



The Christmas Story According To The Four Gospels: A Congregational Event

by Emily Bisset

Editor: Anne Saunders

Editorial Assistants: Sheilah Alyea, Jen Bell

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The idea for this congregational event grew out of a Bible study held in the period prior to Advent 2014. The study focused on the three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the sessions analyzing and comparing these gospels, the group considered information about the author, date and setting, literary details and theological observations.

Ending the study near Advent, the group was interested in doing one last comparison of all the gospels, including the Gospel of John: how does each gospel record the birth or nativity of Jesus? Rather than doing this in Bible study sessions, members thought it would be fun to involve the whole congregation in an event similar to the traditional Christmas pageant – despite the fact that our congregation:

- had not had a Christmas pageant for many years
- did not have any costumes in its storage cupboards
- averages about six or seven children on a Sunday morning
- includes children who are mostly six years of age or younger
- did not have members who had time or energy to stage a pageant, hold rehearsals or memorize parts!

The congregational event on the following pages is a result of that decision with those challenges. The four-scene drama that unfolds instructs everyone in an entertaining way about the conflated version of the Christmas story that we retell every year: a story that exists in no one gospel but borrows from different ones. If we only had one of these gospels, the Christmas story we know and love would be very different.

The Christmas Story According to the Four Gospels

This congregational event was held after worship one Sunday in Advent with a light lunch. Ideally you own or can borrow simple costumes and props from a neighbouring congregation. The narrator(s) and the stage manager require copies of the script for reading. Other characters repeat after the narrator(s).

Assign some parts in advance, but mostly “recruit” people as they arrive the day of the event. The narrators and stage manager direct others as needed with the narrators speaking the script that appears in UPPERCASE to everyone as part of the staging efforts and not the story. Mix up parts so children play some key roles. Children might be shepherds, but have only adults play sheep (e.g. wearing masks with cotton balls glued all over them!). Note: Adapt to your context e.g. do only Scene One or Scene Three.

The Characters (Note: The parts of narrators 1 & 2 can be read by the same person.)

Scene One – Total: 15 – a stage hand, narrator 1, narrator 2 (could be combined to have one narrator), stage manager, Mary, Joseph, angel of the Lord, five wise men, star holder, King Herod, Chief Priest

Scene Two – Total: 1 – a stage hand

Scene Three – Total: 12+ – a stage hand, narrator 1, narrator 2, the angel Gabriel, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, shepherds, sheep (as many as possible), angels (children and adults)

Scene Four – Total: 4 – stage hand 1, stage hand 2, narrator 1, narrator 2

The Props

Scene One

- two large poster board signs (can be back to back), one saying “The Gospel according to Mark” and another one saying “The End”

Scene Two

- two large poster board signs (can be back to back), one saying “The Gospel according to Matthew” and another one saying “The End”
- a large soft ball (e.g. beach ball) or pillow
- a pillow
- a baby doll wrapped in a cloth or towel
- a chair or stool
- a paper star fixed on the top of a pole (e.g. a broom stick)
- a cardboard box that holds five wrapped gifts or gift bags

Scene Three

- two large poster board signs (can be back to back), one saying “The Gospel according to Luke” and another one saying “The End”
- two large soft balls (e.g. beach balls) or pillows
- something resembling a donkey costume (e.g. a grey blanket or big jacket, floppy ears)
- a baby doll wrapped in a cloth or towel
- copies of the Book of Praise for the angels for singing the chorus of #147 “Angels we have heard on high.”

Scene Four

- two large poster board signs (can be back to back), one saying “The Gospel according to John”, another saying “The End”, and another one saying “The Beginning”
- a large, wearable poster board “book” with a) the words “The Bible” printed on the front “cover” large enough for the audience to see and b) a hole large enough for a person’s face to go through

Scene 1 – The Gospel according to Matthew

The stage hand walks across the stage carrying the sign that says “The Gospel according to Matthew.” Then narrator 1, narrator 2 and the stage manager appear.

Narrator 1: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. Jesus’ mother was a young woman named Mary. WHERE IS MARY?
(Mary comes forward and we hand her a soft ball to put under her shirt.)

Narrator 2: Before they were married, she was found to be with child. Where did this child come from? (*pointing to her belly*)

Narrator 1: Mary said, “It came from the Holy Spirit.”

Mary: It came from the Holy Spirit!

Narrator 2: Her husband Joseph ... WHERE IS JOSEPH? (*Joseph comes forward*). Joseph, as you can clearly see, is a man of faith. He wanted to do the right thing and he did not want to get Mary in trouble. So he thought he would just quietly leave her and break their engagement. But just when he had decided to do this, he went to sleep. (*Mary goes off to one side of the stage. Joseph lies down to sleep – have a pillow?*)

Narrator 1: An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. WHERE IS THE ANGEL? FLY OVER HERE! The angel said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.”

Angel: (*going close to Joseph and saying in his ear*) Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.

Narrator 2: The angel then said, “Take Mary as your wife, for the child in her belly is from the Holy Spirit.”

Angel: (*going close to Joseph and saying in his ear*) Take Mary as your wife, for the child in her belly is from the Holy Spirit.

Narrator 1: The angel said more, “The baby will be a boy. You should call him Jesus.”

Angel: The baby will be a boy! You should call him Jesus.

Narrator 2: They gave him that name because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him ‘Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’”

Narrator 1: Okay, it’s time to wake Joseph up. On the count of three, everyone say, “Wake up Joseph!” One, Two, Three... WAKE UP JOSEPH!

Everyone: WAKE UP JOSEPH!

Narrator 2: When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded. Mary, come over here! *(Mary comes beside Joseph and they stand hand in hand.)*

Narrator 1: Joseph took Mary as his wife. She gave birth to a son. *(Exchange the soft ball for a baby)*

Narrator 2: And Joseph said, "I have an idea. Let's name him Jesus."

Joseph: I have an idea. Let's name him Jesus! *(Joseph and Mary holding the baby go off to one side of the stage.)*

Narrator 1: In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. WHERE ARE THE WISE MEN? WHICH WAY IS EAST??

Stage Manager: Wait a minute. What about the camels?

Narrator 2: It doesn't say anything about camels in the Bible.

Stage Manager: What do you mean? No camels?!

Narrator 1: *(Patiently)* If you want a camel, you're out of luck. Now, where are the wise people? *(Wise people come up to the centre of the stage.)*

Narrator 2: One of the wise men said, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

Wise Man #1: Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?

Narrator 1: Another wise man piped up and said, "We observed his star at its rising."

Wise Man #2: We observed his star at its rising.

Narrator 2: WHERE IS THE STAR? (*Star holder person stands on chair and holds up the star on a pole.*) Ahh, there it is... Another wise man said, "We have come to worship the child, the new king."

Wise Man #3: We have come to worship the child, the new king.

Narrator 1: A fourth wise man said... (*Looking at the audience*) Wait. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that there are only three wise men. But Matthew doesn't tell us how many there were. Read your Bible! The four...and five wise men said, "Let's go!"

Wise Man #4 and #5: Let's go! (*The wise men move off to the side of the stage, opposite to where Mary and Joseph are.*)

Narrator 2: When King Herod heard this, he was frightened. WHERE IS HEROD? (*Herod comes to centre stage.*) And all Jerusalem was scared too. EVERYONE! LOOK SCARED! Herod called together all the chief priests and scribes of the people. CAN I GET A PRIEST OVER HERE? (*Chief Priest comes up to the stage.*) Herod asked the chief priests and scribes where the Messiah was to be born. The priest said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea."

Chief Priest: In Bethlehem of Judea!

Narrator 1: For so it has been written by the prophet, "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people of Israel."

Narrator 2: Then Herod secretly called for the wise men. (*Narrator whispers to Herod to call the Wise Men over to the centre of the stage again.*)

King Herod: Hey wise men! Come over here!

Narrator 1: He found out from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then sending them to Bethlehem, he said, "Go and find that kid!"

King Herod: Go and find that kid!

Narrator 2: Herod told them that when they had found the child, to send him word so that he could go and worship him too... Hmmmm, that seems sneaky to me. *(Herod and Chief Priest leave the stage.)*

Narrator 1: When the wise men heard the king, they set out and looked for the star ahead of them *(The star on the pole leads the wise men weaving through the congregation and back up the stage where Mary and Joseph and the baby are.)* ... until it stopped over the place where the child was.

Narrator 2: When the wise men saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. They gave three cheers: Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!

Wise Men (all five): Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!

Narrator 1: When they entered the house ...

Stage Manager: *(Interrupting)* Wait... what house? What about the stable?

Narrator 2: There is no stable.

Stage Manager: Really?

Narrator 1: Not according to Matthew!

Stage Manager: *(Shaking head)* OK.

Narrator 2: When they entered the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. *(Wise men offer their gifts.)*

Narrator 1: They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. They knew he was sneaky too. And they left for their own country by another road. *There is a moment of silence. Then the stage hand walks across the stage carrying the sign that says, "The End." The curtains/staging area closes.*

Scene 2 – The Gospel according to Mark

The staging area is open before the audience and there is nothing there. The stage hand walks across the stage carrying the sign that says “The Gospel according to Mark.” There is a moment of silence. Then the stage hand walks across the stage carrying the sign that says, “The End.” The curtains/staging area closes.

Scene 3: The Gospel according to Luke

The stage hand walks across the empty stage carrying the sign that says “The Gospel according to Luke.” Then narrator, narrator 2 and the stage manager appear.

Narrator 1: The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth. WHERE IS GABRIEL? (*Gabriel comes to the centre of the stage.*)

Narrator 2: The angel Gabriel came to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. WHERE IS JOSEPH? (*Joseph comes up and is directed to one side of the stage.*)

Narrator 1: The virgin’s name was Mary. WHERE IS MARY? (*She comes up to the centre stage next to Gabriel.*) Gabriel said to her, “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.”

Gabriel: Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.

Narrator 2: But this confused Mary greatly. She wondered what kind of a greeting this might be. She looked at Gabriel with a very confused face. (*Urge Mary, if necessary, to do this.*) So, Gabriel said to her what angels always say. ARE THERE ANY CHILDREN OR ADULTS HERE WHO REMEMBER WHAT ANGELS ALWAYS SAY? DO NOT BE AFRAID!

Everyone: Do not be afraid!

Narrator 1: Right, the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.”

Gabriel: Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

Narrator 2: As Mary's face changed from confused to surprised (*encourage this if necessary*) Gabriel said, "And now, a baby will grow inside you and you will have a son."

Gabriel: And now, a baby will grow inside you and you will have a son.

Narrator 1: Gabriel told Mary that she should name the child Jesus. And that he will be great, called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Narrator 2: Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be?"

Mary: How can this be?

Narrator 1: She wondered this because she was a virgin. The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will do it!"

Gabriel: The Holy Spirit will do it!

Narrator 2: The angel told her that that the power of the Most High will overshadow her; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. Then the angel told her that her relative Elizabeth was also going to have a baby. Gabriel said, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Gabriel: For nothing will be impossible with God.

Narrator 1: Then Mary said, "Yes. I am the servant of the Lord."

Mary: Yes. I am the servant of the Lord.

Narrator 2: Then the angel departed from her. (*Gabriel flies off stage.*)

Narrator 1: So, Mary set out and went quickly to a Judean town in the hill country, to Zechariah's and Elizabeth's house, and greeted Elizabeth. WHERE IS ELIZABETH? (*Elizabeth joins Mary on the stage. Give them both soft balls or pillows to put under their shirts. Whisper to Mary to say "Hi Elizabeth" and to hug her.*)

Mary: Hi, Elizabeth! *(Mary and Elizabeth hug each other).*

Narrator 2: When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "WOW! Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Elizabeth: "WOW! Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Narrator 1: Holding her belly, Elizabeth said, "As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy."

Elizabeth: As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.

Narrator 2: Elizabeth continued talking saying, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." After that, Mary sang a beautiful song about how good God is. And Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then went home. *(Mary goes over to where Joseph is. Elizabeth leaves the stage.)*

Narrator 1: In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first census and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph... MARY AND JOSEPH, COME ON OVER HERE! Joseph, with Mary, went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of his ancestor David, called Bethlehem.

Stage Manager: Wait a minute – where is the donkey? *(Holding up some cloth)* I have a donkey costume right here.

Narrator 2: The Christmas story in the Bible does not mention a donkey in any of the gospels.

Stage Manager: No donkey? No camels? You've got to be kidding me. *(Shakes his head.)*

Narrator 1: Joseph went to Bethlehem because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

Narrator 2: While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn. *(Mary takes the soft ball out of her shirt and is handed a baby doll wrapped in a blanket and. Mary and Joseph move to where a manger is set up on stage, Mary puts the baby in it and they sit down beside it.)*

Stage Manager: Excuse me, tells us about the stable, and the cow, and the other animals there!

Narrator 1: Sorry, nothing about any of that in Luke. But it does say that in that region there were shepherds living in the fields. WHERE ARE THE SHEPHERDS? *(The shepherds come up on one side of the stage.)* They were keeping watch over their flock by night. WHERE ARE THE SHEEP? CAN YOU HEAR THEM COMING? *(Sheep come up and are encouraged to baaa as they come.)*

Narrator 1: Then an angel of the Lord stood before them. WHERE IS GABRIEL? *(Gabriel comes and stands in the middle of the shepherds.)* The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. *(Encourage the shepherds to be afraid.)* The angel said to them... what is it angels always say? DO NOT BE AFRAID!

Everyone: Do not be afraid!

Narrator 2: Right, the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Gabriel: Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:

Narrator 1: The angel kept talking and said, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Gabriel: To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Narrator 2: *And that's not all! The angel also said, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."*

Gabriel: This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

Narrator 1: And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host. WHERE ARE THE REST OF THE ANGELS? *(They come and crowd the stage.)* They were praising God and said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven!"

Angels: Glory to God in the highest heaven!

Narrator 2: And they sang "Gloria in excelsis deo." *(Conduct the angels in singing the chorus of "Angels we have heard on high", encouraging all to join in. Sing it more than once if you like.)*

Narrator 1: And then the angels said, "And on earth peace among those whom God favours!"

Angels: And on earth peace among those whom God favours!

Narrator 2: The angels left them and went into heaven. *(Usher the angels off the stage.)*

Narrator 1: Then the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go now to Bethlehem and see!"

Shepherds: Let's go now to Bethlehem and see! *(Shepherds move over to where Mary, Joseph and Jesus are.)*

Narrator 2: So they went quickly and found Mary and Joseph with the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what they had been told about this child; and all who heard it were amazed.

Narrator 1: But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Narrator 2: The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. *(The shepherds leave the stage.)*

There is a moment of silence. Then the stage hand walks across the stage carrying the sign that says, "The End." The curtains/staging area closes.

Scene 4: The Gospel according to John

Stage hand 1 walks across the empty stage carrying the sign that says "The Gospel according to John." Then narrator 1 and 2 appear.

Narrator 1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. *(Pause.)*

Stage hand 2 walks onto the middle of the stage with cardboard Bible, opens it up as though reading a verse, puts his or her face through the hole, then walks away from the staging area through the audience as though going out of the church "into the world.")

Narrator 2: And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. *(Pause.)*

Narrator 1: *(Looking at Narrator 2)* And that's it. That's what the four gospels say about the birth of Jesus, isn't it? *(Narrator 2 nods in agreement.)*

Narrator 1 and Narrator 2: *(Looking at each other and addressing each other)* Well then, Merry Christmas! *(Looking around at the other characters and at the audience, and repeating with expressions and gestures of joy)* MERRY CHRISTMAS! MERRY CHRISTMAS! *(Turn and walk off stage.)*

Stage hand 1 walks across the stage carrying the sign that says, "The End". Stops in the middle and looks at it with a questioning look. Thinks about it. Then the

stage hand replaces it with the sign that says, “The Beginning.” The curtains/staging area closes.

Note: The script for “The Christmas Story according to the Four Gospels” is based on the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.