

Journeying through Christmas



Resources for Christmas, Epiphany
and Candlemas

THE CHURCH
SCHOOLS OF
CAMBRIDGE



Introduction

During this troubled year, where many things that seemed ‘normal’ have been stripped away, I have created this material to provide a Biblical approach to Christmas that peels away the extra layers that have built up over nearly two thousand years of re-telling. In an age of tweets and soundbites, it also seems timely to look at the entire story, rather than focus in on the stable (which isn’t actually mentioned in the Bible).

So, here is a Godly Play-style story of the ‘whole story’. It can be told in three parts or as one. There are three videos to accompany the story, which can be viewed in the classroom or at home and are available on the [Church Schools of Cambridge website](https://www.csoc.org.uk).

The story takes place in a bag full of sand representing the desert. The actual journeys took the travellers through difficult physical as well as psychological terrain; perhaps offering a lens through which to view our current circumstances. The bagful of sand also allows the geography of the Holy Land and the relation of the journeys to each other to be made visible.

Each of the story segments ends with open-ended wondering questions which allow children of all faiths and none to relate the story to their lives, helping them to process where they are themselves, and perhaps find something to take forward with them.

Follow-up activities are open-ended. They could be done in the classroom or at home, using any materials that fall to hand, and internet searches for pictures and music.

You can find videos of the stories along with suggestions of pictures of music on the Church Schools of Cambridge website: [csoc.org.uk/christmas](https://www.csoc.org.uk/christmas)



Story: Part I

Resources you will need:

Bag of sand (for the desert), Bethlehem model, Jerusalem model, Dead Sea and Sea Galilee felts, River Jordan wool, Nazareth block, hills of Judah block, Zechariah, Elizabeth, altar and incense burner, angel, Mary, Joseph, cave, manger, baby, shepherd, sheep, angels, 2 doves, Simeon, Anna, sword, wise men, star, King Herod, scroll, three gifts, soldiers, globe, candle.

Annunciations and the Visitation

Open the desert bag and swirl the sand as you say:

The desert is a dangerous place. The wind blows and the landscape changes.

There is little to eat or drink, and almost no shelter, so people must carry with them everything they will need.

Days are hot, but nights can be freezing cold.

Wild animals roam and robbers lie in wait, so people travel in groups to stay safe.

Make a road in the sand with your finger, then blur it with your hand

It's hard to find the way in the desert, and easy to get lost.

People only journey through the desert if they have no choice.

Pause

Smooth the sand

This is the Holy Land, the home of God's people, Israel.

Make a sweeping road shape, plotting the route Mary and Joseph will travel.

Place the objects as they would appear on the map: the river and seas to your left, and the cities to your right



Story: Part I

Place the Bethlehem model

Here is the hilltop town of Bethlehem, King David's royal city.

Place the Jerusalem model and Dead Sea felt piece

Here is the great city of Jerusalem, looking down on the Dead Sea.

Place the River Jordan wool and Sea of Galilee felt

This is the River Jordan, and this is the Sea of Galilee.

Place the Nazareth block

Here is the village of Nazareth, set inside a basin of craggy hills.

Ripple the sand with your fingers and place the block

This is the hill country of Judea, and here is one of the villages.

Different books in the Christian Bible tell us different parts of the Christmas story. Many people never hear the whole story.

In the Gospel of St. Luke we hear about:

Present Zechariah and Elizabeth and place them by the Judea block

Elizabeth, and her husband Zechariah.

They were faithful and stayed close to God, but they had been unable to have children, and now they were too old.

Move Zechariah to Jerusalem

Zechariah was a priest, and it was his turn to serve God at the Temple in Jerusalem, about a day's walk away.

Move Zechariah and place an altar and incense burner beside him



Story: Part I

Zechariah went alone into the sanctuary to burn incense, whilst the worshippers waited outside, praying.

Present the angel

All at once, Zechariah glimpsed someone standing beside the incense altar. He was overwhelmed with fear and started to tremble, but the angel said: “Don’t be afraid! God has heard your prayer. Your wife Elizabeth will give you a son, and you must call him John.” Zechariah asked, “Do you expect me to believe this? I am an old man, and my wife is an old woman.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel! God sent me to bring you this good news. But since you didn’t believe, you will be silent until the child is born.”

Remove the angel and move Zechariah forward

The crowd outside were waiting and wondering what was going on, but when Zechariah came out, he was unable to speak to them.

Move Zechariah home

Zechariah returned home, and soon afterwards Elizabeth discovered that she was going to have a baby.

Present the Mary and then Joseph

This is Mary – a young woman who lived in Nazareth, a village in the mountainous region of Galilee. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, who was descended from King David’s family.

Move Mary to one side and bring the angel to her

One day, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, telling her not to be afraid. God was pleased with her and had chosen Mary to give birth to a very special baby, who was to be named Jesus. Mary was confused, and asked, “How can this be?” Gabriel said that the Holy Spirit



Story: Part I

would come to her. The boy would be the holy Son of God: “He will reign over Israel, and his Kingdom will never end!”

The angel also told Mary that her cousin, Elizabeth, was going to have a child in her old age – nothing is impossible for God! Mary trusted God, and said, “I will serve the Lord!”

Remove the angel

Move Mary south to Judea

A few days later, Mary set off to visit Elizabeth. The journey was long – nearly a hundred miles. She must travel through rough terrain – rocky hillsides and desert valleys. I wonder who she travelled with?

Bring Mary to Elizabeth

As she entered Elizabeth’s house, Mary called out a greeting. At the sound Mary’s voice, Elizabeth’s child leapt inside her. Elizabeth cried out, “God has blessed you and your child!” and Mary sang a song of joyful praise.

Move Mary back to Nazareth

Mary stayed for about three months, before she set off for home.

Move Zechariah forward

Soon afterwards, Elizabeth gave birth to a son. Their family wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father.

Mime writing on your hand

But Zechariah called for his writing tablet and wrote: ‘No! His name is John.’ Instantly, Zechariah could speak again, and he began singing praise to the Lord, the God of Israel.

Move Joseph forward, and bring the angel to him



Story: Part I

In the Gospel of St. Matthew we hear that meanwhile, in Nazareth, Joseph was beginning to worry. Mary was going to have a baby, and Joseph knew the child was not his. As he wondered what to do, an angel appeared to him in a dream: “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to marry Mary. Name the boy Jesus, because he will save his people.” When he awoke, Joseph did as the angel had told him.

Remove the angel and bring Joseph back to Mary

Remove Zechariah and Elizabeth

I wonder which is your favourite part of this story?

I wonder what more you would like to know?



Story: Part II

Resources you will need:

Bag of sand (for the desert), Bethlehem model, Jerusalem model, Dead Sea and Sea Galilee felts, River Jordan wool, Nazareth block, hills of Judah block, Zechariah, Elizabeth, altar and incense burner, angel, Mary, Joseph, cave, manger, baby, shepherd, sheep, angels, 2 doves, Simeon, Anna, sword, wise men, star, King Herod, scroll, three gifts, soldiers, globe, candle.

The Nativity, The Shepherds, and the Presentation at the Temple

Gesture to Mary and Joseph

The Gospel of St Luke tells us that several months later, Mary and Joseph prepared for a journey. It was almost time for Mary's baby to be born, but they had no choice. They had to travel to Bethlehem, King David's town, to be counted by the Romans, as Joseph was a member of the family of King David. The journey was long and hard. It would take about a week, and there were rough stones underfoot.

Move the figures to Bethlehem

When they arrived, there was no room for them to stay – everywhere was full.

Place the cave and manger, then put Mary and Joseph inside (and the ox and donkey beside the manger)

But finally, they were able to take shelter with the animals.

Present the baby and lay it in the manger.

While they were there, the baby arrived! Mary wrapped him in strips of cloth, and laid him in a manger, the feeding trough for the animals.

Present the shepherds and sheep and place them near Bethlehem



Story: Part II

That night, there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flock from wolves and thieves. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified! The angel said, "Don't be afraid! I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Saviour, yes, the Messiah, the Lord, has been born today in Bethlehem. This is what you are looking for – a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."

Present more angels

All at once, the angel was joined by a huge choir of angels, singing: "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to everyone who pleases God."

Remove the angels

When the angels had gone, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see what God has shown us."

Move the shepherds quickly to cave and place them by the manger

So, they hurried to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph with the baby lying in the manger just as the angel had said.

Pause for the shepherds to enjoy the baby then move them back to the sheep

On their way home they called out the good news to everyone they met.

Gesture to Mary

Mary treasured all these things in her heart and thought about them often.

Pause

When he was eight days old Mary and Joseph named the baby 'Jesus', as the angel had told them.



Story: Part II

Move Mary, Joseph and Jesus to Jerusalem – near the altar and incense

When he was about a month old, they took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, to present him and dedicate him to God.

Place two doves beside the altar

They offered a pair of turtledoves as a sacrifice.

Present Simeon

The Holy Spirit led an old man called Simeon to the Temple that day. God had promised Simeon that he would not die until he had seen God's chosen one - the Messiah, who would rescue his people.

Move the baby over to be 'held' by Simeon

When Mary and Joseph arrived, Simeon took the baby in his arms and sang out praise to God: "Lord, now I can die in peace because, just as you promised, I have seen your salvation! He is a light to show God to all the nations, and he is the glory of God's people, Israel."

Mary and Joseph were surprised at what Simeon had said. Then he blessed them. He told Mary the child had been sent as a warning sign from God, but that many would reject him.

Brandish a sword

And for her it would be like a sword piercing her very soul.

Stick the sword upright in the sand beside the altar (like a cross)

Present Anna



Story: Part II

There was also an old woman in the Temple that day – Anna, a prophet. She spent all her time at the Temple, day and night, worshipping and praising God. When Anna saw the baby, she began giving thanks to God and told everyone who was there that this child was the one they had been waiting for to rescue Israel.

Return Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem

Remove the shepherds, sheep, Simeon and Anna.

I wonder which is your favourite part of this story?

I wonder what more you would like to know?



Story: Part III

Resources you will need:

Bag of sand (for the desert), Bethlehem model, Jerusalem model, Dead Sea and Sea Galilee felts, River Jordan wool, Nazareth block, hills of Judah block, Zechariah, Elizabeth, altar and incense burner, angel, Mary, Joseph, cave, manger, baby, shepherd, sheep, angels, 2 doves, Simeon, Anna, sword, wise men, star, King Herod, scroll, three gifts, soldiers, globe, candle.

The Wise Men and King Herod, and The Coming of the Word

Present the wise men; place them on the side of the cloth to your left and move them to Jerusalem

It is in St Matthew's Gospel that we hear about the wise men, the kings, the Magi, who came from eastern lands afar. At about that time they arrived in Jerusalem, asking:

Hold up the star

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”

Present King Herod

King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard of this. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers, and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

Hold up a scroll and lay it by Herod

They searched through the scrolls of holy scripture and found the writings of the prophet Micah: “A ruler will come from Bethlehem in Judea, who will be the shepherd for God's people Israel.”

Bring the wise men to Herod



Story: Part III

Herod called the wise men to a private meeting, and he learnt from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them: “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. When you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” But he was not telling the truth!

Hold up the star and move it and the wise men to Bethlehem

The wise men went on their way. The star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem.

Fix the star over the cave

It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!

Move the wise men to the Holy Family

They went into the house and saw the child with his mother Mary. And they bowed down and worshipped him.

Pause

Present the three gifts in turn and place them at the front right of the desert bag

Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of precious gold, sweet-smelling frankincense and bitter myrrh.

Move the wise men away and leave them at the front left

When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to King Herod.

'Jump' Herod up and down with rage

Herod was furious when he realized the wise men had outwitted him.



Story: Part III

Advance the soldiers towards Bethlehem, stopping about halfway

He sent soldiers to Bethlehem to round up every baby boy under two years of age.

Present the angel to Joseph

But the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying: “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother. Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for him.”

Remove the angel

Remove the Holy Family figures

That night, they left to find safe refuge in the distant land of Egypt.

Pause

St John’s Gospel doesn’t give us any more details about what actually happened that first Christmas, but it tells us something about what it all means for Christians:

In the beginning the Word already existed.

Place a globe centre front

God created everything through him.

His speech shaped everything that was created; his breath filled all living things...

Place a candle by the globe

...and his life brought light to everyone.

Light the candle

The life-light blazed out in the darkness, and the darkness couldn’t put it out.

Pause to enjoy the light



Story Part: III

The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

Place the baby in the manger by the light

So, the Word became human and made his home among us.

Place Mary and Joseph beside the baby

Hold up the baby to show his outstretched arms

He was full of loving forgiveness and truth.

I wonder which is your favourite part of this story?

I wonder what more you would like to know?



Wondering Questions

Return Zechariah and Elizabeth, shepherds and sheep, Simeon and Anna to the story scene

I wonder which is your favourite part of this story?

I wonder which is the most important part?

I wonder which part you would most like to see?

I wonder what more you like to know?

I wonder what you would change?

I wonder where you are in this story?



Response Activities

- ◆ **I wonder if you would like to make a model of something from this story?**

(You could use Air Dough/Model Magic, plasticine, clay, playdough or newspaper with flour and water paste)

- ◆ **I wonder if you would like to make and decorate a symbol to represent part of the story?**

(E.g. star, angel, heart, dove, sheep, flame, footprint)

- ◆ **Over the years, names have been given to different parts of the story, which artists have painted:**

The Annunciation to Zechariah: when the angel announces the news that Elizabeth will have a baby

The Annunciation to Mary: when the angel announces to Mary that she will have a child

The Visitation: when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth

The Dream of Joseph: when the angel reassures Joseph

The Way to Bethlehem: when Mary and Joseph travel to be counted

The Nativity: when the baby is born

The Adoration of the Shepherds: when the shepherds enjoy Jesus

The Presentation: when Jesus is presented to God at the Temple and meets Simeon and Anna

The Journey of the Magi: when the wise men travel from the east, following the star

The Adoration of the Magi: when the wise men enjoy Jesus

The Massacre of the Innocents: when Herod's soldiers arrive in Bethlehem and round up the boy babies

The Flight to Egypt: when Mary, Joseph and Jesus flee away to safety

- ◆ **I wonder if you would like to look at some paintings of different parts of this story, and then choose a part to paint yourself?**



Response Activities

- ◆ **I wonder if you can think of some symbols to represent the different parts of the story?**

You could make a story bag using symbols you have drawn and cut out, or objects you have collected (from your home, classroom, playground, park or garden). Then you could use your symbols to tell the story to someone else.

- ◆ **I wonder if you can make puppets (e.g. card cut-outs stuck on lolly sticks or felt glove puppets) of the characters in the story to help you act it out?**
- ◆ **I wonder if you would like to make a map of the story, and show all the different journeys?**
- ◆ **Listen to music that composers have written for the songs of Zechariah (The Benedictus), Mary (The Magnificat) and Simeon (The Nunc Dimittis).**

I wonder if you would like to compose some music to help tell the story?

Think of the sounds the people in the story might have heard in each place they visited.

(You could use percussion instruments, keyboards, recorders, or make sounds with the objects you can find around you)

- ◆ **I wonder if you would like to choreograph a dance to help tell the story?**
Think of how people were feeling, and how they might have moved.
- ◆ **Imagine that you had travelled with Joseph and Mary. What new things did you hear, and see, and taste and smell and touch?**

I wonder if you would like to write a letter or postcard home from Egypt letting your family know what has happened?



Response Activities

- ◆ **I wonder if you would like to make a list of all the things you would need to take on a journey?**

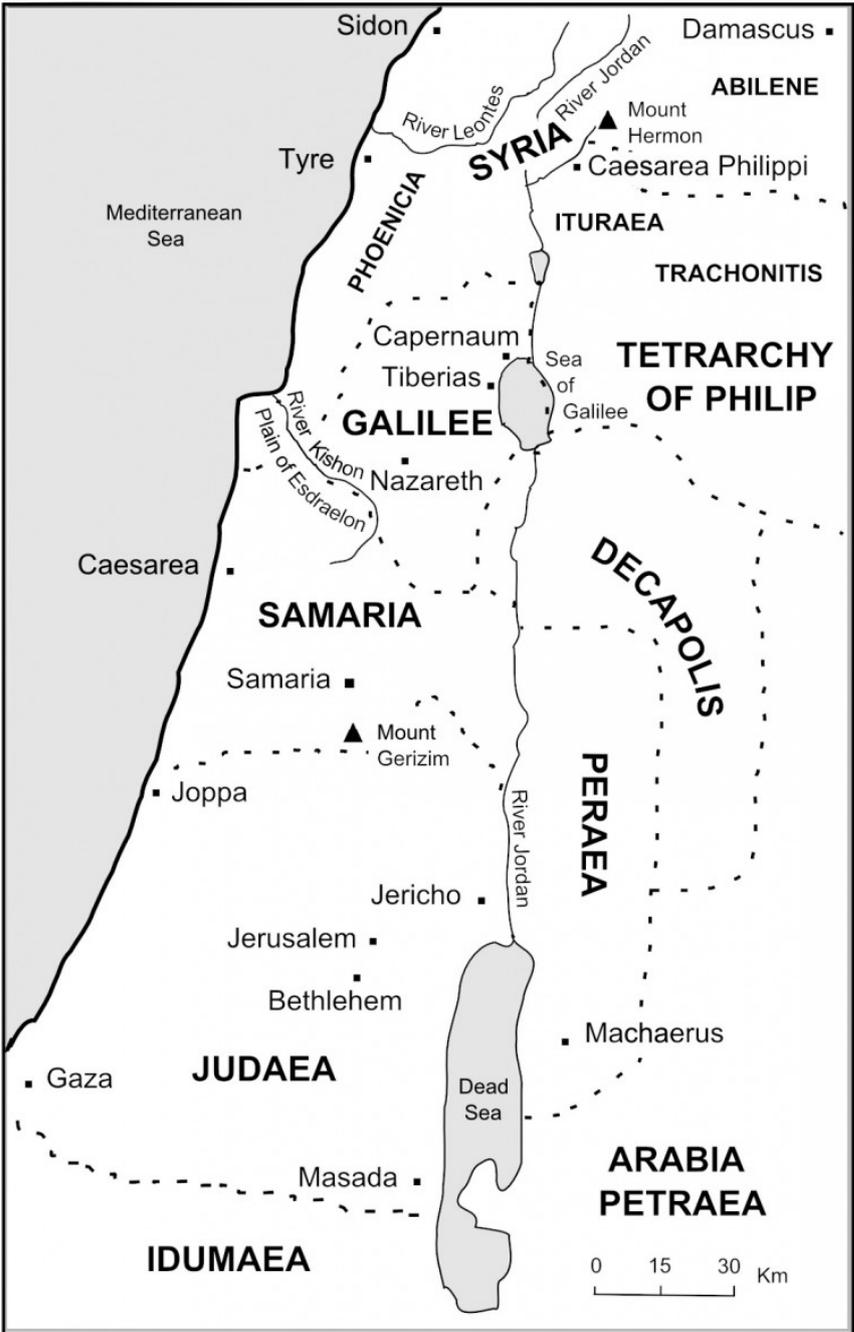
What do you think that Mary and Joseph or the wise men took with them?

- ◆ **Would you like to make a picnic (or make a menu) for the journey?**

Mary and Joseph probably took bread, olive oil, herbs, dried dates and water with them!



Resources



Map of Biblical Palestine.
(Source [The Bible Journey](#), 2020)



Resource Suggestions

Christmas Paintings:

[The Annunciation to Zechariah by Alexander Ivanov](#) (1806-1858, Russian)

[The Annunciation to Mary by Henry Ossawa Tanner](#) (1859-1937, African-American)

[The Visitation by James B. Janknegt](#) (painted 2008, American)

[The Dream of Joseph by Anton Raphael Mengs](#) (1728-1779, German)

[The Way to Bethlehem by Gloria Ssali](#) (b. 1971, Ugandan)

[The Nativity by Duwun Lee](#) (2012, Australian Aboriginal)

[The Adoration of the Shepherds by John Battista Giuliani](#) (b. 1932, Guatemalan)

[The Presentation by Fra Angelico](#) (1400-1455, Italian)

[The Journey of the Magi by James Tissot](#) (1836-1902, French)

[The Adoration of the Magi by Gentile da Fabriano](#) (1370-1427, Italian)

[The Massacre of the Innocents by Peter Bruegel the Elder](#) (1525-1569, Dutch)

[The Flight to Egypt by He Qi](#) (2000, Chinese)

See also [Nativity Paintings from the World](#)



Resource Suggestions

Music for Zechariah, Mary and Simeon

Benedictus

Plainchant

William Byrd (English Renaissance polyphony)

Charles Villers Stanford (19thC Irish choral):

Marty Haugen (20thC American Lutheran liturgical)

James Beaugard (21stC American Christian gospel)

Prayer from the Vineyard (21stC psalmist)

Magnificat

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (Italian Renaissance polyphony)

Herbert Brewer (19thC English choral):

Timothy Dudley-Smith, ‘Tell Out My Soul’ (20thC English hymn)

David Haas (20thC American Catholic liturgical)

Todd Agnew (contemporary American Christian folk/blues)

Taize chant (20thC French liturgical)

Nunc Dimittis

Thomas Tallis (English Renaissance polyphony)

Alexander Grecheninov (19/20thC Russian classical)

Geoffrey Burgon (20thC British film composer)

Pawel Lukaszewski (20/21stC Polish choral)

Paul Smith (21stC English classical)

Michael Card (21stC American Christian songwriter)