



God's Gift of Love

Goal: To recognize God's surprising love in Jesus Christ.

RECOGNIZING GOD'S GRACE . . .

. . . In Luke 2:1-7

Mary and Joseph must have been nervous as they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was a long journey and Mary was ready to have a baby. Even worse, there was “no place for them in the guestroom” (v. 7, CEB). Yet God provided a place: a manger, where Mary “gave birth to her firstborn child, a son” (v. 7, CEB). God provided a place for Jesus to be born.

How like the gracious God to take care of the details and provide for the needs of God's people! God's grace extends throughout the necessities of our lives, down to the smallest needs we have. In safety, among God's creatures, the Son of God was born.

When it must have seemed that all was in danger for lack of a place for the birth, God's grace furnished a means by which the baby Jesus could come into the world in shelter and protection.

. . . In Your Children's Experiences

The culture wants us to celebrate Christmas with all of the appropriate consumerism, inviting us to be anxious about spending time and money to get everything ready—to get it all done. Children are not oblivious to these cultural expectations.

In the church, we observe Advent, a countercultural season of preparation, waiting, and hope for God's greatest gift: Jesus. As children take part in the simple gestures of the season—lighting candles, singing songs, and praying prayers—they enter into a world governed by God's grace.

. . . In Your Relationships with the Children

Encourage the children to share stories of how they are getting ready to make room for the birth of Jesus. Do they light candles, pray, or sing songs about Jesus? Be open to hearing the stories of their plans for Christmas.

We can help children discover ways to celebrate Jesus' birth by simply making room in their lives to say thank you. As you put Jesus in the manger, offer a prayer of thanksgiving for God's gracious gift. In your prayers this week, name each child, giving thanks for his or her birth.

*Holy God, give me a heart of gratitude
for the marvelous gift of your son. Amen.*



Supplies

Music & Melodies

bit.ly/GGGMusicMelodies

Stories, Colors & More (SCM) i–iv, 3, 3a, 3b, 3c, 16, 18, 19

basic supplies
(see p. vii)

audio stories (optional)
(see p. vii)

internet-connected
device

Christmas music

purple cloth

four Advent candles

medium-size bowl

baby doll and biblical
costumes (optional)

Responding

Claiming

copies of **Grace Notes (GN) 1** on card stock

Celebrating

undecorated cupcakes,
frosting, flat knives,
sprinkles, birthday
candles, Christmas
music

Praying

nativity set

Extra Activity

copies of **GN 2**

GATHERING IN GOD'S GRACE

Post **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.

“Celebrating God’s Grace” and “Praying God’s Grace” require more prep.

Welcoming and Preparing

LG **B** **MS**

Greet the children by name and with the words “Grace and hope be with you.” Prompt them to respond with the same words.

This is the third week of Advent. Play Christmas music as the children arrive. Invite them to help you set up your space. Provide a Bible, purple cloth, four Advent candles, and a bowl to set on the table. As the days are drawing closer to Christmas, the children sense the anticipation. Ask them what they are doing to prepare for the birth of Jesus. Some activities may be singing songs, lighting an Advent wreath, participating in a Christmas pageant, and so forth.

Ask some children to help prepare today’s “Responding in Gratitude” activities and suggest that one or two prepare to lead today’s singing.

Invite the children to build a city of Bethlehem by using available objects around the room. Include the place where Mary and Joseph found shelter.

Singing

Invite the group to sit in the worship space. Admire the efforts of the children to create it.

Sing “This Is the Day”—**SCM 16**—to celebrate the gifts of God. Some may wish to move to music, and others may wish to sing. If someone is dancing, say something like: “I see (*Name*) rejoicing. Dancing is one way to rejoice and be glad in each day God gives us.”

LG *By nurturing communication skills, children are given the ability to build relationships and inspire others.*

Praying

C **LD**

Invite the children to gather around the Advent candles. Turn on three candles. Remind the children that the candlelight is a reminder of God’s presence and gift of grace to the world. God shines light in the darkness through the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Invite the children to join an echo prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the prayer.

Holy God, /
you are good and great. /



You came to the world /
full of grace and truth. /
We look forward to when you will come again. /
Amen. /

- Give children time to respond and to share; for some children, listening and speaking may take longer.

Preparing to Hear the Story

Ask a child to complete the following sentence: "I'm getting ready for Christmas by thanking God for . . ." He or she chooses the next person to repeat the first child's response, adding something for which he or she is thankful.

Remind the children that grace means God accepts us and loves us just as we are. Suggest that it is important to thank God for grace.

Gesture to the bowl and ask the children to recall the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth from the previous session. Wonder what it means that God fills our empty places and surprises us with grace. Invite the children to name some good things God fills people with.

Hearing the Story

Invite a child to find Luke 2 and place the open Bible on the worship table. Read **SCM 3**. Conclude by saying, "Word of wisdom, Word of grace," and prompt the children to say, "Thanks be to God."

Invite the children to choose a character from the story (Mary, Joseph, Caesar Augustus, people in Bethlehem, the innkeeper) and to walk around the city of Bethlehem that they have created acting out the story. Use biblical costumes if you have them.

Challenge the children to use the bowl. Give them ideas: the bowl could be a bag that Joseph is carrying or a bowl full of water that a person gives to the weary travelers.

Read the story again. Use your voice, expressions, and feelings to make it engaging. Repeat the story, or invite the children to tell it using their own words if children want to change characters.

Reflecting on God's Grace

Remind the children that we have no way of knowing what Mary, Joseph, and Jesus looked like. Artists have often painted them to represent people and places the artists were familiar with.

Show the children **SCM 3a**, **3b**, and **3c**, which depict the birth of Jesus in a painting, a ceramic nativity set, and stained glass.

Provide paper and markers for them to create a nativity scene from their own perspective. Encourage them to take home their art to share with family members.



Today's story 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.



Singing

Sing “Joy to the World” to celebrate the joy of God’s gift of Jesus. As you sing, point out the words on **SCM 19** so the children can follow along.

Turn off the candles.

T *For children who struggle with transitions, this may be a good time for an adult helper to come close to one or more children to model and encourage appropriate responses.*

RESPONDING IN GRATITUDE

Select activities appropriate for your group and for the time available.

Claiming

TD

Explain to the children that they will make reminders of God’s love for us. Provide construction paper and pencils and have the children trace both hands. Help them cut out the hands and set them aside. Tell the children that God’s gift to the world is Jesus. We can love and carry Jesus in our hearts every day.

Hand out copies of **GN 1** on card stock and have the children fill in the night sky using craft supplies you have (paint, crayons, colored chalk). Help the children cut out the heart. Show them how to glue the palms of the hands to the back side of the heart so that the fingers point out. Ask the children, “Will you hold this gift from God in your hearts?” When they respond yes, show them how to fold the fingers over so that they hold the heart.



Celebrating God’s Grace

FM LD

Invite the children to decorate the room for a birthday party for Jesus. Talk with them about Christmas as a birthday celebration, with Jesus as the one we honor and celebrate as God’s gift of love to us.

Ask the children to think about what they might give to Jesus as a birthday present. Remind them that their gifts need not be things that can be held or touched, but that they might be actions that honor Jesus’ humble birth and the poor people to whom he was born. Distribute paper and crayons, and invite the children to draw a picture of a gift they would like to give Jesus.

Frost and decorate cupcakes to celebrate Jesus’ birthday. Play Christmas music, if available, and make this a time of celebration. Sing “Happy Birthday” to Jesus.

Enjoy the cupcakes, and invite the children to present their birthday gifts that they drew for Jesus.



Praying God's Grace

Invite the children to join you in a time of prayer. Display a nativity set. Invite the children to take turns holding a person or object in the nativity scene. Wonder whom or what you might pray for in regards to that person or object. For example, Joseph might represent fathers. What prayers for fathers do the children have? The shepherds might represent people who care for others, such as medical people, child caregivers, and so forth. What prayers for caregivers do the children have? A cow might represent animals who provide food for us. What prayers might the children have for the food we eat, those who do not have enough food, and so forth?

After each child has had a turn to choose a person or object, close your prayer time with the following prayer, or one like it.

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the gifts you give us through the birth of your son, Jesus. May our prayers for others and our world be a gift to you. Amen.

LG *Providing opportunities for children to make decisions about how they can lead, offer help, and express generosity helps build their confidence. This also helps them learn that they are gifted members of your community.*

Extra Activity



One way to surprise people with God's love and grace is by performing random acts of kindness. Ask the children if they know what that means. Explain that a random act is something unexpected, in other words, a happy surprise or a gift.

Hand out markers and copies of **GN 2** and invite the children to color the page. Have the children take turns reading or guessing from the pictures, the different suggestions of the random acts of kindness listed on the page. Encourage children to add one or two of their own ideas to the list. Assist with writing as needed.

Invite the children to take the list home and post it in their room where they can see it each day. Encourage them to circle random acts of kindness they are able to do and commit to doing them this week. Suggest that they add a star once they have completed a kind act and even more if they do the act again. Assure them that even one act of kindness has ripple effects as God's surprising grace and love is spread far beyond what we know.



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).

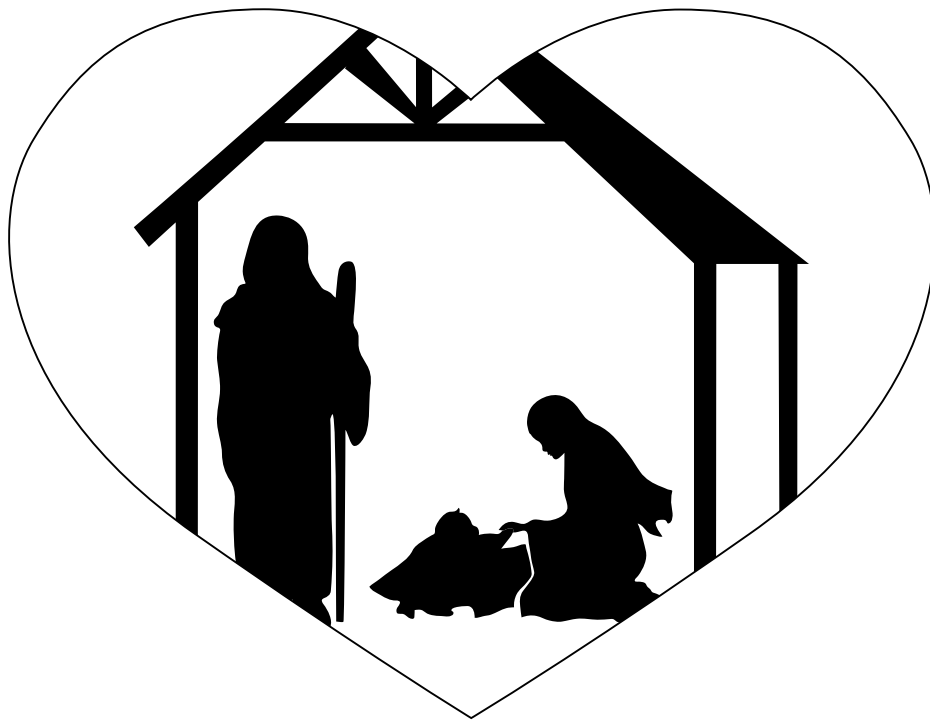
LOVING AND SERVING GOD

Sing “He Came Down”—**SCM 18**. Help the children remember the movements that they developed in the first session. Encourage them to use the same movements as they sing.

Remind children that this is the third week of Advent, and that for each week until Christmas, you will light one candle. In the past two weeks, you looked for ways that Jesus brings peace and learned about God’s surprising grace. Today you heard the story of Jesus’ humble birth, a story of God’s surprising love.

Tell the children that this third week reminds us that we are part of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus’ family. We celebrate God’s love for them and for us.

Give each child a blessing. Say to each one: “(Name), the love of God is with you. Tell your friends and family how surprising God’s love is!”

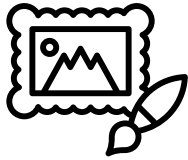




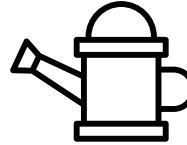
Recycle trash.



Sweep the kitchen floor.



Draw a picture.



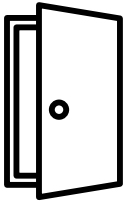
Water the plants.



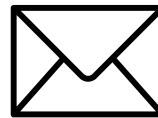
Give water to someone who is thirsty.



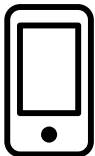
Donate toys.



Open the door for a stranger.



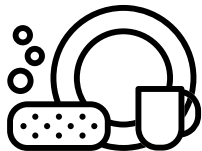
Send a handwritten letter.



Call a grandparent.



Smile at a stranger.



Offer to wash dishes.



Offer to feed a pet.

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