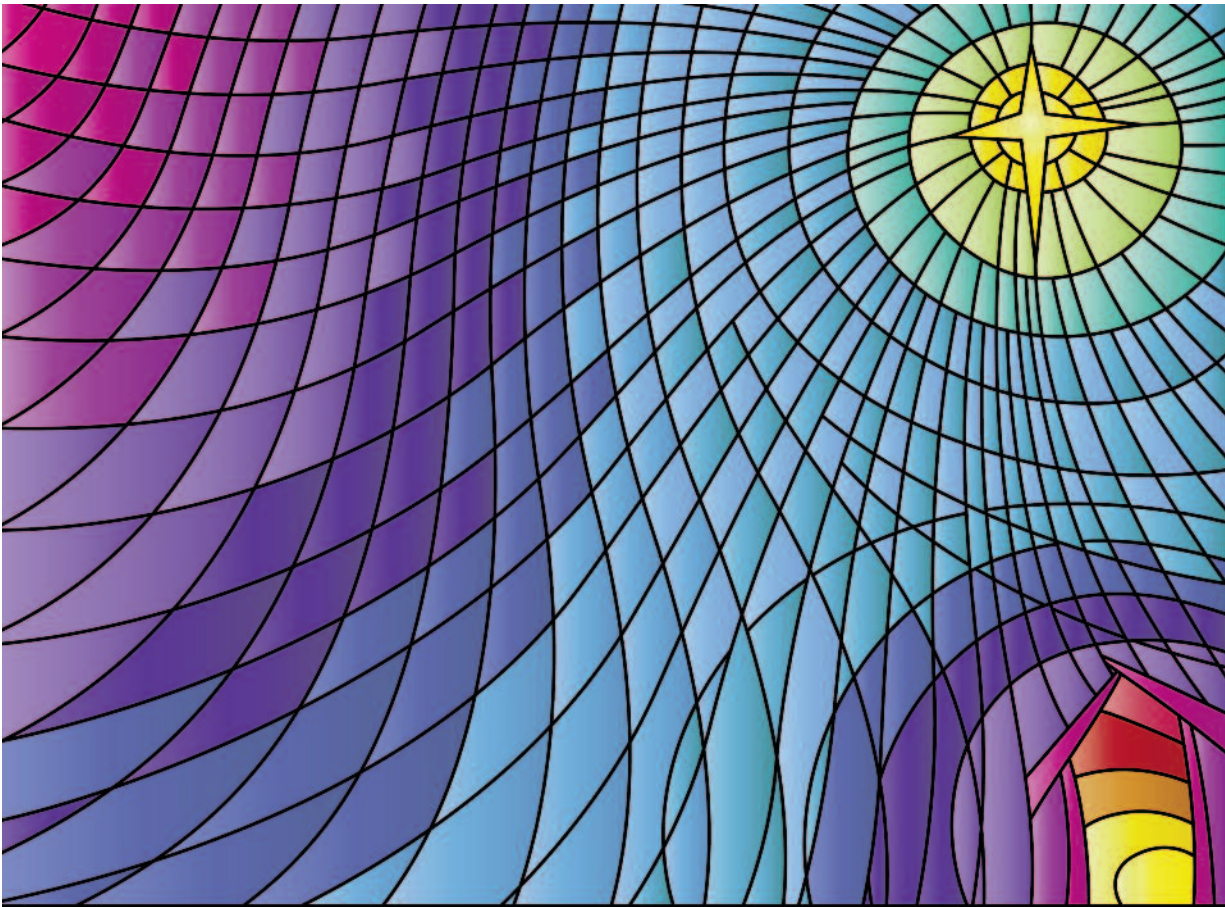


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Family-Friendly Christmas Eve Worship

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The idea for this Christmas Eve service came about when I was working as a Minister for Youth and Families. I had two small children of my own and plenty of opportunity to spend time with other parents of young children, both church families and families not connected to any congregation. Several parents not connected to the church expressed an interest in attending a Christmas Eve service, yet almost all of them shared a concern about bringing their children to an unfamiliar church, especially on Christmas Eve, when children are vibrating with excitement and anticipation.

These parents were worried that their children would behave badly, and might be unwelcome additions to a traditional Christmas Eve service.

Many of these parents had memories of going to church on Christmas Eve with their own parents. While they might not think of attending a worship service on a Sunday morning, Christmas Eve held a particular nostalgic appeal. It occurred to me that it is a great time for families in the community at large, those on the fringes of church communities, to participate in a welcoming

EQUIPPING FOR . . . Worship

and energetic worship service - a service meant for small children that would accommodate, rather than problematize, the high energy and joyful excitement of children on Christmas Eve.

These casual conversations led to an experiment: a hands-on service of worship designed for children under five and their families. The service retells the story of Jesus' birth, but using rhythm and rhyme to capture the attention of young children. We advertised it as a service for parents who wanted to introduce their children to Christian rituals on Christmas Eve but were anxious about bringing their children into a

traditional worship space. It was held at 5:00 p.m. While we expected a small core of families from the congregation to attend, we were pleasantly surprised to welcome 80 people - children and parents and grandparents. Many of those who attended were peripheral to the church community. (We made sure to have literature about our other children's programs available). The service lasted about half an hour in order to accommodate the short attention spans of young children. It was a messy, noisy half-hour, but the children (and everyone else) were fully engaged.

Setting the Stage

Large cotton sheets were laid down at the front of the sanctuary, and covered with hay. A wooden manger held a doll representing the baby Jesus. The worship leaders dressed in simple costumes. At the beginning of the service, the children were invited to come and find a spot to sit around the manger. The children were literally in the story, seated in the stable with the baby Jesus. As the service progressed, the children played different roles. They became donkeys when they put on a pair of donkey ears, and sheep when they were given a sheep mask. They were given strips of cloth to help swaddle the baby. (These props can be customized, and they can be created in the weeks before Christmas by volunteers or by church school classes.)

A narrator recited the story in rhyme, interspersed with single verses of well-known Christmas hymns. A soloist sang "Little Donkey" while she knelt among the children in the stable.

At the end of the service, we gathered the corners of the sheets and lifted the mess right out of the sanctuary so it was ready for the next service. A quick run of the vacuum cleaner picked up the stray bits of straw.

Materials

- sheets or tarps
- one bale of hay (and a vacuum cleaner!)
- a cradle
- a doll
- strips of cloth for swathing bands (enough for each child)
- halos
- donkey ears
- sheep masks
- small shepherds' crooks
- song lyrics for the congregation
- costumes for adult worship leaders

Order of Worship

Welcome

Introduction

Song: Away in a Manger (children come into stable)

Story: Our Journey to Bethlehem

Solo: Little Donkey (give kids donkey ears)

Story: Jesus is Born (swaddling clothes)

Song: Silent Night

Story: The Shepherds

Song: While Shepherds Watched (give kids sheep masks and Shepherds' crooks)

Story: The Angels

Song: Hark the Herald

Story: The First Christmas

Song: Joy to the World

Introduction

On a night long ago, in a place far away
A baby was born on the first Christmas Day.
His name was Jesus, a tiny wee king
And he came to the world to change everything.
Let's go to Bethlehem and see
The baby that came to love you and me.
Come to the stable and gather around
The manger where baby Jesus is found.
Come all you children and hear this story
Of a tiny baby who would grow into a King of
Glory.

Our Journey to Bethlehem

Mary and Joseph were tired and sore;
They had travelled all day and then some more.
Finally, they arrived in Bethlehem town
Only to find there was nowhere to lie down.
The hotels were all full, there wasn't a bed
For Jesus' poor mother to lay down her head.
The baby was coming, and it was so late at night,
Dirty and ragged, they made quite a sight.
They asked a kind man if they could sleep in his
hay
In the barn with the animals, where the cows lay.
The man showed them a spot, it was warm and
dry,
And Mary and Joseph sat down with a sigh.
And they slept, for a while, while the stars shone
And waited for morning, for night to be gone.

Jesus is Born

While it was still dark, Mary woke with a start;
The baby was coming, she knew in her heart.
So it was in that barn, on that cold, dark night
That Jesus was born, and then wrapped up tight.
As he lay in the manger where the animals eat,
A sheep came and nuzzled his tiny wee feet.
And even the smallest creatures gathered around
While the tiny new baby made small little sounds.
And the dark, dark night wasn't dark anymore
As the light of a star shone through the stable door.

The Shepherds

There were shepherds whose job was to care for
the sheep;
It was very late and they were fast asleep.
But they didn't sleep for long that night
Because the star and the angels were shining bright.
The shepherds were scared - they weren't quite
awake
But the angels said "it's good news, for heaven's
sake."
A baby is born, get up! Come and see,
This news is the best, the very best that can be.
So the shepherds ran off, and their sheep came too
And they saw for themselves that the good news
was true.

The Angels

When angels appear, the good news is clear
The beautiful little savior of the world is here.
They shouted out loud that the new babe was
found
In a manger, with his family gathered around.
The angels sang songs which gave God all the
Glory,
Because God is the beginning and end of our story.

The First Christmas

No one slept on that first Christmas Eve;
The child was so special, no one wanted to leave.
They sang praises to God, for sending such joy
In the form of a new and perfect baby boy.
The star kept on shining so the whole world could
see
That God loves everyone, including you and me!
Tonight is a time to sing and to say
Thank you to God for what happened that day.
Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked down where he
lay,
the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.