



SESSION 1 of 4

Annunciation

MEETING AIM

To tell the story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary and Joseph to let them know that the Messiah would be born to Mary.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-21

BACKGROUND

God's people have been waiting a long time for him to send the Messiah. More than 400 years previously, God had given lots of messages to his prophets that pointed towards a special person who would come and make everything right between God and his people. However, God doesn't seem to have said much on the subject since then, and peace seems a long way off in the midst of Roman occupation.

5 CIRCLE TIME

As you begin the session, invite the children to sit together in a circle and pass round a simple object. When a child has the object they can share their response to the question. Sometimes it's helpful to have a sand timer so you have time for each person to share if they want to. If a child doesn't want to say anything they can just pass on the object. Ask the children to share about anyone they know who has had a baby.

5 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: pictures of famous people and their children

Before the session, find photos of celebrities and their children and print them out. Mix them up and stick them around your room. Challenge the group to guess which children belong to which celebrities. How did they make their decisions?

10 BIBLE STORY

You will need: simple costumes and props
Say that God's people had been waiting a long time for someone special to come and make everything right. A long time ago God had made promises about this special person coming, but the people had been waiting for hundreds of years and no one had arrived. Then tell this story:

Today's story is about a Jewish girl called Mary. *Dress someone up as Mary.* Mary was just an ordinary girl. We think she was still a teenager.

One day Mary was just getting on with life when God's chief messenger, the angel Gabriel, showed up to talk to her! *Say that we always make angels cute, with lots of sparkles, tinsel and fairy wings, but actually in the Bible, angels are powerful and a bit scary! Choose a child to be the angel and challenge them to strike a powerful, imposing pose.*

We know angels are scary because every time they show up in a story the first thing they say is: "Don't be afraid!" Gabriel comes to visit Mary and the first thing he says to her isn't: "Don't be afraid!" (though he does say that as well) but rather: "God thinks you are really great!" *Depending on the age and confidence of your actors, you can have them repeat the words of the conversation or not.*

Mary was super confused, and she wondered why the angel had come. Gabriel told her that she was going to have a special baby who would be king. His name would be Jesus. Mary was really confused now because she wasn't even married yet, and in those days you didn't have a baby before you were married or you would get in a lot of trouble. She told Gabriel she didn't think this could be right. But Gabriel told her it absolutely was right and that nothing is impossible with God. So Mary said: "OK, God is in charge and I'll take part in this story and have the baby."

Mary wasn't married yet, but she was engaged to a man called Joseph. *Choose another volunteer.* When Mary told Joseph she was going to have a baby, he was also pretty confused. He didn't know what to think, so he decided to break off the engagement. He decided to do it quietly so Mary wouldn't get into trouble. However, before Joseph could do it he had a crazy dream where an angel showed up and told him Mary was going to have a very special baby who would save the world. Joseph said he would stay with Mary and be part of the story.

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

Ask the children these questions, encouraging everyone to take turns to contribute:

- How would you have felt if you were Mary?
- What questions would you have wanted to ask the angel?
- What would everyone else have thought about Mary's story?
- How would you have felt if you were Joseph?
- What questions would you have wanted to ask if you were Joseph?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: people shapes in ready-cut card (you can buy these from craft shops or online); blue and white paper; scissors; glue sticks; felt-tip pens, pencils or crayons; hair-coloured wool; paper fasteners

Before the session, cut circles out of the blue and white paper that will fit on the stomach of the card person.

Let the children decorate the people shapes to look like Mary in a blue dress. Give everyone a white circle and let them draw a baby on it. Stick the circle on Mary's tummy. Now attach a blue circle over the white one using a paper fastener so it can be pushed to one side to show the baby in her tummy.

As you work, chat with the children about the story and what God might be saying to them.

5 PRAYER

Ask the children to put their hands on their tummies. Say that God put a special baby in Mary's tummy. He probably won't do that again, but he does put stories inside each of us. He puts his story there and we get to decide if we want to join in with it. Our stories are all different and they match up with who we are and what we love to do.

While the children are quiet, encourage them to ask God what stories he is beginning to grow inside of them. If you have time, you could hear the stories they have. Thank God that he puts stories in each of us, even if we don't know what they are yet.

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SESSION 2 of 4

Jesus' birth

MEETING AIM

To tell the story of Jesus' birth.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 2:1-7

BACKGROUND

God has chosen an ordinary Jewish girl to give birth to the promised Messiah. Israel is under Roman occupation and, just as Mary is ready to give birth, she and Joseph have to travel miles to Joseph's home town to be counted.

5 CIRCLE TIME

As you begin the session, invite the children to sit together in a circle and pass round a simple object. When a child has the object they can share their response to the question. Sometimes it's helpful to have a sand timer so you have time for each person to share if they want to. If a child doesn't want to say anything they can just pass on the object. Ask the children to share about the most difficult journey they've ever been on.

5 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: Bible atlas or Bibles with maps (or maps downloaded and printed from the internet)

Show the children the Bible maps you have brought. Ask them to look at the map and point out any place names they recognise. Ask them which are the important place names for the Christmas story. Have a look at where Nazareth is, then find Bethlehem. See how far apart they are. Wonder together about how long it would take to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. If you have access to a smartphone map app, use it to find out the distance and travel time.

5 BIBLE STORY

You will need: a Roman helmet; a donkey mask; access to an up-to-date NIV Bible

By this point in the story, Mary and Joseph are married but Mary hasn't had the baby yet. She's very pregnant, though! Talk about what it's like to be pregnant. It's not that comfortable by the end! Ask if anyone knows what's going on in Israel

at this point in history. Who is in charge? It's the Romans. Put the Roman helmet on someone. Then tell this story:

The head Roman at the time was called Caesar Augustus, and he decided to find out how powerful and rich he was. The way to do this was by counting everyone. That's called a census. Nowadays we do a census by filling in a form online or on paper and sending it away. Back then you had to go to the place you were born to be counted. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, but that wasn't where Joseph was from. Who knows where he was from? *They can work this out from their knowledge of the story.*

Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem, which was 70 miles or so away. They didn't have cars, buses, trains, planes or even bikes, so how did they travel? *They will probably suggest a donkey.* We always put a donkey in the Christmas story and they might have used a donkey, but it's not actually in the Bible. *Give someone a donkey mask to wear.* When Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem it was super busy. Loads of people were there to be counted and it was going to be difficult to find somewhere to stay. So what happened next? *You'll probably get the answer that Mary and Joseph had to sleep in a stable because there was no room at the inn.*

Have a look at the most up-to-date version of the NIV. Point out that it talks about there being no 'guest room'. It's likely that Joseph had family in Bethlehem. His family wouldn't have turned him away, but they might not have had a nice guest bedroom available as the house was probably already full of visitors. Houses in the Middle East at the time had downstairs rooms where you could bring your animals in at night, and it might have been there that Mary and Joseph stayed. So when Mary had the baby she put him in manger – where the animals usually ate – because that was a good size and shape for a baby when there were no other options.

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

Ask the children these questions, encouraging everyone to take turns to contribute:

- What do you think it would have been like to travel 70 miles when you were almost ready to have a baby?
- Why do you think we sometimes add things to the story that might not be quite accurate?
- How do you think it felt to have a baby when your country was occupied by enemy forces?
- Jesus was God's Son, the Messiah. Do you think people could tell by looking at him?

- Do you think Jesus was just like any other baby?
- How do you think Mary and Joseph felt knowing how extra special their baby was?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: small flat stones (pale ones if possible); small boxes that can hold about eight of the stones; permanent markers; hay

Over the next three sessions you're going to make a stone nativity scene. Put a little hay into the box, then as you decorate the stones you can place them inside. In this session, use the markers to decorate a stone to look like Mary, one for Joseph and a small one for Jesus. If you want to, you can add an angel and a Roman for context. As you work, chat about the story and what the children think God is saying to them.

If you can't get any suitable stones, you could form some flat pebbles out of air-drying clay a few weeks in advance so they are dry enough to be drawn on. Or you could make salt-dough pebbles and bake them in the oven ahead of time.

5 PRAYER

You will need: boxes from 'Creative response'

Sit with your box of stones. One by one, take Mary, Joseph and Jesus and hold them each in your hands. Thank God for everything you can think of about their part in this story.

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SESSION 3 of 4

The shepherds

MEETING AIM

To tell the story of the shepherds hearing about Jesus' birth.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Luke 2:8-20

BACKGROUND

Jesus has been born in Bethlehem. Now God wants to announce his arrival, starting with the most unexpected of people. Sometimes we think that faith and revelation are only for the people at the front, the most important people.

Shepherds were low down on the social scale. The fact that God chose them to reveal the news of the Saviour's birth says much to us about the inclusivity and radical nature of God's saving plan. Children often feel as though they are at the bottom of the pecking order. Help them explore the idea that Jesus came for them as well as for the people leading the church!

5 CIRCLE TIME

As you begin the session, invite the children to sit together in a circle and pass round a simple object. When a child has the object they can share their response to the question. Sometimes it's helpful to have a sand timer so you have time for each person to share if they want to. If a child doesn't want to say anything they can just pass on the object. Ask the children to talk about who they want to share important news with.

5 INTRO ACTIVITY

You will need: flip-chart paper; marker pens
Divide the sheet of paper in half by drawing a line down the middle. Ask the children to think of the most important people in society: those with the most influence. Write their ideas on one side of the paper. On the other side, ask the group to list the most unimportant people in society: those with no influence at all.

Chat about the differences between the two lists. Is it possible for people to move from one side of the paper to the other: to become important, or to go the other way and become insignificant? Are there times when members of the group feel insignificant?

10 BIBLE STORY

You will need: Bibles

Ask who can recap the story so far. Who knows what happens next?

Say that everything about Jesus' story is slightly upside down. Jesus is born to be the king of the universe and put things right for ever between God and his people, he's born to pretty ordinary people in pretty basic circumstances. Not only that, but when he's born, the first people God wants to tell are really poor, ordinary people with no influence or power at all. That really sets the stage for Jesus' whole life. It's the poor and the powerless – the people no one else wanted – that he went to spend time with.

In today's story, God gives a big announcement to some shepherds. They visit Jesus and then go off to tell as many people as they can. Read the story from the Bible (Luke 2:8-20). The International Children's Bible is great if you have a copy.

Ask the group to divide into groups of five or six and prepare a quick drama sketch of the story. Once everyone has finished, allow some time for groups to perform the drama to the rest of the children. They don't need to if they don't want to – they could just enjoy the process! Get some initial feedback on how the shepherds might have felt, and on what might have made them rush off to tell the rest of Bethlehem.

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

Ask the children these questions, encouraging everyone to take turns to contribute:

- If you were God, would you have planned Jesus' story like this?
- If not, how would you have done it?
- If Jesus came today, who would hear this first announcement if they were the same sort of people as the shepherds?
- Why do you think God is so interested in people with no power or influence?
- How do you think the shepherds felt?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: small boxes and flat stones from 'Session 2'; permanent markers; hay
Continue to make your stone nativity scene. Put a little hay into the box, then as you decorate the stones you can place them inside. In this session, use the permanent markers to decorate some stones to look like shepherds and angels, with the odd sheep if you like. As you work, chat together about the story and what the children think God is saying to them.

If you didn't do 'Session 2', you'll need to create stones for Mary, Joseph and Jesus to add to your nativity scene.

If you can't get stones, you could form some flat pebbles out of air-drying clay a few weeks in advance so they are dry enough to be drawn on. Or you could make salt dough pebbles and bake them in the oven ahead of time.

5 PRAYER

You will need: paper and pens

Ask the children to find a quiet space and think about what it must have been like to be a shepherd hearing the news from the angels. Let them write a prayer as if they are shepherds, thanking God for the story they have been part of. Give help to any reluctant writers, helping them to articulate and record what they want to say.

If the children would like to read out their prayers allow them time to do so now. If they don't want to, have a time of quiet as the children reflect on the prayers they have written and talk to God about what they have discovered through this story.

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SESSION 4 of 4

The wise men

MEETING AIM

To tell the story of the wise men, who travelled to honour the new king.

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 2:1-12

BACKGROUND

As Jesus is born in Bethlehem a star appears in the east and, believing it to be of the utmost significance, some wise men follow it to find Jesus.

5 CIRCLE TIME

As you begin the session, invite the children to sit together in a circle and pass round a simple object. When a child has the object they can share their response to the question. Sometimes it's helpful to have a sand timer so you have time for each person to share if they want to. If a child doesn't want to say anything they can just pass on the object. Ask the children to talk about which superstar celebrities they follow.

5 INTRO ACTIVITY

Going on from talking about superstars, ask the children what kind of ideas and behaviours you see if you follow these people. It won't all be bad! For instance, if you follow some pop stars it might be drinking and bad behaviour, but if you follow a fitness star you might learn about health and well-being.

10 BIBLE STORY

You will need: simple props and costumes; three wrapped gifts containing objects to represent gold, frankincense and myrrh
Ask who can recap the story so far. Who knows what happens next? Tell the next part of the story:

The story now shifts a bit further east, where some people who knew all about the stars saw something a bit unexpected. We often have three wise men in our Christmas story because they bring three presents, but the Bible doesn't say there were three, or, for that matter, that they were men. *Choose some children to be star experts and dress them up in the costumes.*

People paid much more attention to the stars to tell them things 2,000 years ago. These star experts saw a new star rising and felt it meant that a new king had been born. They decided to follow the star and pay honour to the new king.

When they came to Jerusalem, they did the sensible thing and went to the royal palace where the king was. Who was this king? A man called Herod, who was a nasty piece of work. *Have someone be Herod and put a crown on their head.* The star experts asked King Herod about the new king. Herod was a bit rattled. He was the king and no one was going to take that from him! Herod knew there were messages in the scriptures about a new king coming, so he asked the religious teachers where it was supposed to happen. They told him Bethlehem. Herod sent the star experts to Bethlehem and told them to come back when they had found the baby king. He said that he wanted to worship him too, but I don't think that was really his plan! *Have your star experts and Herod act out the conversation.*

In our nativity plays the wise men always get to Jesus when he is still a tiny baby, but they probably didn't get there until a bit later. Joseph and Mary had found a house to live in (the census must have been over) and Jesus may have been several months old or anything up to 2 years old. The star experts were thrilled to find Jesus and gave him presents; not usual gifts, but items with symbolic meanings.

Choose a volunteer to open each of your three wrapped presents as you talk about the symbolism. First, gold, to show that Jesus was a king. Second, frankincense, which was something used by the priests. A priest was someone who connected people to God, and that was what Jesus would do. Third, myrrh, a very strange gift for a baby, as it was an ointment used on dead people. It showed that Jesus' death would be important and special in some way.

After they had given their presents, the star experts went home without going back to see Herod because they had been warned in a dream that he was a very dangerous man. And he was!

5 CHATTING TOGETHER

Ask the children these questions, encouraging everyone to take turns to contribute:

- Why do you think people took notice of the stars in this way in history?
- Why do you think the wise men bothered to follow the star?
- Why was Herod so upset?
- How do you think Mary felt about the three gifts that were given to Jesus?

- Why did the wise men believe their dream was a warning?
- Should we pay attention to our dreams?

10 CREATIVE RESPONSE

You will need: small boxes and stones from "Session 2"; permanent markers; hay; gold card; scissors; glue sticks

Continue to make your stone nativity scene. Put a little hay into the box, and as you decorate the stones you can place them inside. Today, use the markers to decorate stones to look like wise men with their gifts. In addition, cut out a gold star shape and stick it on the outside or lid of your box. As you work, chat with the children about the story and what God might be saying to them.

If you didn't do session 2 or 3, you'll need to create stones for Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the shepherds and the angels to add to your nativity scene.

If you can't get stones, you could form some flat pebbles out of air-drying clay a few weeks in advance so they are dry enough to be drawn on. Or you could make salt dough pebbles and bake them in the oven ahead of time.

5 PRAYER

You will need: a Christmas tree decorated with stars

Remind the group that a star can point you to something, like the superstars we talked about at the beginning and the star in the story. Ask them what they would like to be pointed to and what sort of things might do that for them. As they think about this, the children can come and collect a star from the tree. Pray and thank God for each person, asking that they would find things that point them towards Jesus.

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