

The Story of the Journey to Bethlehem: Godly Play® approaches to Advent and Christmas for Friends

As a Friend and parent of children reaching school-age, I've struggled with how to make space for the testimony of simplicity, for wonder, and for the biblical roots of the Christmas story in our family's holiday celebrations. More than just one morning of new presents, my husband and I want our children to experience Christmas as a time of holy mystery, as a story that is both then and now. The Godly Play® Advent story (done in five parts) has spoken to this need, and become part of our family's holiday tradition and, I hope, of my children's memories of Christmas.

Each Sunday evening, after dinner, we gather on our living room floor to hear a piece of the journey to Bethlehem. It is a familiar story, but told over the weeks of Advent it takes on new meaning for the children. The *journey* is underscored, and the roles of the various travelers in the journey are deeply valued. Last year, my 5-year old son would start asking on Tuesday how long it was until Sunday . . . and I have watched a toddler sibling sit with rapt attention as the candles are lit and the story literally unfolds. We use our family's ceramic Nativity set as the figures in the story, and it is another part of our tradition to allow the older children to move them from the story material underlay to their place in our Christmas decorations (on a table out of smaller hands' reach!) after the story is told. The story materials are not simply a holiday decoration to the children. They love to "build" the Nativity each week, piece by piece, and are deeply anticipatory of the final figure's appearance, that of the baby Jesus. There is beauty in their reverence of the materials.

Another aspect of our family that this story speaks to is that my husband is Catholic, and celebration of Advent makes space for discussion of the traditions he grew up in. The lovely wooden box that holds our Advent story materials is a treasure we look forward to bringing out and sharing together each Christmas. It slows down the progression to the big morning, and reminds us all of the light, mystery, and holy wonder in the story. My five-year old daughter told her brothers the story in her own words a couple of years ago, on the playroom floor:

"Mary and Joseph were married.
Mary was going to have a baby.
They found a manger.
Mary got off the donkey - she was relieved.
From Mary the baby was born
A star shone above the Wisemen.
They followed curiously,
Crowded around.
Then the star shone to the
Shepherds and they followed
and found Him.
That's why we call him the Son of God."

Godly Play® stories for Christmas also have a place in many of our monthly meetings' religious education programs and community celebrations at this time of year. For years, I've been using

our desert box to tell the story of the Nativity. Not all “characters” in the story made their way across literal desert, but it underscores the difficulties of the journey.

The Godly Play® Christmas Eve Liturgy for Children has been a good story to use at our meeting for the “Christmas pageant.” Our middle school and Young Friends (high school age) read the words of the story from the facing benches while our younger children, dressed in homemade costumes like those used everywhere, simply walk to the front of the meeting house when it is their part of the story. We practice creating this “tableau” in the weeks before, but because the children don’t need to say any “lines,” there is very little pressure to perform. Perhaps the most joyous part of this story in using it in the larger community is the way music and Christmas hymns are woven throughout. A meeting in my area swapped some of the traditional songs of the season for folk music choices. At my meeting, when the readings are completed and all the children are gathered in the front of the meeting room in the traditional Nativity scene, we light candles and together sing our final song, “Silent Night,” before entering into a period of worship.

by Melinda Wenner Bradley, West Chester (PA) Monthly Meeting