



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

Celebrating

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

Offering

9 oz. clear plastic cups,
permanent markers,
scenes cut from copies
of **Grace Notes (GN) 1**,
yellow and orange
tissue paper, decoupage
medium, battery-
operated tealight
candles, double-sided
foam tape

Extra

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,  ) and ways to adapt for children who have special needs or disabilities.

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

Welcoming and Preparing

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. Ask for a volunteer to practice reading the Scripture passage from the Bible.

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 at the table. Admire the efforts of the children to create a worship space.

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: “I see (*Name*) rejoicing. Dancing is one way to rejoice and be glad in each day God gives us.”

Praying

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 a volunteer to say a prayer or have the children join an echo prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the prayer today.



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. /

- A** *Adapt any activity to suit your children's needs. Ask yourself, "How can I change this activity so this child can do it?"*

Preparing to Hear the Story

Ask a child to complete this 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 that 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

LG LD

Invite a child to find Luke 2 in the Bible and the volunteer to read Luke 2:1-7. Conclude by saying, "Word of wisdom, Word of grace," and prompt the children to say, "Thanks be to God." Place the open Bible on the worship table.

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 the baby doll for Jesus and dress in 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 from **SCM 3**. Use your voice, expressions, and feelings to make it engaging.

Repeat the story by having the children change characters and act out the story using their own words.



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.



Reflecting on God's Grace

VI

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 from three different artists' views.

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

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 struggling with transitions, set clear expectations and let them know how long activities should take.*

RESPONDING IN GRATITUDE

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

Celebrating God's Grace

TD FM FA

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 as we celebrate 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 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 then invite the children to present their "birthday gifts" that they drew for Jesus.

Praying God's Grace

SD

Invite the children to make joyful noise in prayerful anticipation and gratitude of Jesus' birthday by singing, drumming hands on furniture, blowing or shaking noisemakers, or playing rhythm instruments. Encourage the children to dance and move to the music they are making in celebration.



An option for this activity: play familiar carols to accompany the children's singing and prayers of joyful noise.



If the children would like to create a rap, poem, or song as a celebration prayer to accompany their music, suggest that they may find phrases that they hear at Christmas to be a good place to start: phrases like “joy to the world,” “glory to the newborn king,” “peace on earth,” and “good will to all.”

After a time of joyful noise and prayer, close the activity by inviting the children to repeat the following sentence, louder each time:

Christ the Lord is born!
Christ the Lord is born!
Christ the Lord is born!



Offering God's Grace

A

Before the session, place a cup upside down on card stock. Trace around the outside of the cup and cut out the circle. Punch a hole in each circle about an inch from the edge. Make enough for each child.

Invite the children to make a nativity light to give as a gift to their parents/caregivers and families as a reminder of God's surprising love in Jesus. Give each child a 9 oz. clear plastic cup, a nativity scene cut from **GN 1**, and a black permanent marker. Give the children the following instructions:

- ▼ Tape the scene on the inside of the cup. Trace and fill in the scene on the outside of the cup. Remove the paper scene.
- ▼ Tear small pieces of yellow and orange tissue paper. Using a paintbrush and decoupage medium, glue the tissue paper pieces to the inside of the cup.

Give each child a circle on card stock with a hole punched in it and a battery-operated tealight.

- ▼ Place a square of double-sided foam tape on the bottom of the tealight and adhere the tealight on the card stock circle so that the switch pokes through the hole.
- ▼ Place tacky glue around the rim of the cups and place the cup on the card stock circle.

Invite the children to light their tealights and admire the glow of the nativity scene.

If you chose do to the food collection project last week, remind the children that next week is the final day of the project. Brainstorm with the children ways to thank the congregation for participating. Finalize plans for delivering the food to the chosen agency, and secure drivers and chaperones for the group's visit.

Battery-operated tealight candles will be used again in “Celebrating God's Grace” for the winter 7 session. You may want to consider buying in bulk to cover both sessions.



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

LG M

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 the different suggestions for random acts of kindness listed on the page. Encourage the children to add one or two of their own ideas to the list.

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 and that God's surprising grace and love are 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).

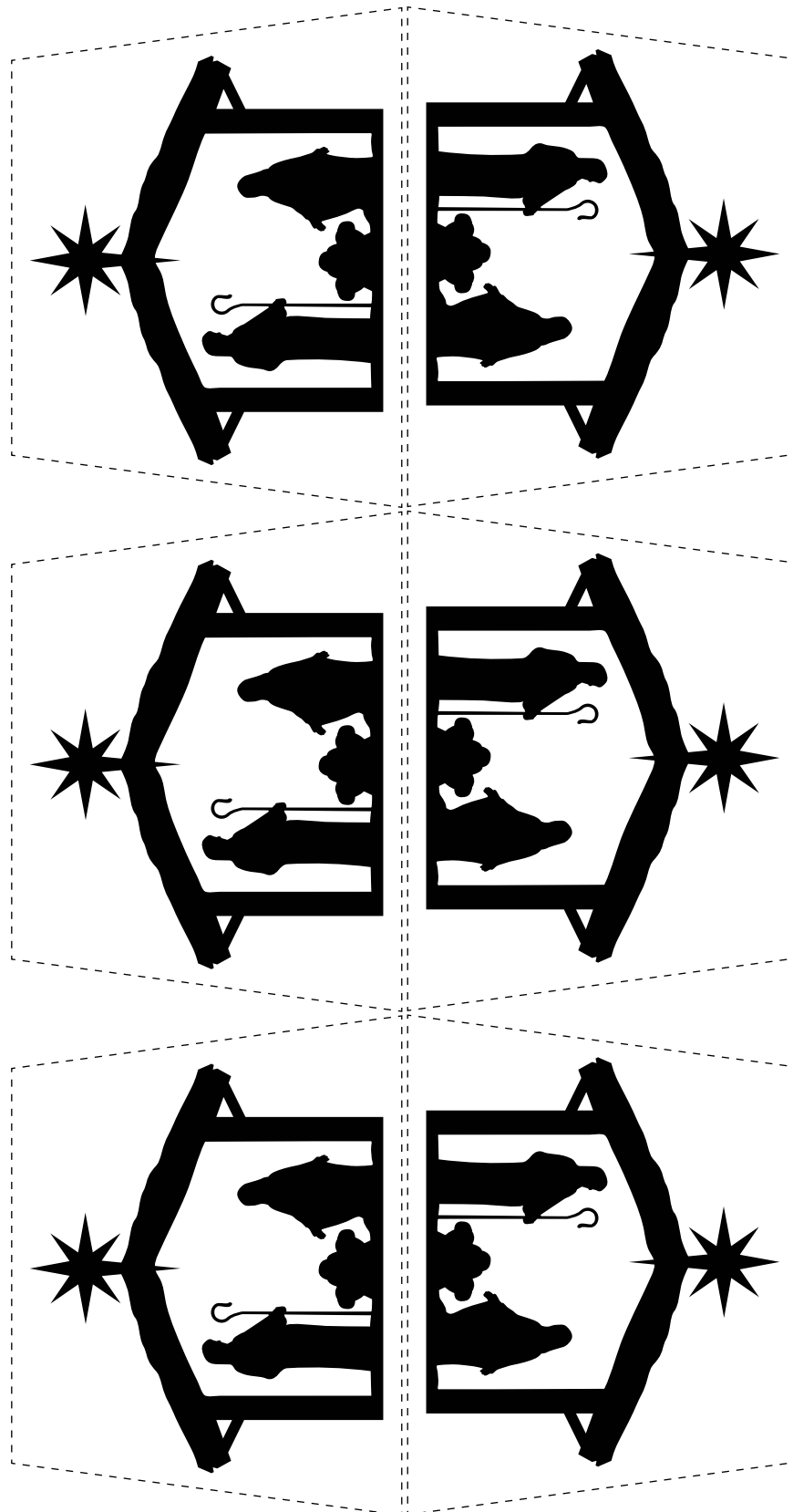
LOVING AND SERVING GOD

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 the children that this is the third week of Advent, and that for each week until Christmas, you will light one more candle. During 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!"

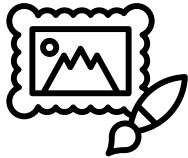




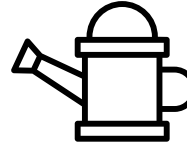
Recycle trash.



Sweep the kitchen floor.



Draw a picture.



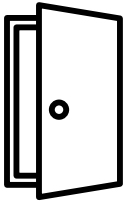
Water the plants.



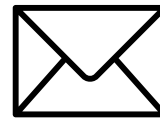
Give water to someone who is thirsty.



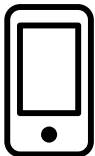
Donate toys.



Open the door for a stranger.



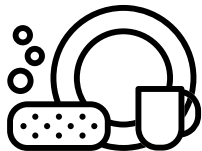
Send a handwritten letter.



Call a grandparent.



Smile at a stranger.



Offer to wash dishes.



Offer to feed a pet.

--	--

