



Grace in a Manger

Goal: To celebrate the Christmas story with joy and gratitude.

RECOGNIZING GOD'S GRACE . . .

. . . In Luke 2:1-7

As if Mary didn't have enough to do in preparation for the birth of her firstborn son, now comes word that she and Joseph have to make a seventy-mile journey from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered for the tax rolls. Bethlehem was the destination because Joseph's ancestry was associated with King David and Bethlehem was David's city.

We don't have details of their trip or housing arrangements when they arrived. We do know that because they didn't have a room inside an inn or house, Mary gave birth to her son and laid him in a manger, a trough used for feeding animals.

God's grace was with Mary and Joseph in providing a place for Jesus to be born, the manger. But in the manger is even greater grace—Jesus himself! Though born like all other humans, this baby was also God in human flesh—Emmanuel, "God is with us."

We cannot be more grateful for God's grace given in Jesus. He came to live and die and be raised again to forgive our sin and bring us into God's family forever. Our whole lives overflow with gratitude for the grace given in that Bethlehem manger!

. . . In Your Children's Experiences

This story is probably one that most children know. Children hear it at church and perhaps at home as they grow up playing with a beloved nativity set. When we consider what we most want children to know, what we think is most important in their growth as a spiritual being, knowing they are loved by their family and they are a beloved child of God is at the top of the list. This story of the birth of Jesus helps children remember that God sent God's Son, Jesus, to help us see how we could love and to remember that God is always with us.

. . . In Your Relationships with the Children

As you prepare to tell this familiar and beloved story of the birth of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke, be alert to how the children have heard it over the years. Older children will be able to understand how two authors, Matthew and Luke, both told the story but did so in different ways. Here in Luke, we hear how Mary and Joseph had to travel and so they were looking for a guest room to stay in so Mary could have her baby. Since the birth story will be familiar to most of them, you could invite them to think about questions they would like to ask the people in the story. This would help them think about Jesus' birth in new ways.

*O gracious God, be with me in every new morning,
that Christ will be born again in my life. Amen.*



Supplies

Music & Melodies

bit.ly/GGGMusicMelodies

Stories, Colors & More (SCM) i–iv, Christmas 1, Christmas 1a, 15, 19

basic supplies
(see p. vii)

internet-connected
device

Advent calendar poster
from previous sessions

snack

Guided Play

choice 1: seasonal
decorations

choice 2: picture books
about Jesus' birth, old
Christmas cards

choice 3: child-friendly
nativity set

Exploring

choice 1: cupcakes,
sprinkles, icing (variety
of colors), washable
felt-tipped markers,
small bowls

choice 4: copies of
Grace Notes (GN) 1

Suggested children's
Bible: *Growing in God's
Love: A Story Bible*,
edited by Elizabeth F.
Caldwell and Carol A.
Wehrheim (Louisville, KY:
Flyaway Books, 2018),
www.pcusastore.com.

GATHERING IN GOD'S GRACE

Before the Children Arrive

Designate a story corner, and lay out a blanket or individual mats for the children so their backs will be to the door.

Use **SCM i–ii**, “Your Visual Schedule,” to provide clear expectations and a visual cue for the group.

See **SCM iii–iv** for the key to icons (for example, **LG** **T**) and ways to adapt for children who have special needs or disabilities.

Select the activities that will work best for you and for your children. You do not need to do everything suggested!

Add an additional 9" x 12" envelope to the bottom of the Advent poster. Tape or glue the open flap to the back of the poster so that the envelope hangs below the poster. Cut out the rectangle from **SCM Christmas 1a**, and glue it to the envelope. Put **SCM Christmas 1** in the envelope.

Welcoming and Guided Play



Welcome the children by name as they arrive and say, “Grace and peace be with you.” Prompt the response, “And also with you.” Be sensitive to any children who might be visiting for the first time.

Explain to the parents/caregivers that the children will hear a story about how Jesus was born.

Invite the children to choose a guided play activity to start:

- 1. Wondering**—Provide seasonal decorations, especially some with an aroma or that make a sound, elaborate Christmas cards, hay or straw, and ribbons and bows. Invite the children to hold, touch, and smell the items on display. Talk with them about decorations they have seen elsewhere. If possible, take them to see the sanctuary decorations.
- 2. Reading**—Provide an area with quiet music and old Christmas cards to look at. Provide a children's Bible or picture books about Jesus' birth, such as *The Nativity* by Julie Vivas and *The Nativity* by Géraldine Elschner.
- 3. Playing with a Nativity Set**—Invite children to play with the characters and animals of a nativity set. Rejoice that Jesus is here.

T Give the children a signal when it's time for something new; sing a familiar song or repeat a phrase such as: “One, two, something new.” Expect this to be difficult for some, especially if they are new to your group. It may be helpful to give a child a specific task.



Transitioning to Story Time

When you sense the children are ready to move into group time, call them to the story corner, singing “Hello, Hello! How Are You?”—**SCM 19**. Repeat words and phrases as appropriate.

Stretching



Help the children prepare to concentrate on the story.

Begin a stretching game slowly, then more energetically, and end with a slow pace. Invite the children to follow you in reaching high and bending over. You can do something like: up (*reaching high*), down (*reaching down*), center (*hands touching chest*), out (*hands extended*).

The Baby Is Asleep



As you sing, act out sleeping, waking up, and rocking a baby in arms. Sing this to the tune of “The Farmer in the Dell.”

The baby is asleep, the baby is asleep,
Everyone be quiet now, the baby is asleep.

The baby’s waking up, the baby’s waking up,
See him look and smile at me, the baby’s waking up.

The baby’s name is Jesus, the baby’s name is Jesus,
He was born in Bethlehem, the baby’s name is Jesus.

Luke’s telling of Jesus birth can be found in *Growing in God’s Love: A Story Bible*, edited by Elizabeth F. Caldwell and Carol A. Wehrheim (Louisville, KY: Flyaway Books, 2018), www.pcusastore.com.



Hearing the Story



Show your Bible to the children. Tell them that the Bible is a book of stories about God and God’s people.

Open the Bible to Luke 2. Tell the children that here is where we can read about when Jesus was born.

Draw the children’s attention to the Advent calendar poster with the fifth envelope added. Exclaim that today, Christmas and the baby Jesus are here!

Read **SCM Christmas 1**. Express the emotions of the story in your voice, gestures, and facial expressions. Conclude the story by prompting the children to say, “Amen.”

Encourage the children to find and identify Mary, Joseph, and Jesus on **SCM Christmas 1**. Ask them to tell you the story in their own words. Wonder about the story:

- ▼ I wonder how Mary felt when they couldn’t find a room.
- ▼ I wonder how the innkeeper felt when Mary and Joseph knocked on the door.
- ▼ I wonder what you think is the best part of the story.



EXPLORING GOD'S GRACE



1. Celebrating Jesus' Birthday

B F TD

Prepare for a party. As the children work on the chains and cupcakes, talk about how they are preparing to celebrate Jesus' birthday.

To make decorations, invite the children to tape construction paper strips together to make chains. Then decorate the room with the chains.

To make refreshments, give each child a cupcake to decorate. Have several small bowls with different colors of icing. Invite the children to choose their icing and spread it on top of the cupcake. Give each child a paper plate and write her or his name on it.

Pour a few sprinkles on each paper plate. Children can use their fingers to put sprinkles on the cupcake.

Ask them to leave their cupcakes on their plates; they will eat the cupcakes later during snack time.

2. Jumping for Joy

M MS

Play a game that spells out the joy of Christmas.

- ▼ Show the children how to spell the letters in *JOY*: J (*right arm down with hand curved up*), O (*hands clasped over one's head*), or Y (*hands outstretched overhead*).
- ▼ Children jump three times in unison, then each "freezes" in the pose of a J, an O, or a Y.
- ▼ See if the children can find partners to form the word *JOY*. When they get together, shout out in joy!
- ▼ Play again and see if they can find different partners.

Afterward, invite children to name the things that bring them joy at Christmas.

3. Walking to Bethlehem

M MS B

Bethlehem is very far away. Ask the children to think of different ways they could travel to Bethlehem. Say that when Jesus was born, people didn't have cars and airplanes and buses. Explain that most people had to walk.

Take them on a walk to Bethlehem. Bethlehem may be in your room, or it might be in some other room or in a corner of the hall. Make the walk as long as possible. If you stay in the room, walk in weaving, zigzag fashion. If possible, walk through the hallways of your church building. Once you have made it to Bethlehem, sit and rest. Consider having your snack time in Bethlehem.

Option: In advance, set up one or more inns in your church building. Visit with the children and prompt them to ask the innkeepers for room in the inn.



Use “wonder” questions that do not force a child to remember facts. Wondering questions help a child think aloud. Answers are neither right nor wrong. They help teach children to speak from their hearts.

Say a personal word to each child. It might be no more than “I’m glad you were here” or “I’m sorry you have such a bad cold,” but let each child know you paid attention to him or her today.



Ask parents and caregivers for their email addresses so that you can provide them with the link to www.pcusastore.com/GGGdownloads, where they can download coloring pages, *Grace Sightings*, audio stories, and songs (see p. vii).

4. Coloring Page

Hand out copies of **GN 1** and crayons. Invite the children to color the picture. Wonder together what it must have been like on that night in Bethlehem long ago. Wonder what you would have said or thought or felt upon seeing the baby Jesus.

T *Transitions can be difficult. This may be a good time for some quick physical activities, such as squeezing your hands, stretching, and so on.*

LOVING AND SERVING GOD



Call the children to snack time, singing “Away in a Manger”—**SCM 15**. Repeat words and phrases as appropriate.

Have each child put away one toy or object. Invite everyone to sit around a table or on the floor.

Show the children the Advent poster from earlier in the session. Count the envelopes (*five*). Ask the children how many Sundays there were in Advent (*four*). Rejoice with the children that today is a holiday, Christmas Day, Jesus’ birthday!

Say an echo prayer, such as:

“Thank you, God, for your love. /
Thank you, God, for Mary and Joseph. /
Thank you, God, for your gift of Jesus. /
Help us to share your love with others. /
Amen.” /

Invite the children to get their cupcakes. Celebrate! Enjoy the snack.

As the children leave, say, “May the grace of God be with you.” Ask the children to respond, “And also with you.”

Grace in a Manger



Mary and Joseph said thank you to God for their beautiful baby, Jesus.

