



WEAVING GOD'S PROMISES

for Youth

LESSON 19

JESUS IS BORN

SUMMARY OF TODAY'S STORY

Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem to take part in a Roman census. While there, Mary gives birth to Jesus and places him in a manger, "because there was no place for them in the inn."

Shepherds hear of the birth from angels and go to visit the holy baby for whom the angels give praise to God.

KEY CONCEPTS

- The meaning of Christmas
- God among us
- Caring for the poor and needy

WHERE YOU'LL FIND TODAY'S STORY

In the Bible

We recommend the *New Revised Standard Version* Bible.

Luke 2:1-20

In Our Sunday Lectionary

Today's story is told in church on the following Sundays:

Years A, B and C: Christmas Eve;
Christmas Day; Holy Name Day
(RCL)



WEAVING OUR STORY WITH THE BIBLICAL STORY

In Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus, wise men or magi come to visit Jesus and to pay homage to him. Luke, whose book gives so much emphasis on the blessings of the poor and needy and our call to care for them, names the lowly shepherds as the ones to whom the good news is proclaimed by angels.

We treasure Luke's story of the birth of Christ. It is poetry, but much more than poetry. Luke situates the event in history—the reign of Emperor Augustus, the governorship of Quirinius, during a general census. But the event itself is rooted in eternity—proclaimed by angels, the birth of Jesus opens a window from heaven to earth.

No matter how often we hear this story, we never tire of the words or the message. We seek to relive it—in our Christmas pageants, in our books, our pictures and paintings, our nativity scenes. For it is the story of God coming near to us. As St. Paul wrote to the Philippians (2:6-7):

... who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

The Christmas story, of God made man, divine made human, is not an event of the past. It is alive and still present to us. There is a sense in which Jesus is always born to us, and here we celebrate the birth of Life.



THE EPISCOPAL THREAD

A priest said once that Anglicans—including Episcopalians—sometimes focus more on Christmas than on Easter because we are an incarnational faith. He said, “The importance of God-with-us is in God's incarnation, Jesus' birth among us, more than in Jesus' death.”

Although he may have been exaggerating to make a point, it is true that Anglican theology is highly incarnational and therefore takes the birth, the incarnation, of God in Jesus Christ as the epitome of the presence of God in this world. God has been born to us, the divine born human. And so, humanity now becomes “worthy to stand before [God],” as Eucharistic Prayer B says (*BCP*, p. 367), since God has deemed himself worthy to stand among us.

Familiar Christmas carols are not distinctive to Episcopalians. One Christmas tradition that has become beloved in many Anglican and Episcopal churches, from services in the Church of England, is the annual Festival of Lessons and Carols. This service, often recorded and shown worldwide from King's College or St. Paul's Cathedral and other renowned churches, tells the story beginning with the fall of humanity and culminating in our redemption by God through the birth of Jesus Christ. As the lessons and music move from Advent and preparation to Christmas and celebration, the thought dawns: Christmas is now here!



GATHERING

Check-In

Invite group members to sit comfortably, giving them an opportunity to visit with each other, establish friendships and build community. Relationships are an important dimension of Christian formation, so a few minutes of visiting will enrich their spiritual development. This is also the perfect time to “check in” with your group members by asking them to share how they are feeling at the time or what kind of a week they had.



PRAYER

Materials:

- small table with cloth to cover it
- taper candle or one pillar candle

- matches
- cross

After all the group members have a few minutes of fellowship time, gather them together for a simple opening prayer.

Ask one of the members to light the candle(s) while saying these words from Psalm 119:105:

- Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

Explain that you are inviting the light of God to be with all of you. (You might consider posting that reading in the meeting room.)

Invite the member who lit the candle to read this prayer:

- Dear God, Today we celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, in our midst! All of our preparations, all of our prayers have led us to this joyous day. Even as we participate in the festivities and traditions of the day, we will always remember the reason for such happiness: the divine born human, God made man. *Amen.*

Or use any prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer* or from any book of prayers, or make one up yourself.

Carefully extinguish the candle.



TELLING THE STORY

Set the scene:

- Have a birthday party for Jesus! Bring in a cake and some juice and celebrate!

Read today’s story aloud from a Bible, or tell the story in your own words. The *NRSV* translation is a beautiful telling of the story of the birth of Jesus, one with which the youth will surely be familiar. Ask for volunteers to read sections from the Bible. Although the words are simple, the impact of the story is powerful and moving.

Let the group hear the story without analyzing it for them or discussing it. For now, simply let the story sink into their minds and hearts.



WEAVING THE FAMILY OF GOD

Lesson Box

Materials:

- 1 3" x 5" index card for the day's *scribe*
- pen or pencil
- a file box in which to store the cards

Ask for a volunteer or assign a student to act as class *scribe*. Then, ask the group to articulate the most important lesson gleaned from the day's reading. As a prompt, you might ask:

- How would you summarize the most important lessons Joseph learned as a result of his experiences?
- What *does* the Lord require of you?

Once the group has agreed on its wording, ask the *scribe* to write the lesson on the card, date it and file it in the box. By the end of the year, you will have a wonderful and thorough summation of the lessons covered—in the participants' own words.

- Why do you think Luke told of the angels appearing to shepherds and not to the magi?
- How do you know God is in our midst?

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CLOSING PRAYER

Before the group leaves, say a closing prayer to send them into the church worship service or back to their homes with God's love and blessing. Pray an appropriate prayer for your group, such as this one:

- God our Father, we thank you for being here with us today. We thank you for sending Jesus Christ, your Son, to be born among us. Now send us back to our families with your love in our hearts and souls so that our celebrations of Jesus' birth may spread your love to everyone around us. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

End with a dismissal used in church, such as:

- Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

The group then responds:

- Thanks be to God!



SUGGESTED HYMNS

- "From heaven above to earth I come" #80, *The Hymnal*, 1982 (NY: Church Publishing, 1985)
- "O come, all ye faithful" #83, *The Hymnal*, 1982 (NY: Church Publishing, 1985)
- "Shengye qing, shengye jing/Holy night, blessed night," #725, *Wonder, Love, and Praise* (NY: Church Publishing, 1997)
- "Where is this stupendous stranger," #726, *Wonder, Love, and Praise* (NY: Church Publishing, 1997)
- "Silent Night," #26, *Lift Every Voice and Sing II* (NY: Church Publishing, 1993)
- "Away in a Manger," #27, *Lift Every Voice and Sing II* (NY: Church Publishing, 1993)
- Or sing any number of other wonderful Christmas hymns!



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WHAT CHRISTMAS MEANS TO ME

Group members will think about what Christmas means to them—now—and what it meant to them when they were much younger.

Materials:

copies of the *What Christmas Means to Me* worksheet (p. 7), 1 per participant
pens or pencils

Preparation:

Make enough copies of the worksheet for each member of the group.

Directions:

1. Use the worksheet as a guide for a group discussion *or* ask the youth to work on it individually.
2. If you do hand out the sheet for quiet work, regather after 10-15 minutes and ask volunteers to share their responses.

WHAT CHRISTMAS MEANS TO ME

When I hear the word *Christmas* I think of _____

My favorite part of the *Christmas* season is _____

Check off the statements below that apply to you:

_____ Christmas is a very special day for me.

_____ The Christmas season is too commercial.

_____ I enjoy giving gifts.

_____ I enjoy receiving gifts.

_____ I always attend church on Christmas Eve/Christmas Day.

_____ I have a favorite Christmas hymn.

_____ I think of the birth of Jesus on Christmas morning.

_____ At some point during Christmas day, I pray.

_____ My feelings about Christmas have changed as I've grown older.

_____ I like the experience of worshipping in church on Christmas Eve/Day.

Do you feel any differently now than you did 5-10 years ago? In what ways and why?

Why do you think your views have changed?



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COMPARE/CONTRAST: LUKE AND MATTHEW TELL OF JESUS' BIRTH

Group members look at the writings of Luke and Matthew and compare how each one told of the birth of Jesus.

Materials:

- copies of the bible, 1 per person
- 2 sheets poster board
- masking tape or poster putty
- large markers

Preparation:

Place the poster board on the wall. Write the heading *SIMILAR* at the top of one and the heading *DIFFERENT* at the top of the other.

Directions:

1. Ask volunteers to read Luke 2:1-20 and Matthew 1-2 aloud. (Because the beginning of Matthew 1 deals with Jesus' ancestry and includes many difficult names, you may want to draw the group's attention to it but skim over that section yourself.)
2. The similarities and differences in the telling of the same story will not be hard for the youth to discern.
3. If the responses are somewhat general (one is longer; one has two sections; one has many more people; etc.), help the group focus its attention to such things as language, characters, the magi, King Herod, Jesus' birthplace, etc.
4. Write their responses on the poster board as they are given (or ask for two volunteers to jot them down for you).
5. When the group members have finished giving their answers, ask them some of the following questions:
 - How does each story "feel"?
 - Do you like one more than the other? Why?
 - Does it make a difference that Matthew's story includes magi and Luke's includes shepherds? Why or why not?



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CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD

Group members decorate a bulletin board or display with illustrations of Christmas traditions in their families' countries of origin.

Materials:

- computer with Internet access (more than one if possible)
- construction paper or card stock
- 3" x 5" index cards
- colored pencils and marker
- glue
- stickers, glitter and other assorted embellishments

Preparation:

During the week before the session, ask each member to find out his/her family's country of origin and to bring in a picture of himself/herself.

To save time during your next session, ask each group member to log onto the website given below to find out about traditions commonly found associated with their ethnic backgrounds.

Directions:

1. Log onto <http://www.santas.net/aroundtheworld.htm> and ask each group member to identify his/her family's—mother's, father's or both!— ethnic background(s). Give each person time to read about that country's Christmas traditions.
2. Ask each group member to draw a representation of one of the country's Christmas traditions. Make sure the name of the country is written at the top of the page.
3. Then, ask each group member to briefly explain a favorite *current* family tradition that their own families now practice. Ask them to write their descriptions on the index cards. Make sure they write their own names at the top of these cards.
4. Display all of their work in a place where the congregation may view it.



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CHRISTMAS COOKIES

Group members decorate Christmas cookies to share at coffee hour or to eat while they are making other crafts!

Note: We suggest asking one or two parent volunteers to help with baking enough cookies for the group.

Materials:

already-baked cookies (may be shaped or plain round)
tubes of colored frosting for decorating *or* white prepared frosting (available in any grocery store)
food coloring in several colors
small bowls for making frosting
small cups for holding frosting
decorative sprinkles
plastic knives
paper plates
napkins

Preparation:

Bake cookies ahead of time so that they are ready to be frosted and decorated during class time. Make either butter cookies or plain oatmeal cookies, without nuts.

Directions:

1. Spread a thin but even coat of white frosting on each cookie.
2. Add food coloring to some of the frosting and stir. Make several colors of frosting.
3. Divide up the cookies so each person has the same number to decorate (and eat!).
4. If the finished cookies are to be shared during coffee hour, arrange them on plates before serving.



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LARGE CHRISTMAS CANDLEHOLDER

Group members make this fancy and imaginative version of a candleholder. These make great gifts for someone in the family or serve as a nice reminder of Jesus' birth!

Materials:

- large glass canning jars (no lids needed), 1 per participant
- wide-lipped glass votive holders or planters that will rest securely in the opening of the jars but not go into the jars, 1 per participant
- white or ivory votive candles, 1 per participant
- assorted stiff ribbon (the kind with thin wires inside that make them shapeable)
- assorted artificial greenery and flowers
- other decorative materials such as gold balls, pinecones and stars

Directions:

1. Invite each person to make a candleholder as follows:
2. Cut ribbons and shape them into attractive shapes, then place them into the jar. Add greenery and other beautiful materials. Arrange these materials so that the jar looks beautiful from all angles.
3. Put the glass candleholder or planter in the jar opening. Put the candle in the candleholder.
4. Tie a ribbon around the neck of the jar.