

A Very Special Christmas Story

an interactive service for all ages

Created by Rev. Micol I. Cottrell

Instructions:

For this service you'll need six decorative boxes:

- Box 1: black cloth, candles, and matches
- Box 2: map, burlap, and animals
- Box 3: Mary and Joseph (a good nativity set helps)
- Box 4: white sheet, baby Jesus
- Box 5: microphone and shepherd
- Box 6: compass and star

Place these boxes throughout the church (on windowsills, at the end of pews, under a Christmas tree).

Exploring the boxes and explaining the contents is meant to be off-script (memorized), which allows for more interaction with the congregation as the items are explored. Instructions are in blue.

You may have to let people know at the beginning of the service that this is an interactive service so all people regardless of age are invited to respond.

In 2015, the first year I led this service, it ran an hour and ten minutes but because of the interactive nature it did not feel long and even the younger children were engaged the whole way through.

Also, please feel free to use/remove parts of the service or to put in your own voice. That said, please do not change the theological and thematic thrust of this service. If adapting please note adapted after the credit you give for using this service. Please feel free to change the hymns or to use candles instead of glow sticks.

Take your time, play with the congregation, let your holy imagination fly, and enjoy as the very special Christmas story unfolds.

Blessings,
Micol Cottrell.

(Advent Candles lit, but not Christ Candle)

Hymn: Good Christian Friends, Rejoice

Words of Welcome

Welcome to Christmas.

Welcome if you are here every week,
some weeks,
Christmas time,
or just tonight.

Welcome if tonight finds you in joy, peace, and celebration.
And welcome if this night stirs pain and loss.

Welcome if you are excited,
and welcome if you are not.

Tonight we are invited to celebrate Jesus' birth,
to hear the ancient stories of our people,
of our faith,
of our dreams.

We are invited to allow these stories to seep into our lives,
stir and mingle within our being,
drawing us into the hopes, dreams, and celebrations
of long ago that live on.

We are invited to
experience a birth of human and divine capacity,
of earthly and cosmic proportions,
and to remember that the birth long ago
happens again tonight
in each one of us
and all around us.

So come, let us celebrate Christmas.
For Christ will be born. Amen.

Opening Prayer:

**All: Holy One,
as we enter into this time of worship,
help our minds to mingle, our creativity stir, and our imagination take flight.
As we hear the ancient stories of faith and celebrate Jesus' birth
may we experience your presence guiding and inspiring us. Amen.**

We Enter the Christmas Story

Tonight we are going to be telling a very special story. It's a story that stretches over many, many years. It's a story that is given to each one of us. It's a very special Christmas story.

Are you ready to hear the story?

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 92b, 6-7

Tonight as we hear the very special Christmas story we are going to be bringing presents to the front of the church. These presents are going to help us to think about the story. Are you ready to see one of these presents?

Box 1: black cloth, candles, and matches

(Bring Box 1 to the front but do not open it)

Look at this! I wonder what it could be?

It looks very special – a beautiful box.

I wonder what could be inside of this special box....

I wonder if you would like to see what's in this special box?

(Pull out black cloth, unfold it and show it to the congregation)

I wonder what this could be?

(Pause to let people answer. As they offer their suggestions acknowledge what they say by respond "I wonder if it could be a...")

I wonder if it is a shadow.

I wonder if it is darkness.

When it is really dark things can be difficult. In the darkness you can hit your foot against the side of your bed and that hurts. In the darkness we can't see what is around us and that can be scary. In the darkness we can get lost and that can be confusing.

I wonder how you feel in the really dark darkness?

(Pause to let people respond)

Some people are comfortable in the really dark darkness, some are not.

A long, long time ago, before you were born, or your grandparents, or your great great great grandparents, there were people living in a country called Israel. These people were struggling. There had been a war and another country had taken control of them. Cities had been destroyed, people had been killed. The centre of their worship – the Temple, where people imagined God living among them had been torn down. Some of the people were taken away to live in another country.

I wonder how these people felt?
(Pause to let people respond)

I wonder if some people were hurt? I wonder if some people were scared? I wonder if some people were confused? I wonder if some people even started to wonder if God was really with them?

I wonder if some people felt like they were covered in a very dark darkness?
(Place black cloth over your head)

Many years later around the time of the special birth we are celebrating today things were also difficult. Israel was again taken over by another country. Things were unfair, people were hurt, scared, and confused. Many people were waiting for a Messiah, someone who would save them from their pain and fear. I wonder how these people felt?
(Pause to let people respond)

Many people felt like they were covered in a very dark darkness.
(Place black cloth over table)

Maybe there is something in our box that can help us with this darkness?
(Look inside box)

Yes, there is something else in our box!
Do you want to see what it is?
(Pull out candles and matches and place on table)

Candles and matches! Have you ever lit a light when it is dark... maybe a flashlight... maybe you turned on the light in your room. What happens to the darkness when you shine a light into it?
(Pause to let people respond)

For centuries people like us, who live in northern parts of the world – who feel the coldness of winter, see the land covered in snow, and who experience long dark evenings have light candles in wintertime.

These winter lights were seen as a symbol of hope: hope that winter would give way to Spring, hope that the harshness would give into gentleness, hope that the dangerous would move into the life abundant.

Tonight, we are going to light some candles in the darkness. As we light them we remember the hope that prophets like Isaiah shared with people when they felt their lives were stuck in the dark darkness.
(light candles)

Scripture Reading: Micah 5: 2-5a

I think it's time to open another Present.
(Open Box 2 and pull out map)

I wonder what this could be?
(unfold the map for people to see)

It's a map! I love travelling. How many of you like travelling? Now, think really hard. If you could go anywhere you wanted to, where would you go?
(Pause to let people respond)

Those sounds like very special places. Maybe there is a place in our box, a special place, where our Special Christmas story can take place.
(Pull out burlap)

I wonder what this could be?
(Pause to let people respond. As they offer their suggestions, respond "I wonder if it is...")

I wonder if it is hay. Maybe old smelly hay, maybe hay with snakes or mice in it. Maybe new hay, fresh and soft.
(Place burlap on table)

Wait... there is more things in this box...
(pull out animals)

Here are some animals... hmmm... Hay and animals! It is looking a lot like a barn!

Don't get me wrong I like barns, but barns are all around us. When I drive through the country I stop noticing the barns around me because they are an ordinary part of the scenery.

Micha says that something very special is going to happen in Bethlehem. Now, in the days when our special story takes place Bethlehem wasn't a very impressive place. It's a small place. It's not a centre of trade, it's not the temple city, it's not a capital or place of political power. It doesn't even have good farmland or abundant fish-filled water. Bethlehem is an easy to overlook place, it's an everyday kind of place. It could be anywhere. It could be everywhere. It's as ordinary as a barn filled with hay and animals.

I wonder what kind of special things might happen in ordinary places?

Hymn: O Little Town of Bethlehem

**Scripture Reading: Luke 1: 26-35, 38
Matthew 1: 18-25**

Box 3: Mary and Joseph

Let's open another box. I wonder what's in our box this time?
(pull out Joseph and Mary)

I wonder who these people might be? Maybe they are special people for our special Christmas story! They don't look very special? Okay, they are dressed a little different, but they don't look special. They kind of look like every day, ordinary people. They kind of look like you and like me.

Wait... maybe he's a king or she's a queen! Do you see a crown?

Or maybe she's a strong and brave warrior! Do you see a sword?

No... just two everyday, ordinary people.

Let's put them up on our table with the animals.
(place Mary and Joseph on the table)

I wonder what might happen with people like you and me?
I wonder what special things they can do?

Hymn: Joy to the World

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-7

Box 4: White sheet, baby Jesus

It's time for more Presents!
(Open box and pull out white sheet)

This looks pretty fancy! I wonder what this could be?
(Pause to let people respond)
I wonder if it is a table cloth for a fancy diner?
I wonder if it snow: fresh, cold, good for making snow people and for sledding snow.

I wonder with it looks like if I put it around my neck?
(place white cloth around your neck like a cape and pose like a superhero)

It looks like a superhero cape! I wonder how many of you like superheroes?

I wonder what superheroes do?
(Pause to let people respond)

It sounds like Superheroes are very important people! I wonder what a superhero looks like?
(Pause to let people respond)

Let me tell you something really great! Our very special Christmas story is about a superhero! Only we use a different name. Instead of superhero we use the word “Christ,” which means messiah, which means one who saves people. We also call this person Emmanuel, a great name that means “God with us.”

I wonder if there is a superhero in the box?
(pull out baby).

What is this?
(Pause to let people respond)

What do babies do?
(Pause to let people respond)

Ok, remind me what superhero’s do?
(Pause to let people respond)
and what do babies do?
(Pause to let people respond)
Hmmm. A baby doesn’t sound like a superhero.

I was expecting Batman, Superwoman, Spiderman, someone big and strong, or with super powers. Instead we have a wee tiny baby named Jesus. I wonder how a baby could be a superhero? I wonder how a baby, small and fragile and new, could be someone who saves others? I wonder how people can experience God through a baby?

Let’s put the baby up there with the man and woman.
(place baby on the table)

Hymn: The Virgin Mary had a Baby Boy

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8-20

Box 5: Microphone and Shepherd

How many more presents do we have left?
Let’s open another one!
(Open box and pull out microphone)

I wonder what this is?
I wonder what we could use this for?

Microphones help other people hear what we have to say. They help us to speak really loud! If you had a very important message to tell you could use a microphone so others would hear you.

I wonder if you had a really important message who would you share it with?
(Pause to let people respond)

I wonder if you wanted other people to know the message who would you get to help you tell other people?

(Pause to let people respond)

Maybe there's someone in the box who will help us to share our very special Christmas story.
(Pull out Shepherd or Shepherds)

Well look at this, it's a shepherd.

Now, in the time of our very special story most shepherds didn't own their own sheep – they took care of other people's sheep. Shepherds moved sheep around the countryside and lived a lot of the time with the sheep. Many people looked down on shepherds. Many people thought they couldn't be trusted. Some people thought they were thieves. Some people thought they smelled badly, or that they were rough and mean. Many people didn't want to be near shepherds.

I wonder why shepherds are the first people to hear the very special Christmas story? I wonder why the angels thought Shepherds, who many people didn't trust, were the perfect people to share an important message? I wonder what it would have felt like to be a shepherd and to hear such great news?

Sharing our Gifts (Offering)

We've been bringing presents to the front tonight, gifts that help us to hear the story of Christ's birth. Our lives are filled with holy presents: people who fill our lives with joy, the beauty of the earth around us, the blessings of life! We take time to give thanks to God for the blessings of life, and to share our gifts of time, talent, relationship, and money with one another, with this church, and with our world.

Dedication of our offering

**All: God of abundant life,
We thank you for the birth we celebrate tonight.
In response to your presence we offer our gifts to you
and pray that your love may be born within us now and always.
Amen.**

Prayers of the People

Life-giving God,

Who's presence is proclaimed in angel song, in noise and wonder, and felt in the small stirrings of life: in a baby's cry and parents warm embrace, we give you thanks for the blessings of this night, for the peace of gathering here knowing that wherever this night finds us we are loved – by you and by one another. May the wonder of this Christmas Eve stir our lives that we may experience your deep holy presence born again in our midst.

We pray for all of the Bethlehems of this world where hardship, injustice, and uncertainty are a reality. We pray for places where war has brought suffering, where laws support one group while

neglecting another, where people are excluded and cast down. With all of the Bethlehems of this world we offer our prayers. . .

We pray for those who find themselves like Mary and Joseph wanting and needing. We pray for those who do not have enough food, or adequate shelter. We pray for those who have been shamed, forgotten, or cast away. We pray for those living under tyranny and oppression in their homes, in their countries, by loved ones, strangers, and political organizations. With all of the Marys and Josephs of this world we offer our prayers. . .

We pray for the shepherds of this world, those who live on the edges of our perception, who are forgotten, neglected, or worse, rejected. We pray for those living with poverty, unemployment or underemployment. We pray for those who live in the developing nations and are often neglected in the decisions we make that affect them. We pray for those who we label scandalous, unpleasant, or unlovable. May we hear their voices and know your compassion comes to us through them, that your healing and wholeness comes to us from the margins and the edges of our perception inviting us to grow. With all the shepherds of this world we offer our prayers. . .

We pray with the animals and the stars, for the planet, our home, and for all that shares this creation with us. We pray for the cosmos that stirs our imagination. We pray that we may see that your love story is for all creation so that we may live with greater respect and wonder as we celebrate our place within your great artistry. With the animals and the stars we offer our prayers...

We offer in the silence the prayers we hold. . .

We pour out these prayers to you, O wondrous God, joining them with the prayers of all creation, trusting in your love, and open to the ways in which we can respond to the prayers of those around us. Together we join in the prayer that Jesus taught us saying... Amen.

Scripture: John 1:1-14

Box 6: Compass and Star

There is just one more present tonight.

(open box and pull out compass)

I wonder what this could be?

I wonder what it could be used for?

This is a compass. Compasses are important. With a compass you figure out which direction you are facing. If you have the right map and a compass you can even figure out where you are. Compasses help us to know where we are and help to guide us to where we want to go.

What else is in our box?

(Pull out the star)

I wonder what this could be?
(Pause to let people respond)

I wonder if this is a star way up in the sky?

In the time when our very special Christmas story takes place stars were very important. Like our compass stars helped people find out where they were going. People also believed that stars announced very important events. The birth of kings and queens, emperors, heroes, and holy people were often said to be announced by stars. Stars announced that the whole cosmos was celebrating, and that the birth was so important that it was of universal proportions.

Did you know that we are made of stars? We owe our very life and this planet's growth to stars. From the exploding of stars, supernovas, the elements of creation flooded this place. We are literally made of stardust. The stars, the cosmos, fills our bodies.

The Gospel According to John tells our very special Christmas story differently than the stories in Matthew and Luke. In ancient Greece philosophers argued about what was the essence of all that is, what makes up all that is? Some said it was earth, others fire, other water, others air, and some said it was logos – word, wisdom. What is the essence of all that is?

In the beginning was the logos, the word, the essence
And the essence was with God and was God.
All things came to be through it,
And without it, nothing was.
And the essence is the light of the world.

We are guided by stars, inspired by stars, connected by stars. We are made of stardust. And we are made of the essence, the logos, the word, the Christ who was in the beginning, was one with God, whose birth in Jesus we celebrate, and whose birth we experience in the very essence of our being.

Whether you feel like you are covered in dark darkness,
or you feel like your life is filled with bright light;

Whether you look around and the place you stand feels importance, holy, meaningful, filled with promise or potential,
or the place you stand feels overlooked, forgotten, ordinary;

Whether you feel like a queen or king, like a brave warrior, strong, wondrous, filled with purpose,
or you feel the vulnerability and fragility of human life weighing down on you;

Whether you are trusted with important messages,
or looked on again and again with mistrust and judgement;

Wherever we find ourselves in this very special Christmas story,

may we experience the presence of Christ
Born once more among us
and within us,
connecting us to God,
to the world,
to the cosmos,
to all that was, is, and will be.

Come, Christ, logos, essence, come
and be born in us and among us again tonight.

Let us be filled with the hopeful and holy vision of Isaiah and Micah,
let us say yes with the bravery and boldness of Mary and Joseph,
let us be open to the Angel songs and give witness to the holy things that are all around us,
for the story happens again tonight and every moment of our lives,
the stars proclaim,
the stardust rings out in our body:
Christ is born
and our very special Christmas story continues.

Lighting of the candles

We light the Christ Candle,
the eternal star that gives life to all,
that shone in Jesus,
and radiates from all creation.

And we take out our glow sticks.
For this sacred light fills our lives
– for Christ is born in us.
For us, and among us.

May our star, the holy essence, the logos, the image of God in us,
shine brightly, spreading the holy light of hope, peace, joy, and love throughout the world the
world.

Hymn: Silent Night

Blessing

Like the shepherds may we go out, with praise on our lips, excitement streaming through our
body, knowing that with this birth, filled with the Holy we will never be the same again.

Go out into the world with the fullness of Christmas. Go in peace. Amen.

Our special story does not end with a silent night. The shepherds did not stay quiet. Mary and Joseph's joy was not censored. The prophets and the cosmos were boisterous. As we go from here we join the mighty song of faith.

***Hymn: Go, Tell It on the Mountain**