

ENRICHMENT LESSON

THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS

LESSON NOTES

FOCUS: THE INCARNATION

- LITURGICAL ACTION
- ENRICHMENT PRESENTATION

THE MATERIAL

- LOCATION: CHRISTMAS SHELVES
- PIECES: PICTURES (MOUNTED ON FOAMCORE OR WOOD) OF THE ANNUNCIATION, VISITATION, NATIVITY, PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE, ADORATION OF THE MAGI, MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS AND THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT; LABELS FOR EACH PICTURE, ALSO MOUNTED ON FOAMCORE OR WOOD; ADDITIONAL PIECES OF FOAMCORE OR WOOD ON WHICH YOU HAVE GLUED COPIES OF THE RELATED BIBLICAL TEXTS
- UNDERLAY: WHITE

BACKGROUND

This enrichment lesson can be presented on any Sunday either before or after Christmas, as time allows. The presentation is based on the book *The Glorious Impossible* by Madeleine L'Engle (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990). Ms. L'Engle provides a poetic commentary on seven classical moments of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. The medieval frescoes of Giotto are used instead of modern, realistic pictures or models to honor the deep mystery of the Incarnation without the loss of its historical fact.

NOTES ON THE MATERIAL

Find the materials for this presentation on the top shelf of the Christmas shelves, placed to the left of the focal shelves. You will find the material to the right of the stand of Advent cards on the top shelf.

This material can be made by the storyteller or other church member. First purchase two copies of the book *The Glorious Impossible*. One book will be cut apart

to provide pictures. The other book is used as a control and for the children to be able to read Madeliene L'Engle's text to match to the pictures. Please note: it is a violation of copyright law to make copies of either the pictures or text from *The Glorious Impossible*. (You can use the remaining portions of the cut-apart book to make additional display materials, if you wish.)

The material is a golden box with a picture of the Madonna and child glued to the lid of the box. (You can find this picture on the endpaper inside the *back* cover of *The Glorious Impossible*.) Glue a picture of Christ the Teacher to the bottom of the box. (You can find this picture on the endpaper inside the *front* cover of *The Glorious Impossible*.) Inside the box you will place plaques made from foamcore or wood. Glue each of these pictures from *The Glorious Impossible* to a separate plaque: the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Adoration of the Magi, Presentation in the Temple, Massacre of the Innocents, and the Flight into Egypt. On the back of each plaque, put dots as a reminder of the correct order in which to show the pictures: one dot for the Annunciation, two dots for the Visitation, and so on, ending with seven dots on the back of the picture of the Flight into Egypt.

On separate but smaller plaques, glue a label that names each picture. On a third set of plaques, glue the related biblical texts.

SPECIAL NOTES

Classroom Management: Finding time for this presentation can be tricky. Some storytellers may prefer to use this during the Advent season. Some use it on the feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday *before* Advent; others use it after Christmas.

As you tell the story, you will hold the picture and turn it so that everyone can see it as you tell about it. It does not usually work to have the children pass the pictures around the circle. Some children will take too long, dominating the circle and your attention, while others will find it hard to wait for each picture. Instead show the pictures yourself, placing the plaques in order in front of you on the underlay as you finish telling about them.

Playing with the Story: This presentation takes advantage of several approaches to learning to speak "Christian." These moves are based on classical Montessori practice and can be used with other lessons as well:

- Nonreaders and those who cannot yet read numbers can try, individually or in groups, to tell the story using the pictures, laying them out on the underlay. When the story is finished, the children then turn over the pictures and count the dots on the back to see if they have the right order. Order in stories is important.

- Both readers and nonreaders can “label” the pictures. This is done by the classical Montessori three-period lesson. First, you read aloud the label, then point to the correct picture and/or place the label beside it. Second, you read aloud or show the label and let the child tell you which picture it refers to. Third, the children name the story and point to the picture and/or place the label.
- More experienced readers can read from *The Glorious Impossible*. After listening to the story as written by L'Engle, the children match that telling of the story to the classical name of the event and to its picture
- Remember that this book has many uses in addition to telling about the Incarnation. It contains the whole story of the Christian People. You can use this approach to create your own lessons.
- This lesson also includes the biblical texts, which are often heard or sung in church around the celebration of the Incarnation. Readers and nonreaders alike can use these. Apply the principles outlined above to set this up.
- Note that in multiple-graded classrooms, nonreaders and readers can work together to enjoy this “inter-play” of word and symbol.

MOVEMENTS

Go to the shelves to get the gold box. Bring it back to the circle and place it in the middle of the circle.

Put the box beside you.

Spread the white underlay. Carefully remove the lid and take out the first picture: the Annunciation.

Place the Annunciation card in front of you to your right, leaving room to eventually lay out all seven pictures in front of you on the white underlay. Then hold out the Visitation card.

Point to the halos around Mary and Elizabeth.

WORDS

Watch carefully where I go, so you always know where to find this lesson.

This is like a parable, but it is bigger than a parable. It is the biggest parable of all, the wonderful impossible. It shows the Incarnation, how God became a baby.

Today I want to show you the whole story. Parts of the Christmas story are not told very often, but they all need to be told, even the sad parts. There are even two births in the whole story! One is the birth of Jesus, and the other is the birth of his cousin, John, the one we know later as John the Baptist.

Look. Do you see what is happening to the mother Mary? This is the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel is announcing to Mary that God has chosen her to be the mother of God.

Do you see Mary? the angel? They have the same colors, but the angel has wings.

Mary was scared, but happy. She was stunned, but blessed.

Mary was a lucky girl, because she had an older friend to talk to. It was Elizabeth. She went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth was much older, maybe even old enough to be Mary's mother. When Mary came close to Elizabeth and greeted her, something wonderful happened.

Elizabeth felt the baby inside her move when she heard Mary's voice. She said something like this, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the baby you are going to have. When you spoke, the baby within me jumped. Something wonderful is going to happen with your baby and with mine, too."

When Elizabeth said that, Mary began to sing a song people call "The Magnificat" because it begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

Look at the halos. These are the gold circles of light around some of the people. They are the holy ones. The artist used real gold in his paint or beat the gold out very, very thin and pressed it into the paint and plaster to make these gold halos. In this picture, the ones with halos are Mary and Elizabeth.

MOVEMENTS

Place the Visitation card to your left of the Annunciation card and finish telling the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah.

Pick up the third card: the Nativity. Show it as you talk about it.

WORDS

See how Mary is. Look how old Elizabeth looks. The artist wanted us to remember that Elizabeth was too old to have a baby, and was old enough to be a really wise and good friend to Mary.

✦ Wait. Let me finish the story. This is the part of the story that people often leave out, because there is no picture for it. It is about the other baby that was born.

Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, was a priest. It was his time to work at the Temple, so he went inside to burn the incense and pray.

While Zechariah was at the altar, he glanced over to his right, and there was a bright light. "Don't be afraid," the angel said. Angels are messengers from God, and they are scary. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news. You and Elizabeth will have a baby."

"But we are too old," Zechariah said, and that was the last thing he said. The angel took away his words. It's not a good idea to argue with an angel. The angel then told Zechariah what the baby's name was supposed to be and disappeared.

Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth and then went home to Nazareth. Elizabeth had her baby. Friends came to help her. When the baby boy was born they all wanted to name him "Zechariah," after his father.

Zechariah shook his head, "No," and then wrote, "The baby's name is John." When they named the baby "John," Zechariah could speak again. It was then that he said his prayer. It is called the "Benedictus" because it is a poem or song of praise that begins: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel." He was so happy!

✦ Then Mary's baby was born. That's why this is called "The Nativity," which means "the birth." See how mother Mary is lying down. She is awake and happy, but Joseph is asleep. The baby is wrapped in strips of cloth. These strips are the swaddling cloths or clothes you hear about in the story.

Look at all the angels. They are so happy, they are flying all over and singing the "Gloria in Excelsis." You may have heard this song in church. It sings, "Glory to God in the highest, and on

MOVEMENTS

Place the Nativity card to your left of the first two cards. Take out the fourth card: the Presentation.

Place the Presentation card to your left of the first three cards. Take out the fifth card: the Adoration of the Magi.

WORDS

earth peace, good will among men." When it says "men," it means to all people, boys and girls.

This is another part of the story that is often left out. It is called the Presentation. After a time, Mary and Joseph took their new little baby to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the custom to present a new baby there to celebrate its name and to dedicate the baby to God.

When Mary and Joseph took the baby into the Temple to be dedicated to God, an old man named Simeon came up and looked at the baby. He took the baby in his arms and said, "Now I can die in peace." What was he talking about?

When Simeon was younger, God told him that he would not die before seeing the Holy One who was coming and would change everything. That day Simeon knew Jesus was the one he had been waiting for.

Then old Anna came up and looked at the baby. She saw that this was the Holy One, too. She gave thanks to God and told everyone in the Temple what had happened.

Simeon is holding the baby. Mary is still holding out her arms. Joseph is bringing two birds to the temple. That was the custom in those days.

Here is old Anna. She loved to be in the temple as much as she could be. I don't know why she doesn't have a halo. Look at her coat. At first, it looks brown and old, but if you look closely, it seems to be all gold.

When old Simeon held the baby, he said a prayer we remember and sometimes sing. It begins, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

The three kings, the Magi, the wise men, finally arrived. They were late. Every year, they are late! They are adoring the baby. That means they are just standing there and looking at the baby and enjoying him. They also brought presents.

Look at the star! This is the wild star they have been following.

MOVEMENTS

Place the Adoration of the Magi card to your left of the first four cards. Get out the next card: the Massacre of the Innocents, but don't yet turn it around for the children to see. Because of the terrible events it depicts, this card needs introduction.

Now turn over the picture and hold it out for the children to see.

Trace the length of the mothers' eyes with your finger.

Place the Massacre of the Innocents card down to your left of the first five cards. Take out the seventh card: the Flight into Egypt.

WORDS

The artist didn't know very much about camels. He knew they had long necks, a hump and long legs, but look at their faces. They look more like donkeys. See their long ears. That doesn't matter. We still know what he was trying to paint.

This is a part of the story that is often left out, too. It is no wonder people do not tell this part. It is too sad. It is called the Massacre of the Innocents.

The three kings followed the star to the land where Jesus was born. When they came into the land, they went to see the king, King Herod in Jerusalem. When King Herod heard them say they were looking for a baby king, he was very interested. He did not want that baby to grow up. Herod wanted to be the only king in the land.

"Come and tell me when you find this king," he told the Magi. "I want to come and worship him." Herod was not telling the truth. He wanted to kill the new little king.

The three kings, the wise men, did not tell Herod. They went home by another way. They really were wise.

But Herod did not forget. He asked his scholars to look in the scriptures and find where it said the king would be born. They told Herod that the place would be Bethlehem. Herod sent his soldiers there, and they killed every baby boy they could find who was two years old or younger.

It was a terrible thing. The mothers and fathers were very sad. You can see that many babies have already been killed. The soldiers took them from their mothers. No one really looks happy in the picture, not even Herod.

Look at the mothers' eyes. The artist tried to make them look very, very sad. See how long and narrow they are?

I guess the story is over then, isn't it? No. The baby Jesus did not die in Bethlehem.

An angel came to Joseph in a dream before the soldiers arrived. The angel told Joseph to take his little family to another country. They fled far away to the land of Egypt. Mary and the baby rode on the donkey, and Joseph led the way.

MOVEMENTS

Place the Flight into Egypt card to your left of the first six cards. Sit back and look at the whole series.

Show the children the various ways the pictures, biblical passages and labels can be used. (See Special Notes on p. 57)

When the interplay of labels, Bible passages and pictures is finished, sit back and look at the whole sequence again.

Show the children the picture on the lid of the box, and then the figure inside on the bottom of the box.

Name everything as you put the lesson away in the box. Take your time. When the box is closed, return it to the shelf where you got it. Then help children choose their work.

WORDS

Now let's enjoy the whole story.

Here is the mother Mary. This is God the Father. Joseph was like a father, but the baby was from God.