A CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

The Christmas Story

Based on Luke 1–2; Matthew 1–2 · Written by Carrie Elderberry



SUITABLE FOR
All ages (written for young audiences)

PERFORMANCE TIME
About 25–30 minutes with the carols

CAST SIZE
2 readers + 10 or more people or puppets

PROPS REQUIRED
Manger; a star; a bundle for the Baby

MAIN THEME
God kept His promise and sent His Son, Jesus, to be born as a baby: a Savior for all people.

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To print just the play on its own, print pages 6–12.

PRODUCTION OVERVIEW

Synopsis

Two readers tell the Christmas story straight from Luke and Matthew while people or shadow puppets act it out: the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, Joseph’s dream, the census, the birth in Bethlehem, the shepherds and the angels, the Wise Men and King Herod, the escape to Egypt, and the return home to Nazareth. The audience learns the big words first, helps answer questions along the way, and sings the carols.

Spiritual Concept

Christmas is the story of God keeping His promises. The prophets said a virgin would have a Son and that He would be born in Bethlehem, and Matthew shows each promise coming true. The same God who kept them is keeping His promises to us, and everyone who seeks Him, like the Wise Men did, will find Him.

Age Suitability

Written for young audiences, and enjoyed by all ages. The readers explain the big words before the story starts and ask the children to help along the way. This version leaves out the killing of the baby boys in Bethlehem. Herod gets a “big death scene,” as the script puts it, so leaders can play it as broadly or as gently as suits their group.

Performance Time

About 25–30 minutes with the carols

CAST & TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

Characters

READER A — Stands at one corner of the stage.

READER B — Stands at the other corner of the stage.

Angel Gabriel

Herod

Magi (3 or more)

Mary

Joseph

Shepherds (3 or more)

Elizabeth

Zechariah (optional)

Roman soldier(s)

Caesar (optional)

Heavenly Host (optional)

Innkeeper (optional)

Herod’s counselors (optional)

Child Jesus (optional)

Prop Options

- Basket to represent Mary’s luggage to take to visit Elizabeth and flee to Egypt
- Bundle to represent the Infant Jesus
- Pillows to represent pregnancies
- Lamb puppets
- Scroll for census
- Manger
- A star
- Battery candles for the angels to light
- Gifts from the Magi

PERFORMANCE NOTES FOR PUPPETEERS

New to puppets? General prep, technique, and voice tips live at gospelpuppets.org/getting-started.

Suggested Introduction

This story is more than two thousand years old. It has been kept safe for us in a book called the Bible. It is the story of how Jesus came to be born on earth as a baby.

There are some words in the story that you may not know yet. Listen carefully because you will hear them again in the story:

Virgin: Say it with me, virgin. Good. A virgin is a person who is not married yet

Engaged: say it with me, engaged. That means going to be married, but not married yet

Favored: (repeat as above, children echoing every new word) is like being respected and honored a lot

Barren: this is a sad word. It means you want to have a baby, but your body can’t do it

Womb: is a funny word! It means the special place where a baby grows, in a mother’s tummy

Miracle: something that can’t happen unless God does it, and He changes nature for it

Decree: A decree is a kind of law, made by a king

Census: A census is when the government counts everybody, so they can make everyone pay money

Manger: A manger is a kind of food box, in a barn, where food for cows and horses is kept

Inn: An Inn is a place for people who are traveling, to stay in and sleep overnight

Are you ready? OK, here we go!

Staging

This is written for two READERS (Reader A and Reader B), one at each corner of the stage. Try to have their voices distinctively different (for example, Reader A might be a man or boy, Reader B might be a girl or woman). The CHARACTERS step forward as their part in the text appears, and step back or offstage when not needed. You will need people or puppets to represent the CHARACTERS listed above.

For shadow puppets: hang a white sheet or shower curtain liner and put one bright lamp a few feet behind it, with the puppeteers between the lamp and the sheet. Flat cardboard cut-outs on sticks work well, and ready-made nativity shadow-puppet sets are also sold online (for example, from Wildflower Toys, or

a nativity shadow-puppet theater from a shop on Etsy). The READERS stand in front, to either side of the screen.

With shadow puppets, the walk-around during the census and the shepherds going out through the audience are done by the audience and the READERS, not the puppets.

Sing only the first verse of each carol.

Reading the Script

Most movements of the characters are indicated clearly in the script. Anything beyond that is indicated by small parentheses within the script. Narrators can read those aloud!

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

For Young Audiences · For Tableau Performance or Shadow Puppets · Taken from the gospels of Matthew and Luke

Based on Luke 1–2; Matthew 1–2 · Written by Carrie Elderberry

READER A: These readings are from the Bible

READER B: from Matthew chapters 1 and 2, and also from Luke chapters 1 and 2.

(Sing "O Come O Come Emmanuel")

READER A: This is how the birth of Jesus came about:

(First scene: MARY and GABRIEL)

READER B: God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, to a virgin, engaged to be married to Joseph. The virgin's name was…can anyone tell me?

(Wait for them!)

That's right… Mary.

READER A: The angel said to Mary, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

READER B: Mary was confused and disturbed, and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

READER A: But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will become pregnant and give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name…does anyone know?

(Wait!)

That's right… Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. His kingdom will never end."

READER B: "How can this happen?" Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered,

READER A: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will over-shadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and will be called the Son of God."

READER B: Mary had a cousin named Elizabeth,

(Add ELIZABETH and optionally ZECHARIAH)

who was an old old lady, and who had never been able to have any children. Do you remember what that is called? (Give them time to guess) Barren…That's right, Elizabeth was barren.

READER A: Then the angel said to Mary, “Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren, she is in her sixth month (that means she was going to have a baby soon). For the word of God will never fail.”

READER B: Mary answered, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

(Exit GABRIEL)

At that time Mary got ready

(MARY picks up her basket)

and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth.

(MARY joins ELIZABETH. ZECHARIAH may be there too)

READER A: When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped within her! (Elizabeth jumps, holding her tummy) and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

(ELIZABETH can put one arm around MARY, and raises the other arm)

In a loud voice she exclaimed:

READER B: “God has blessed you above all women, and blessed is the Child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

(Group hug)

READER A: Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

(MARY goes back to where she started)

(ELIZABETH and ZECHARIAH exit.)

READER B: Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, and you remember what that means? (Get some input) They were not married yet.

(JOSEPH enters, and looks very sad)

(MARY is sad too)

READER A: But before they came together, she was found to be with child, pregnant, by the Holy Spirit.

READER B: Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man, he had in mind to break off the engagement quietly.

(JOSEPH turns his back on MARY, sits down and hides his face)

READER A: That means that he didn’t want to marry her. And that was because he did not believe that God was the baby’s father.

READER B: But after Joseph had considered this

(Enter an ANGEL, and JOSEPH looks at him)

an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said,

READER A: "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is growing in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a Son, and you are to give Him the name—and let's all say it! … Jesus."

READER B: All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son".

READER A: And do you know something? That never happened before, and it has never happened since. It was a miracle!

(Exit ANGEL)

READER B: When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him

(JOSEPH can take MARY's hand)

and took Mary home as his wife.

READER A: But he had no union with her

READER B: Which means she stayed a virgin

READER A: Until she gave birth to a Son.

(MARY and JOSEPH move to one side.)

READER B: In those days Caesar Augustus, the king of all the kings,

(Enter CAESAR and ROMAN SOLDIER. He can give a scroll to the soldier)

issued a decree

READER A: Which means he made an announcement

READER B: That a census should be taken

READER A: Which means he wanted to count everybody.

READER B: It was a census of the entire Roman world. And everyone, that means everyone! So everybody stand up!

(Enter as many other SOLDIERS as you want)

(Have fun with this!)

READER A: The soldiers made sure that everyone went to his home town to sign up.

READER B: Take a moment to walk around. Find somebody you don't already know, tell them your name and ask them where they were born, shake hands with them, and then you can sit back down!

(SOLDIERS stand around the room for the rest of the play)

(Settle everybody back down)

(Enter INNKEEPER, frowning and with arms crossed, and add a manger)

READER A: So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth to Bethlehem the town of David.

(The carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" may be sung here)

READER B: He went there with Mary, who was engaged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

READER A: While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born

(MARY grips her tummy, JOSEPH goes to INNKEEPER)

(INNKEEPER, hands pushing away, shaking head NO, points to manger and exits)

(MARY and JOSEPH kneel down close together by manger)

READER B: and she gave birth to her first-born son.

(MARY can bring out BABY)

READER A: She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

(The carol "Away in a Manger" may be sung here)

(ANGELS prepare for the cue word "suddenly")

READER B: And there were shepherds

(Enter SHEPHERDS)

living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

READER A: An angel of the Lord appeared to them

(Enter an ANGEL)

and they were terrified. But the angel said to them,

READER B: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

READER A: Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host

(Enter any other ANGELS—with some kind of light if possible)

appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests."

(Sing "The First Noel")

READER B: When the angels had left them and gone into heaven,

(Exit ANGELS)

READER A: The shepherds said to one another,

READER B: “Let’s go into Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

READER A: So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

READER B: When they had seen Him, they spread the word about what had been told them about this Child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

(SHEPHERDS exit through the audience saying “Merry Christmas” to everybody)

READER A: But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

READER B: After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, during the time of King Herod,

(Enter HEROD, and—if any—ATTENDANTS, across from manger scene. Light the star now if you have one)

READER A: Wise men, from the east came to Jerusalem,

(Enter MAGI)

READER B: And the wise men asked, “Where is the One Who has been born King of the Jews?

READER A: We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

READER B: When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

(HEROD looks worried.)

READER A: When he had called together all the chief priests and teachers of the law, Herod asked them where the Christ was to be born.

READER B: “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet Micah has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

READER A: Then Herod called the wise men secretly

(circle up!)

and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

READER B: He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the Child. As soon as you find Him report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him.”

(HEROD stays on stage, to the side away from MARY and JOSEPH)

READER A: After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them, until it stopped over the place where the Child was.

READER B: When they saw the star they were overjoyed.

(The carol may be sung “We Three Kings of Orient Are”)

READER A: On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down (do you know what that means? They got down on their knees) and worshipped Him.

(MAGI kneel and offer gifts)

READER B: Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts, and do you know what they were?... right, of gold, and of frankincense, and of myrrh.

READER A: And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

(Exit MAGI, and turn off the star)

READER B: When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

(Enter an ANGEL)

READER A: “Get up,” he said, “take the Child and His mother and escape! Go to (…does anyone know? …(WAIT) right!) Egypt”.

READER B: And the angel said “Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the Child to kill Him.”

READER A: So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother during the night—

READER B: Hurry, Joseph! But don’t forget all the gifts from the Magi! You will need them in Egypt!

(Exit JOSEPH, MARY, and BABY, with any props)

READER A: And they left for Egypt, where they stayed until the death of Herod.

(HEROD dies. Big death scene! ROMAN SOLDIER can drag him off stage)

READER B: Our story is nearly done. Jesus and His family stayed in Egypt for a while, but watch what happens next:

(Enter JOSEPH, MARY and CHILD JESUS. ALL lie down as if sleeping)

READER A: After Herod died

(HEROD can have another death scene)

READER A: *(still)* an angel of the Lord appeared

(Enter an ANGEL)

(Still READER A!)

in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

READER B: "Get up, take the Child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the Child's life are dead."

(Exit ANGEL)

READER A: So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother and went back to the land of Israel.

(JOSEPH, MARY, and JESUS walk across stage)

READER B: Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called…does anyone know?

READER A: They went to Nazareth. If you remember, that is where Joseph and Mary started from, at the very beginning of this story. They did not go back to Bethlehem.

READER B: So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

READER A: And the Child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him.

READER B: We encourage you to read this story for yourself. It is found in the Bible, in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew.

READER A: Our story ends here, but the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection continues even to this day. He lives in the hearts of those who love Him.

READER B: We encourage you to seek Him, even as the Wise Men did, for our Lord Jesus promises that everyone who seeks Him will find Him.

(Sing the carol "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen")

READER A: And finally, we would like to thank all of the people who helped with this play. Can you all stand together for a moment so that everyone can thank you?

(EVERYBODY come out for a bow!)

(Sing "Joy to the World")

THE END

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Discussion Questions

1. What did the angel tell Mary to name her baby?
2. What was Joseph to do? What did the angel tell him in his dream?
3. Why did Mary and Joseph have to travel to Bethlehem?
4. Where did Mary lay baby Jesus, and why?
5. God told the shepherds about Jesus with angels, and the Wise Men with a star. How does God tell people about Jesus today?
6. The Wise Men traveled a long way to find Jesus. How can we seek Jesus this Christmas?

Related Bible Passages

Primary Text: Luke 1:26–56; 2:1–20, 40 — The angel Gabriel tells Mary she will have God’s Son; Mary visits Elizabeth; Jesus is born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger; angels announce His birth to the shepherds, who hurry to find Him; the Child grows strong and wise. (Summarized.)

Additional Scripture:

- Matthew 1:18–2:23 — Joseph’s dream; the Wise Men follow the star; the escape to Egypt; the return to Nazareth. (Summarized. This pageant leaves out 2:16–18.)
- Isaiah 7:14 — The prophecy that a virgin will have a son, called Immanuel. (Summarized.)
- Micah 5:2 — The prophecy that a ruler for Israel will come from Bethlehem. (Summarized.)

Song Suggestions

- “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” — Choir of King's College, Cambridge — https://open.spotify.com/track/6Lub2WGns5ZZbOe3Hbq57m
- “O Little Town of Bethlehem” — Old Time Christmas Carol Singers — https://open.spotify.com/track/79AUEyZFtqePFWhn08VXNp
- “Away in a Manger” — Cedarmont Kids — https://open.spotify.com/track/7goBnTblzva3bStodv6Esh
- “Joy to the World” — Crouch End Festival Chorus — https://open.spotify.com/track/5CMdoNV6O4ZtngSF6378hr

Ministry Context

A Christmas pageant for a children’s program, a Sunday school class or a whole-church Christmas service. The readers can be adults or older children, so even the youngest actors only need to move, not memorize lines. It works as a living tableau with people in simple costumes, or with shadow puppets behind a sheet. The audience joins in all the way through: learning the big words, answering questions, the census walk-around, and the carols.