage curiosity and imagination with God's story.

Engage the children in conversation using the following questions:

- How do you think the magi knew which star to follow?
- Why do you think the magi brought gifts for Jesus?
- Why was King Herod unhappy?

- Why do you think they didn't tell King Herod where Jesus was?
- Why do you think the magi returned home by a different route?
- What do you think the magi were feeling as they headed home after seeing Jesus?

Traveling with the Magi

- Remind the children that the magi traveled a very long way, and their trip probably took more than two years. Pick up the backpack and put the water bottle and map in the backpack. Wonder together how the people would have traveled, where they would have found water, and how they would have found their way.
- Share the food that you have prepared and wonder together what the magi might have eaten on their trip, what they might have brought with them, and where they might have found food along the way.
- Talk together about the other items: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Tell the children that the frankincense was probably an oil or a solid that would be burned to smell good. If you have potpourri instead of oil, suggest that the scent would be similar. Pass the oil or potpourri around and ask the children to describe the scent. Tell the children that myrrh is a resin or sap from a tree and was used in the wrapping of a person's body when they died. If you have black licorice instead of myrrh oil, suggest that the scent would be similar. Pass the oil or licorice around and ask the children to describe the scent.



Wrestle with our place in God's story.

Ask the children where they see themselves in the story, specifically, which character they identify with and why. Encourage conversation about why King Herod was unhappy with the magi's news about Jesus and what he might have been feeling. Encourage conversation about what gave the magi the courage to go on this journey and not listen to King Herod's instructions. Ask the children the following questions:

- What were the magi feeling when they met King Herod?

Leading

- ✦ What were the magi feeling when they met Jesus?
- ✦ Why did the magi give Jesus gifts?
- ✦ Why did the magi go home by a different route?
- ✦ What do you think the magi talked about on their way home?

Choose one or both options:

- Giving Gifts
 - ✦ Remind the children that the magi brought Jesus gifts to honor him. Wonder together:
 - What do you think it means to honor someone?
 - Why do you think these were the gifts the magi brought to Jesus?
 - What gift would you bring to honor Jesus and why?
 - ✦ Watch the YouTube video, “Giving Gifts for Kids in Need at Seattle Children’s Hospital” (bit.ly/GivingGiftsVideo, 2:47). Suggest that the children in the video gave gifts to the children in the hospital understanding the difficult time it is in the lives of the hospitalized children. Recognizing that need honors those children. Ask the children to brainstorm who they could give gifts to and what gifts they could give that would honor the recipients. If it is possible, formulate a plan to follow through on the gift giving by sending home information to families or the congregation.
- Stars
 - ✦ Invite the children to reflect on what it felt like to follow a star and finally arrive to give gifts to Jesus. Note that the magi may have felt multiple emotions at the same time. They may have felt both joyful and relieved; scared and excited; nervous and happy. Wonder about times when we might feel multiple emotions at once too.
 - ✦ Invite the children to write or draw a picture on their yellow construction-paper star of a gift that they would like to give to others this week.

Suggest that older children choose three gifts: a gift of service, a gift of time, and a tangible gift, such as taking out the garbage, eating lunch with a new student at school, or making a homemade card for a friend.

- ✦ Encourage the children to take home the star and hang it on their bathroom mirror to remind them to give this gift, or gifts, to others this week.



Bless one another with God’s grace.

Explain to the children that sometimes special blessings are said for people who go on long journeys. Teach them this blessing from Numbers 6:24–26 (CEB) or another one of your choice. Invite them to repeat after you and use the following hand motions:

The LORD bless you and protect you. (*fold arms across chest, with hands touching opposite shoulders*) /

The LORD make his face shine on you (*place palms out by both sides of your face and wiggle fingers*) /

and be gracious to you. (*bow head*) /

The LORD lift up his face to you (*raise face and look upwards*) /

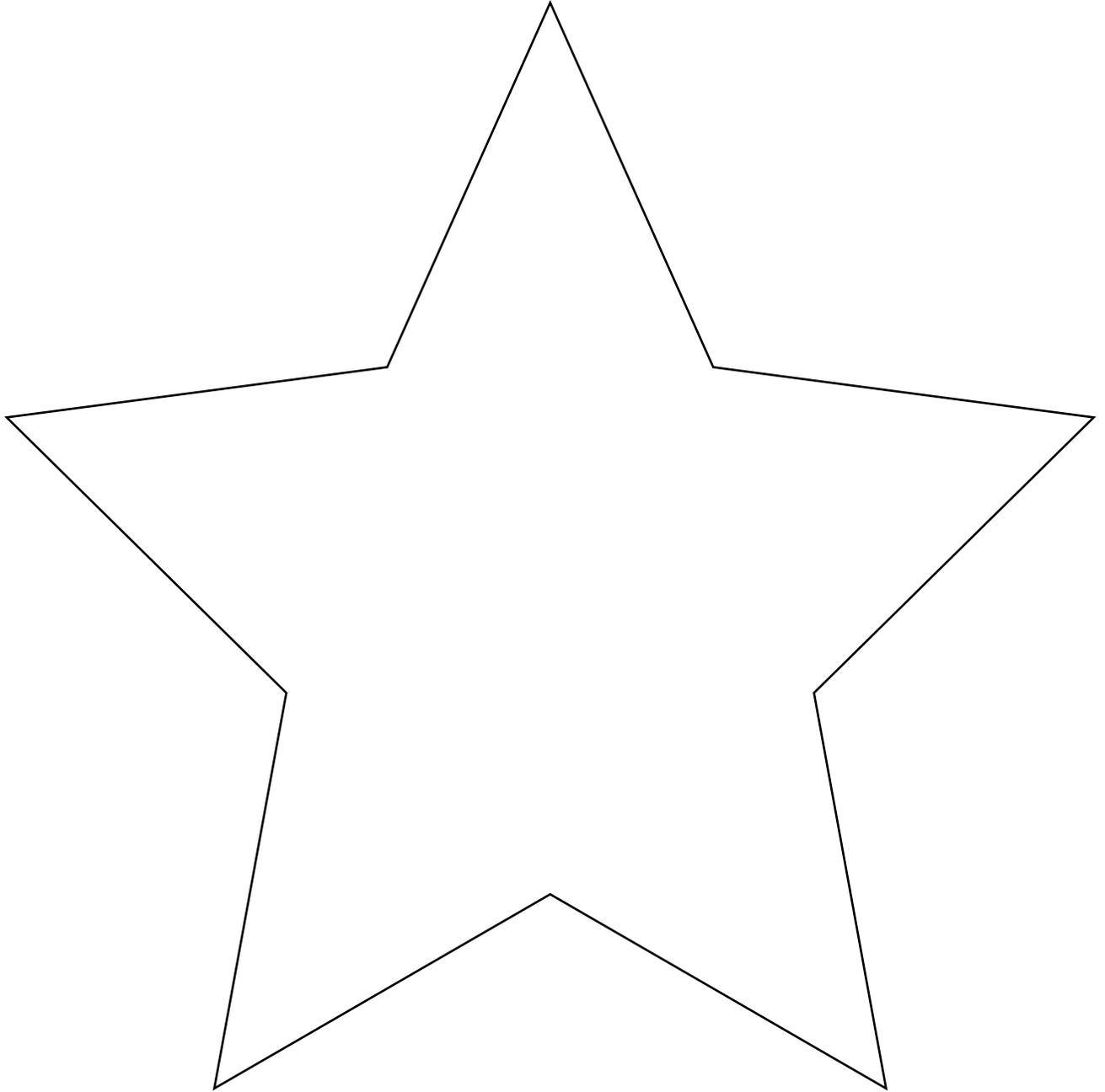
and grant you peace. (*place right hand over heart*) /

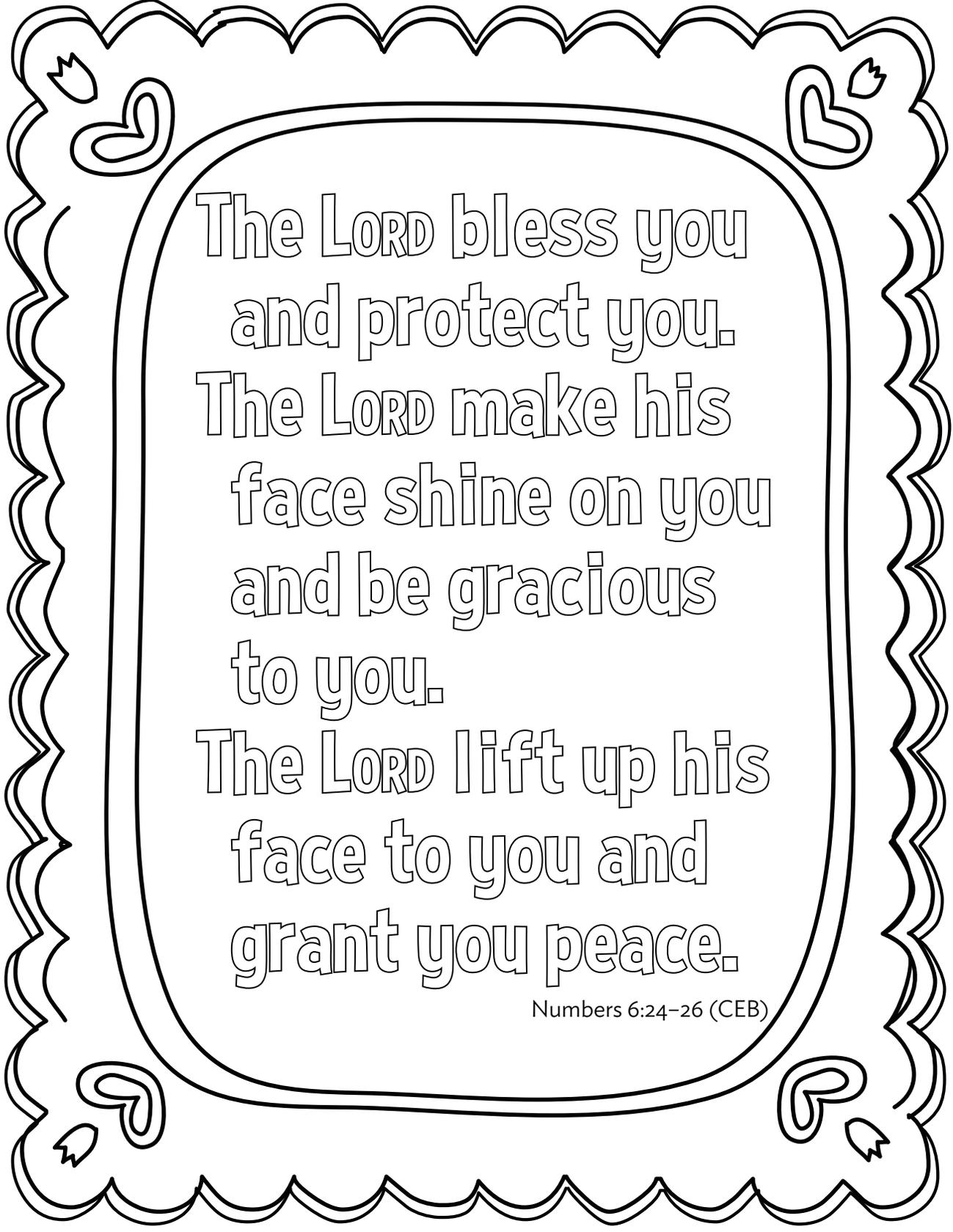


Grow with more.

- Telling Stories
 - ✦ Invite the children to tell stories about gifts using the following questions as prompts:
 - What is the best gift you’ve ever received? Why? How did you feel?
 - What is the best gift you’ve ever given? Why? How did you feel?
 - What are some of the gifts God has given to you?
 - How can you share these gifts with others?
- Traveling Blessing
 - ✦ Hand out copies of Resource Page 2. Encourage children to color it and hang it up by their front door at home. Suggest that they say the blessing to guests or friends when they leave.

Visitors from the East
Resource Page 1





The LORD bless you
and protect you.
The LORD make his
face shine on you
and be gracious
to you.
The LORD lift up his
face to you and
grant you peace.

Numbers 6:24-26 (CEB)

A Story Bible Curriculum features

- sessions based on 148 stories from *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- 35 units in 3, 4, or 5 sessions that cover large biblical stories, key people in the Bible, or biblical themes
- intergenerational activities for use at church or home
- unit overview that explains how these stories connect with one another and our faith
- helps for leaders to connect the biblical story with our world and the spiritual lives of children and adults
- a free downloadable at-home kit guide with instructions and suggestions for at-home faith formation

multiage
stillness seeking
wonder filled
curiosity driven

exploratory
relational
imaginative

**Growing in God's Love:
A Story Bible Curriculum**

compassionate
collaborative
community oriented

fun intergenerational
growth encouraging