



*Orthodox Church School
Teachers' Resources*

The Nativity of Christ





Bulgarian Orthodox Youth Apostolate
Orthodox Church School Teachers' Resources

Prepared with the blessing of
His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph
Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Diocese
Of the U.S.A., Canada & Australia,
Bulgarian Patriarchate

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Popadia Junia Tolbert

Introduction

This curriculum is offered as an aid to the courageous individuals who take up one of the most important ministries in the parish—the religious education of our children. As church school teachers, your most important tools are the love and dedication you bear toward Christ, and the love you have for the children. Through this, He is there with you! Knowing more about the Lord, His mother, and how He came to be among us is a doorway into deeper relationship with Him. Walk through it with the children.

This text was prepared with grade school children in mind, but the information can be adapted for use with older children. These lessons can simply be read aloud, unless you wish to tell the story in your own words instead.

The material in the text is drawn from the books listed on the Source Material page. Crafts are provided as ways to engage the children in the story, to remind them of it, and to help them to make it their own.

While this curriculum is divided into six parts, intending to be useful for the six weeks of the Nativity Fast prior to the celebration of the Nativity of Christ, it can easily be spread into eight lessons. Lesson four, in particular, easily breaks into two or even three lessons. An introductory lesson that presents the yearning for the coming of the Messiah throughout all of the Hebrew nation, what the Messiah was expected to be by the Jews of that time—a king, a deliverer from the oppression of the Romans, etc.—could be added to set the stage for delving into the mystery of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, especially with an older group.

Since the children's presence in the church during the Divine Liturgy is in itself a wonderful teacher of the mysteries of Christ (being in His Presence!), we encourage you to have a time outside of the Liturgy for the church school class.

This is meant to be the first in a series of teaching materials produced by BOYA for church school teachers. More lessons will be forthcoming. We welcome your suggestions and ideas.

~Popadia Junia Tolbert

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Lesson One

Does Jesus Have Grandparents?

We know that Jesus is the Son of God. We also know that Jesus was born of Mary, and she was human like you and me. Mary had a mother and a father. They are the grandparents of Jesus! Their names are Joachim and Anna.

Joachim and Anna were a righteous couple who had no children. In those days, every Jewish couple wanted children, as they all awaited the birth of the Messiah. Each mother hoped her child might be the Messiah, be the one to bear him, or would at least be blessed to look upon him. They thought being childless meant God did not bless you.

Joachim was a shepherd, who had many flocks. Every year he gave one third of his wealth to the temple of God, one third to the poor, and he and his wife lived on what was left. They prayed deeply that God would bless them with a child, but it did not happen, and now they seemed too old to have a child.

On the Great Day of the Lord, Joachim came to the temple in Jerusalem to bring his yearly gift to God. This year, the high priest refused his gift, saying that surely Joachim and his wife must have committed some secret sin, since God had refused to give them children. Joachim was not allowed to come into the temple. His gift was refused.

In great sorrow, Joachim went into the hills to a cave where his shepherds sometimes stayed when watching the flocks. He resolved to stay there, fasting and praying, until God answered his prayers.

Anna, his wife, soon heard what had happened at the temple. She, too, went to her home, and began to fast and pray that somehow, God might remove their shame and grant them a child.

At last, the Archangel Gabriel came to Joachim in the cave. He told Joachim that God had indeed heard his prayers, and that Joachim and his wife would conceive a child who would be dedicated to God, and would be a very special child indeed.

So that Joachim would know that the words of the Archangel Gabriel were true, he gave Joachim these instructions. He told Joachim to go back to Jerusalem and enter the city at the gate that was called the Golden Gate. Gabriel said as proof that his words were truly from God, Anna, Joachim's wife, would meet him at that very gate as he returned. Joachim arose and immediately started his journey to the city.

Anna was also visited by the Archangel Gabriel. The Archangel told her that she and her husband would conceive a child, a girl, and that this child was to be dedicated to God, as she and Joachim had promised in their prayers. The Archangel told Anna that her husband was returning from the hill country, and to go meet him at the Golden Gate of the city, as a confirmation that the words he spoke to her were the truth. She arose and did as the Archangel told her.

When Joachim came to the Golden Gate, there was Anna waiting for him, as the Archangel Gabriel had said. They embraced each other and were filled with joy, for they knew that God had heard their prayers, and that they were to be given a child. They knew that this child was to be special before God.

Joachim and Anna did indeed conceive a child, and they named the infant Mary.



Joachim and Anna Meet at the Golden Gate of Jerusalem



Nativity of the Theotokos



Joachim and Anna with Mary, their daughter.

Mary is holding a white flower,
which is the symbol of the Messiah
to whom she will one day give birth.



Joachim and Anna showing affection to the Theotokos

From Chora Monastery, Constantinople

Lesson Two

Mary's Childhood & Entrance into the Temple

From the time of her birth, Joachim and Anna dedicated their daughter to God. They were careful to have nothing low or unclean in their home. They kept all the rules of their faith, went to the Temple often to pray, and they prayed several times a day each day in their home, as a family. They knew that God had blessed them with this child, and that He had a special purpose for her. They dedicated her wholly to God, and while they could not be fully sure, they believed that she was the one chosen to become the mother of the Messiah. They made sure that she had the best their love and faith could offer to prepare her, if this was what God intended for her.

When Mary was three years old, Joachim and Anna became convinced that it was time for her to enter the Temple itself and live there, surrounded by holy things and spending her life in prayer and service to God. They arranged to have other young girls escort Mary to the Temple. A procession of these girls, each carrying a candle, walked through the streets of Jerusalem, bringing Mary to the Temple.

When they arrived, Mary looked up the steep stairway to the entrance. Fifteen long stairs stretched before her. She ran happily up the stairs to meet the priest Zachariah, who was her uncle. With him, she entered the Temple, and Mary lived there from that day on. Joachim and Anna marveled that their daughter, only three years of age, did not cry or call for them as so many children would have done. They understood that her place was in God's house, and that Mary, although so young, also knew she belonged there.

While living in the Temple, Mary learned to weave and spin. She was so very good at this craft, that she was chosen to weave the purple veil that separates the Holy of Holies, the most sacred Temple area from

the rest of the Temple. The Holy of Holies was a place where only the High Priest was allowed to go. It was where the Holy Spirit dwelt, and it was with fear and trembling that even the High Priest entered. Mary, however, was also allowed to enter this place and to stay there. While in the Temple, Mary was often fed by angels, who visited her. We do not have very many details about her life in the Temple, but we do know that she was happy there, and wanted to stay there for her whole life.

The tradition of the Temple, however, was that when a girl reached the age of 13 or 14, she would no longer be allowed to stay in the Temple. Because the Jews were waiting for the Messiah to come, they wanted every young woman, especially the pious ones, to marry and have children, in the hopes that their child would be the one for whom they all were waiting—the Savior, the Holy One of Israel.

So Mary’s days in the Temple were numbered. Weaving beautiful tapestries, living in the Holy Presence of God in the Holy of Holies, conversing with angels, and being fed by them, was part of her preparation for what was to come.

The priests, too, knew that Mary was somehow especially blessed and chosen by God. They did not know if she was the one who would bear the Messiah, for that had not been revealed by God to anyone. They searched the scriptures for the prophecies about the Messiah and the one who was to be His mother. These are some of the words they read:

“Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign; Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Isaiah 7:14 (KJV)

“But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.”

Micah 5:2

“And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:

² And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD;

³ And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears:

⁴ But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth: with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.

⁵ And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins.

⁶ The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

⁷ And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸ And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den.

⁹ They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰ And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious.”

Isaiah 11:1-10



The Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple



This is an icon called the Jesse Tree.
Like a family tree, it traces the ancestors of Christ.
Jesse is shown lying at the bottom of the tree, as he is the root.
Mary, the Theotokos, is shown in the middle of the tree,
holding the Lord.



Mosaic of the Virgin Mary being given bread by the angels while she was in the temple.
This mosaic is from the Chora Monastery in Constantinople.

Lesson Three

The Betrothal of Mary and Joseph

The priests in the temple were agreed that no young women should live in the temple their entire lives. When they grew old enough to marry, they left the temple to become wives and mothers. This meant that Mary would need to leave the temple. While this was the custom, Mary told them she did not want to leave the temple, as she had vowed never to marry, but had with her parents given a vow to serve God only for her entire life. The priests knew Mary was very blessed by God, and they did not want to force her to break her vow to the Almighty, but they also did not want to begin a new custom in the temple. They also could not send her to live with her parents, because Joachim and Anna had died about three years earlier.

The high priest decided that they must follow the tradition, and choose someone for her to marry. But whom? It was finally agreed that God, Himself, must make the choice. After much prayer, they sent out word that all of the men of Judah who were eligible to marry should bring their staff, or walking stick, to the temple. All of the staffs were to be placed in one room. The priests agreed that they would pray, and then look for a sign from God as to which staff they should choose. The man whose staff was chosen was the man who would then be betrothed to Mary.

And so a notice went out to all of Judah, and men began to bring their walking sticks. One man, Joseph who was a carpenter and a widow with children, did not plan to take his staff. He considered that he was too old to marry again. Some say that he had been married for 40 years, and already had seven children.* But, because the notice said for all unmarried men to bring their staff, Joseph did as the high priest had commanded, for he was a righteous and honorable man.

After the time of prayer, the priests entered the room filled with the staffs of the men of Jerusalem. Row upon row of wooden staffs were before them. How, they wondered, would God reveal to them what they should do?

God did not let them wonder for long. He gave them a miracle. One of the old wooden walking sticks had a fresh bud and flower upon it. The priests saw this, and knew that nothing in nature could cause a stick that had obviously been cut many years ago to come back to life with bud and bloom. It was the sign from God that they had been waiting for! The owner of the stick was sought, and behold, it was the stick belonging to Joseph, the carpenter.

Joseph saw the miracle. He still thought he was too old, but the priests assured him that he was the one God had chosen. And so he was betrothed to Mary. Joseph understood that Mary was dedicated to God, that her desire was to serve God for her entire life and with all of her being. He accepted that his role was to protect and shelter this pure and rare young woman upon whom God's blessing was so full. Joseph knew he had been chosen for this special purpose, and he was willing to serve God in this way.

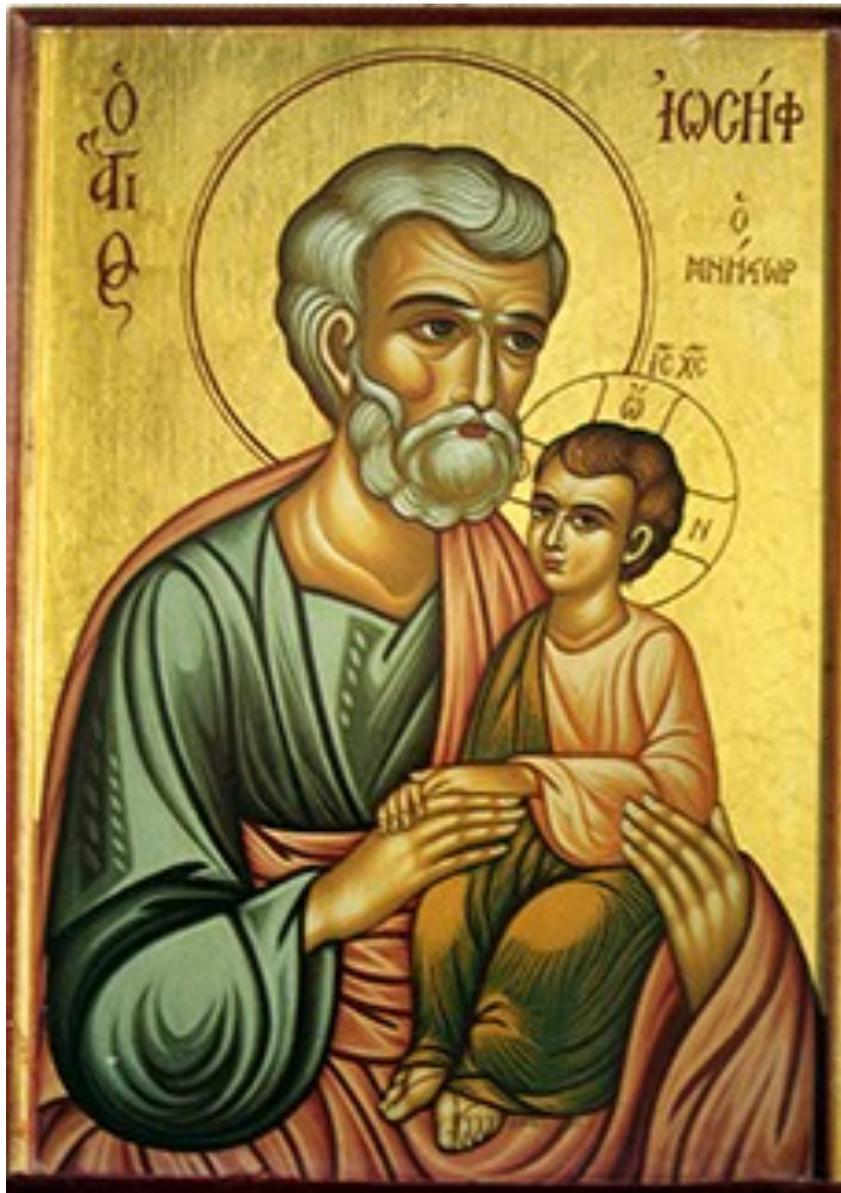
* Joseph's first wife was a pious woman. She had given Joseph seven children, four sons and three daughters. Their names are James, Jude, Simon, Joses, Salome (who became the mother of the Apostles James and John), Esther, and another girl whose name is reported differently in different texts.



Mary being entrusted to Joseph

This mosaic from the Monastery of Chora shows Zachariah, the priest, with Mary at his side, holding the budded staff.

Joseph is stepping forward to receive it. The unbudded staffs lay behind Zachariah.



Saint Joseph the Foster Father with Jesus Christ

This icon shows Joseph tenderly holding the Christ Child.

Joseph is traditionally shown as an older man with gray hair and beard.

He is called the foster father of Jesus because God was the true Father of the Lord, while Joseph took care of Him as would a father.

Lesson Four

The Annunciation Mary's Visit to Elisabeth The Nativity of John the Baptist

After Mary was betrothed to Joseph, the high priest appointed five virgins, about her own age, to accompany Mary as she left the temple. They were Rebecca, Sepphora, Susanna, Abigail and Jael. With Mary, they stayed in Joseph's house in Nazareth. Joseph went to his house in Bethlehem to prepare for the wedding and then travelled to some districts by the seashore, occupied with his work building houses.

Tradition tells us that Mary continued to live much as she had in the temple, reading, praying, weaving and spinning. She preferred to stay in the home, but was generous to those in need and sweet spoken to all. Her virtues encompassed every virtue and she was truly good.

One day she went to the well in Nazareth to draw a vessel of water. There she heard a voice, but saw no one. The voice said to her, "Rejoice, thou who art full of grace, the Lord is with thee: thou art blessed among women." Mary was used to seeing angels and speaking with them, but she did not see who was speaking to her, and she quickly took the vessel of water and returned to the house. There the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her, and again he spoke to her and repeated his greeting.

"Rejoice, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give

unto Him the throne of His father David: And He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.”

Then said Mary unto the angel, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”

And the angel answered and said unto her, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible.”

And Mary said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:30-38)

Now Mary knew that she was indeed chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah. She did not speak of this mystery to others, but instead she made ready and travelled to the hill country to see her cousin Elisabeth.

Elisabeth was the niece of Mary’s mother Anna, and was married to Zachariah, who was a priest in the temple. When Mary was received into the temple at age three, he was the one who received her. This same Zachariah was the priest who called Joseph to retrieve his staff which had budded, and gave him Mary as his betrothed.

Zachariah and Elisabeth were a righteous couple who did not have any children. Elisabeth was barren, which means she was not able to have a child. But now Mary heard from the Archangel that they would indeed have a child! Here is how that came about.

Zachariah was serving in the temple, and offering incense to God in the Holy of Holies. Many people were in the outer court praying. While he was inside, the Archangel Gabriel appeared by the right side of the altar of incense, and Zachariah was afraid.

But the angel said unto him, "Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

And Zacharias said unto the angel, "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years."

And the angel answering said unto him, "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season."

And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless.

And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

"Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men." (Luke 1:13-25)

When Mary arrived at Elisabeth's house, she greeted Elisabeth with joy.

When Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

“For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.”

And Mary said, “My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.” (Luke 1:41-55)

The Holy Bible tells us that Mary stayed with Elisabeth for about three months, and then returned to Nazareth. We do not know if Mary was present at the birth of John, but she is not shown there in icons.

When Elisabeth did give birth, all of those gathered rejoiced that she had a son. After eight days, it was time to circumcise the child, and as they did, they called him Zachariah, because it was his father’s name. Elizabeth told them that the child’s name was John. But they did not accept this because no one in their family was named John, and it was the custom to name a child after other family members. They would not agree, and so went to ask Zachariah, who still could not speak. For nine months, since the Archangel Gabriel had come to him, Zachariah had been unable to speak a word. Now, he called for a writing table, and wrote, “His name is John.” When he finished writing, Zachariah was able to speak again! Everyone was amazed, trembling, for they knew that the hand of God had moved among them. Word of all this spread throughout the hill country. People wondered what this child would be like as a man, who had so many signs from God.

After John was properly named, and Zachariah was able to speak again, he began to prophesy about his son and about the Messiah. He said:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, that he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, In holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

(Luke 1:68-79)



The Annunciation



The Angel Appears to Zachariah in the Temple



Mary goes to the hill country with haste
and greets Her cousin Elisabeth.



The Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Lesson Five

Joseph's Doubts are Resolved The Journey to Bethlehem

When Mary returned to Nazareth after her visit with her cousin Elisabeth, she remained in the home, and did not show herself to anyone. She did not tell anyone what had happened. Only she and Elisabeth knew what God had brought about.

When Joseph returned from his labors, he saw that Mary was about six months pregnant. Joseph knew that it had been his job to keep her safe and pure after she left the temple. Joseph did not know what to think.

Joseph struggled over what to do. The law in those days stated if a betrothed woman was with a man she was not betrothed to and became pregnant, both would be stoned to death. If Joseph hid what he thought may have happened, he, too, would be guilty of breaking the law. If he were to divorce her, he had to state why, and adultery was punishable by death. Joseph, who was a just man, was not willing to expose her to public disgrace. The kindest, most merciful choice seemed to be to send her away secretly.

While he considered what to do, Joseph was visited by an angel in a dream! The angel said,

“Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.” (Matt 1:20-21)

Joseph awoke from his dream and did as the angel told him. He took Mary as his wife and doubted her no more. Tradition tells us that he deeply apologized to the virgin. Now that his eyes were opened by the Holy Spirit, Joseph marveled at the woman before him. He saw both the pure and sinless maiden, and the throne of glory.

The Roman Empire extended throughout the land, and it was at this time that the Emperor, Caesar Augustus, sent out a decree that all the world should be taxed. What this meant was that every man was to go to the city of his ancestors, in order to be properly counted. Joseph was of the lineage of David, and so he had to travel with his sons and Mary from his home in Nazareth in Galilee, to Bethlehem in Judea.

The journey would be difficult. Walking would take three days, fifteen miles each day. Mary was “great with child.” The baby would come very soon. Mary rode on a donkey, which was the best they could do for her. They had very little with them in the way of food or blankets, no comfort or aid for Mary. Joseph knew that all of this would be very difficult for any pregnant woman, even this most special one, but they had no choice. They had to go to register for the tax.

In the service for 9th Hour for the Nativity of Christ, one of the verses that is sung is this:

"O virgin, when Joseph went up to Bethlehem sounded by sorrow, thou didst cry to him: 'Why art thou downcast and troubled, seeing me great with child? Why art thou wholly ignorant of the fearful mystery that comes to pass in me? Henceforth, cast every fear aside and understand this strange marvel: for in my womb God now descends upon the earth for mercy's sake, and He has taken flesh. Thou shalt see Him according to His good pleasure, when He is born; and fill with joy for thou shalt worship Him as Thy Creator, Whom the angels praise without ceasing in song and glorify with the Father and the Holy Spirit.'"



Joseph Doubting

This is a portion of the icon of the Nativity of Christ, which shows Joseph being troubled by doubts, which are shown as an old cloaked man, symbolizing the devil.

Joseph overcame his doubts with God's help.



This icon of their journey to Bethlehem is found in the Monastery of Chora in Constantinople (Istanbul). In it we see Joseph with a slight stoop, and walking as an elderly man. He was generally thought to be about 80 years of age at this time. His eyes are turned toward Mary who has her head turned towards him. One of Joseph's sons is leading, with his mantle flowing, and he carries a bundle of provisions for the trip. He is generally assumed to be James.



This icon shows the scene of Joseph and Mary and Joseph's sons being enrolled for taxes in Bethlehem.

Lesson Six

Christ is Born! The Shepherds and Wise Men Glorify Him!

After their long journey, Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, the city of David. All of the people descended from David were in the town to register for the tax. Joseph sought an inn for Mary to have a good resting place, for he was sure the baby would be born very soon. No one could give them a room. Finally, as they turned from the very last one, the innkeeper had compassion on them. All that he could offer was the use of the cave where he stabled his animals. It was shelter, would be warmed by the presence of the animals, and it was a place to rest. It was getting late, and it would have to do.

Joseph and Mary went to the cave, where he helped her down from the donkey. While she rested there, Joseph went in search of a midwife. He brought Zelomi, telling her of the miraculous child to be born. As she approached the cave, a bright cloud overshadowed it. She knew that the words spoken by Joseph were the truth, and she glorified God. A second midwife, Mary's cousin Salome, joined her also. Mary suffered no pain from the birth of God. He who is both the giver of life and the healer of all ills, was able to cause His creation to change for His birth. Mary was delivered of the Child, and remained a virgin, God's mother.

They wrapped Jesus in swaddling clothes, which are long strips of cloth that wrap the child securely. There was no cozy nursery or soft blankies for Jesus. So, they laid Him in the manger, the place where the food for the animals was put. The King of Glory was born!

At the birth of Jesus, angels filled the heavens, singing and rejoicing! It was nighttime, and the hillsides around Bethlehem were crowded with flocks of sheep. Their shepherds were keeping watch. Suddenly the angel of the Lord came to them. They were surrounded

by the glory of the Lord! Light in the darkness! Angels and singing filled the skies! They were very afraid! But an angel spoke kindly to them and said:

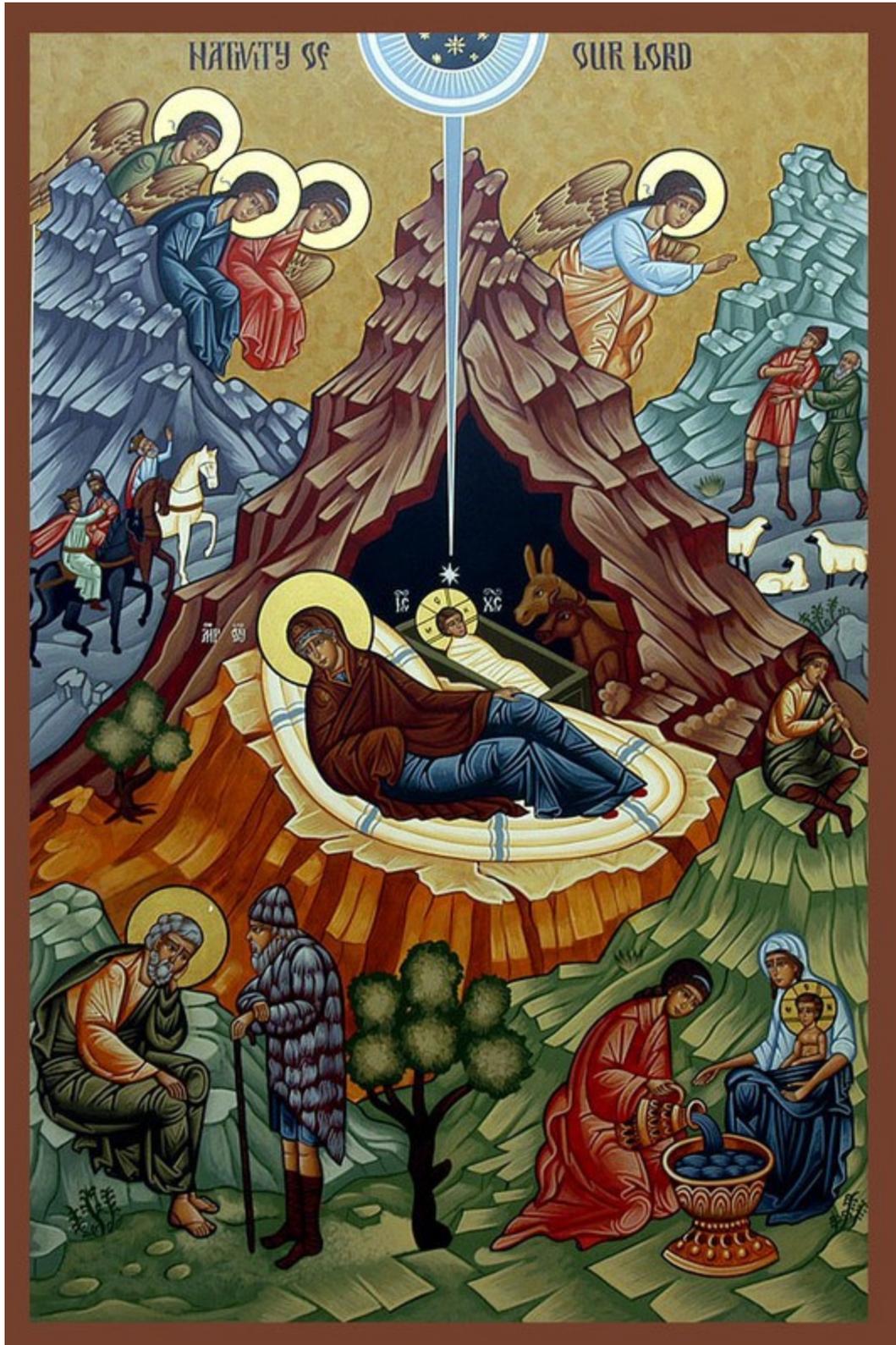
“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

(Luke 2:10-12)

After the angel departed, the shepherds went to look for the Lord Jesus. They saw the star shining brightly over Bethlehem, and soon found the Child and His Mother resting in the cave. They were filled with awe, and worshiped him, rejoicing. After they left, they told everyone what the angel had said to them, and that they had found the Christ Child, the Messiah, the Lord!

Soon came three kings, the Magi, from the East, looking for the Messiah. For many years Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar searched the stars and prophecies for a sign that the Messiah would be born. When they saw the sign, they left their homelands, traveling many months to find the Lord. Led by the star, they made their way to Jerusalem, and asked King Herod where they might find the Child, the King of All. Herod did not want any other king to arise. When his advisors said it seemed that Bethlehem could be the humble city for the birth of the Messiah, Herod sent the Magi on their way and ordered them to return to him and tell him where the child was to be found, so that he could worship him also.

Once again following the star that had been hidden near Jerusalem, the Magi came to the place where Jesus lay in the manger, and they worshiped Him. They gave Him gifts: gold, as a symbol of kingship on earth; frankincense, incense as a recognition that He was God; and myrrh, expensive spice used to prepare bodies of those who died, as a symbol of His sacrifice to come.



The Nativity of Christ

Crafts for the Lessons

Angels (Lessons 1, 2, 4 or 6)

1. Wool Roving Angels

Supplies: wool roving, gold thread

Similar to making a yarn doll.

Take a piece of wool roving about seven inches long, split in two pieces. Fold one piece in half.

Smooth and round the fold to form a rounded head. Tie at neck.

The second piece forms the wings.

Wing method 1: fold the piece with ends in the middle. Rounded fold at ends of wings will flare out to form wings.



Wing method 2: Do not fold piece-ends which will flare out to form wings. Method 2 gives a wispier wing.

When wings are ready, take the other piece of roving and separate the two pieces of roving extending down from the head. Place the wings, centered, in between these two pieces, and tie off at the waist. Adjust wings to flare nicely. Smooth the roving coming down from the wings so that it blends into one skirt for the angel. You can decorate by using gold thread to criss cross across the torso, or wrap a piece as a halo around the head.

Children ages 5-15 can do this.

2. **Angel Glow** (3 versions)

Supplies: Angel Template (p.41). Yellow construction paper 8 x 14” works well. Colored tissue paper, glue stick, scissors, clear contact paper (optional).

- **Framed Angel.** This is an angel design in the middle of a piece of construction paper, with the area around it cut out, leaving a 2.5-3 inch “frame”. Use yellow or pastel tissue paper to paste behind the construction paper. Clear contact paper over the finished product makes it more sturdy. Place in a window or use a LED candle behind it.
- **Hanging Angel.** Instead of using a rectangle, cut two circles out of construction paper. Trace image of angel in the middle, and cut out image on both pieces. One is the front and one is the back of the finished piece. Cover back of one circle with tissue paper. Glue front and back together so that the angel image is lined up. You can put a ring of glitter around the outer edge of circle if you like! Attach a hanger by using a hole punch in the top of the circle or by inserting ends of a ribbon loop between the front and back before gluing.
- **Angel Lantern.** Use first method above. After applying contact paper, curve the paper to form a tube and tape together (if you leave a 1” piece of contact paper to overlap this works well. Cut a 6 inch circle for the bottom. Actual size of the lantern bottom is about 4.5 inches. Trace a 4.5” circle in the middle of the 6” paper circle. Cut from edge of paper to inner drawn circle at 1 inch intervals. Fold these tabs up. Put glue or double stick tape on the outside of the tabs. Place lantern over the circle and stick the tabs to the inside of the lantern. Form a handle by cutting a 3 inch strip of construction paper 14 inches long. Fold it three times so that it is 14 x 1. Tape or staple handle to the “frame” of the lantern. Use an LED tea light to make the candle glow. Use double stick tape to hold the LED light in place so it does not slide around. (Use your lantern to go caroling!)

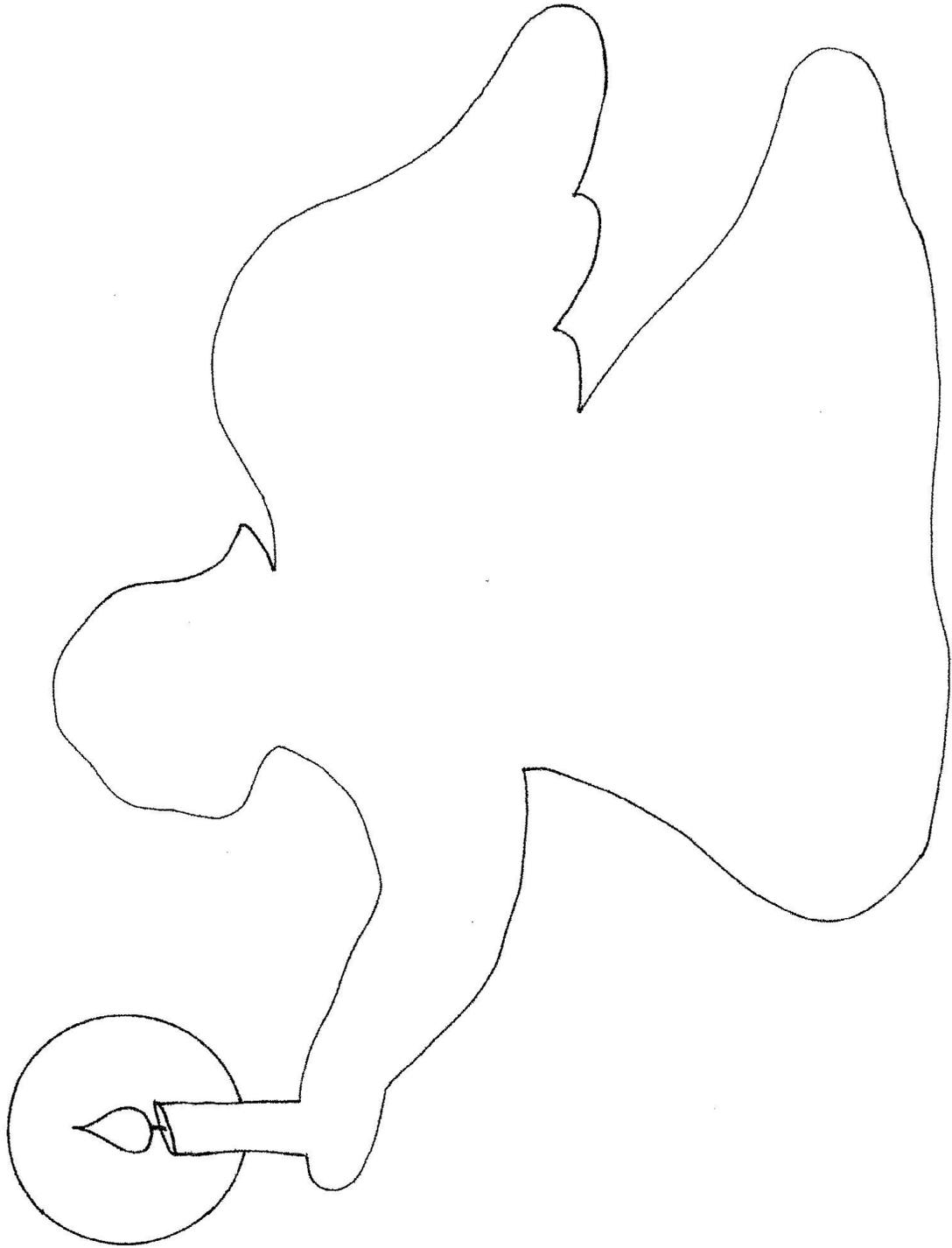
3. Cutout Angel

Using Angel template (p.41), trace design onto watercolor or cardstock paper. Color, using pastel chalks, or watercolors. If using watercolors, consider using a small sponge instead of a brush. Angel is lovely when color is shaded—yellow/green/blue or yellow/orange/red.

Cut out angel and use as a decoration. Reduce the size of the template if you want to make some that could hang on the Christmas tree.



Angel Template



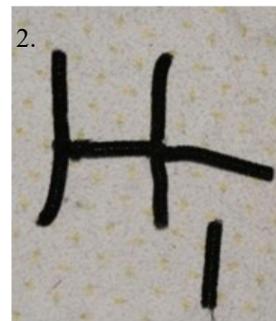
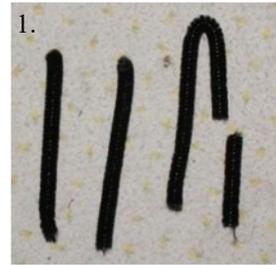
Sheep (Good for Lessons 1 or 6)

Little sheep from wool roving and pipe cleaners

Supplies needed: 1 black pipe cleaner, white, gray, brown or black wool roving. Scissors.



1. Cut pipe cleaner in half. Cut one section in half again. These quarters will be the legs.
2. Fold the long section in half. Cut off one half of one folded side. These will form the ears.
3. Fold legs in half. Twist back legs onto the end of the long piece of pipe cleaner. Bend head onto other end of long pipe cleaner. Twist on ears.
4. Bend neck up and twist front legs to long pipe cleaner at neck bend. Now you have a frame for the sheep body.
5. Wrap the wool roving around the body and neck to form a sheep. Tuck in edges so it does not unravel.



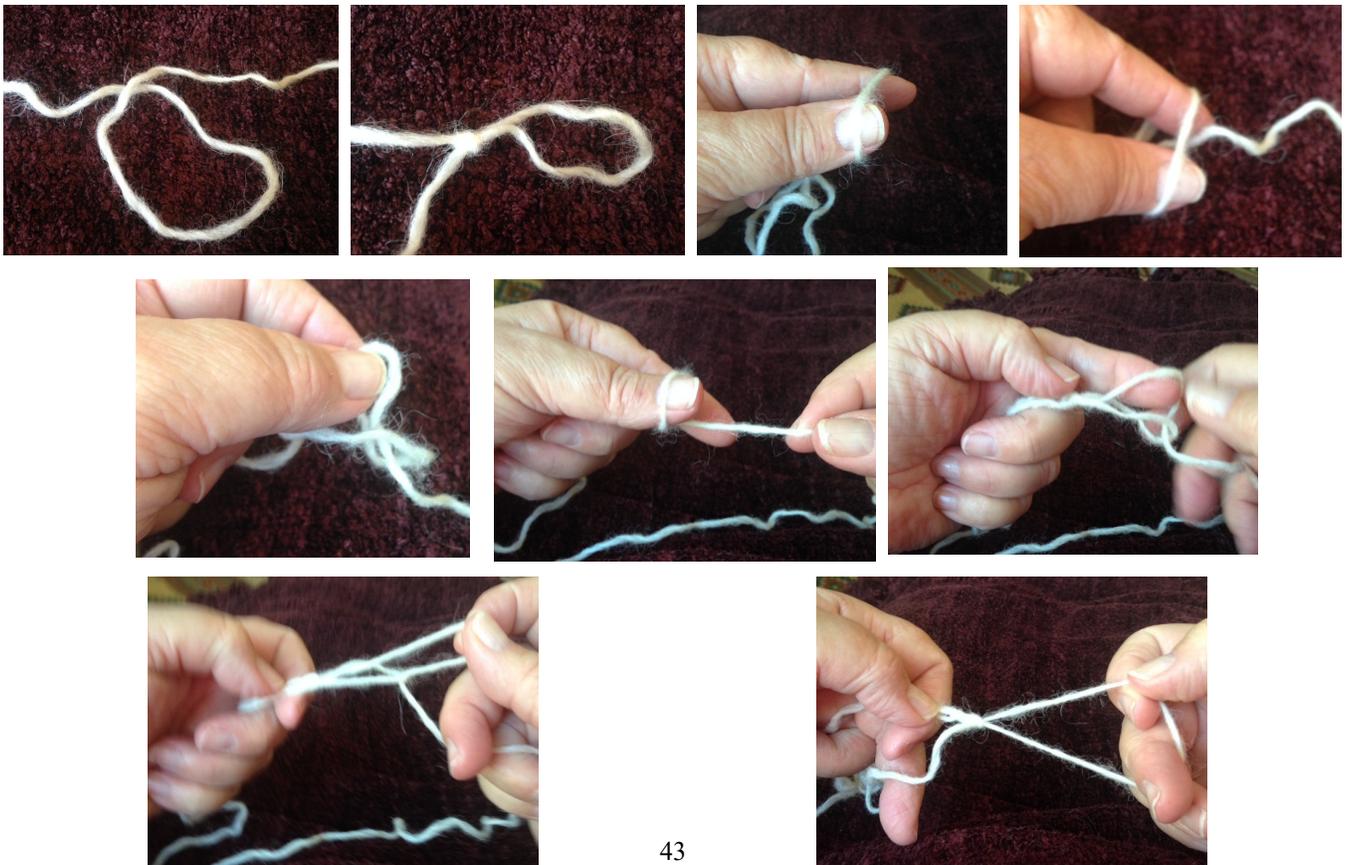
Weaving/Finger knitting (Good for Lesson 2 or 4)

Finger knitting (Mary learned how to weave).

Natural colored wool yarn is best.

The length they make can be used as head band with a cloth for shepherd costumes.

Simple finger knitting instructions. Using a ball of yarn, form a slip knot. (Cross the part of the yarn attached to the ball over the end about 4 inches from the end. Pull a loop of the ball end yarn up through the circle you formed. Holding the end piece, pull the loop until a knot forms leaving the loose end and the loop.) Adjust the size of the loop so that your thumb and pointer fingers can stick through it. Bring the ball end of yarn to your thumb and forefinger, grasping them and pulling another loop through the former loop. Tighten by pulling the new loop until the knot forms around the base of the new loop. Continue with the chain stitch until you have the desired length. Then cut the ball off, and put that string through the 1st loop, pulling until the loop disappears and there is a final knot.



Shepherd's Staff (Good for Lessons 1 or 3)

Make Joseph's staff.

- Salt dough budded staff. Using salt dough or modeling clay, shape a shepherd's staff. A salt dough recipe is below. Paint brown, with a bud or flower or green leaf at the end. Traditionally, shepherd's staffs have a crook at the end - like a candy cane. You can also explain this is why we have candy canes at Christmas—it is the shepherd's staff or crook.
- For a quick craft, you can twist red and white pipe cleaners together and curve them to make a candy cane for their tree.
- Make candy canes cookies. Use sugar cookie dough. Divide dough into two parts. Color one part red and add peppermint flavoring. Roll into 1/2 inch round lengths. Cut red and white dough lengths the same size. Twist together. Bake. Sprinkle with sugar before they bake or paint with a sugar glaze after they are done.

Salt Dough Recipe

1/2 c salt

1/2 c water

1/2 c flour

Add the 1/2 cup of salt and 1 cup of flour to a bowl. Stir in the water adding it slowly – you may not need all of the water. You want the dough to be dry – if it gets sticky, add more flour. Knead the dough and then roll out and use as you want. Once you have made the shapes you want, then dry them so you can paint. Traditionally salt dough is dried in the oven which takes around 3 hours at a low heat so they don't burn. But instead, swap your oven for a microwave and zap for 3 mins. If when the time is up they are still a little wet, then just put back in for another 20 seconds at a time until done. Let them to cool down before painting.

Star (Good for Lesson 5 or 6)

- Star cookies to eat or as ornaments! Make cookies using star shaped cutters. If you have a small and a large star cutter, cut out a star in the middle of the larger star cookie. Place hard candy in the hole. Bake and you have a stained glass cookie star! If making an ornament, use the salt dough recipe in the Shepherd's Staff section.
- Punched candle scone. Using a smooth empty can (one for each child) with no label or printing on it (mandarin orange section cans are a good size), fill the can with water and put in freezer until the ice is solid. Do this ahead of time. Using a strip of paper that will wrap around the can, have the children draw a outline of a big star and some other stars. They might also want to add a Christmas tree. Place dots along the outline of their picture. Take the can with ice from the freezer and tape the design around the can. Using a nail and a hammer, punch a hole in the can on every dot. The ice will keep the can from bending while this is done. When the design is completed, melt the rest of the ice. Add tea light candle or LED candle.
- Star shine: Using the same techniques as in the angel crafts, use a star instead of an angel for the frame, circle or lantern.

Word Search Puzzle

Nativity – 1

E D V
T L I I V
S I Z R I
P Z P G L
D A V I D
J E S U S B A N I M A L S
C T E M P L E J O S E P H O E
P U T H E O T O K O S P U R E
V L I Z A C H A R I A H O L Y
Q U E E N L C M O T H E R
M E H A A
A H I N N
R E M G N
Y M J E A
K D R

Animals	Mary
Anna	Mother
Bethlehem	Pure
David	Queen
Elizabeth	Temple
Holy	Theotokos
Jesus	Virgin
Joachim	Zachariah
Joseph	
Manger	

Word Search Puzzle

Nativity-2

X
ODO
VAELH
QRRNPOJ
HRAOEGQGT
ASISE
IOZHVRL
MJNAAEAYS
GPEICGHESH
SHNAKTT
SAAENRRLU
EZMSOLANRAK
MFHLDGEHMAJBI
OQONFETYT
RBWOGRSDERI
AMQELNARLIBRO
CSOCMLINSAATYHN
ANEILKMDPME
ENALWDIDERSIL
PFETCDDNROLEANU
EFLMIHOACBAGAHCA
Y
OEVIOWEIGTFSP
VCSIOGSNIIFSOU
YMKITRCDSJESUSNRH
NCRSWYHNRECHRISTOES
SBKZABSCECHRISTMASSJM
KRIMIOARJOYLERBWM
VOE
YED
FNT

Angels	frankincense	Melchior	Wisemen
animals	gold	Messiah	Yuletide
Balthazar	Goodwill	myrrh	
Bethlehem	Herod	Nativity	
carols	Incarnation	ox	
Caspar	Jerusalem	Peace on earth	
cave	Jesus	Savior	
Christ	Joseph	shepherds	
Christmas	Joy	Son of God	
donkey	manger	star	
flocks	Mary	swaddling	

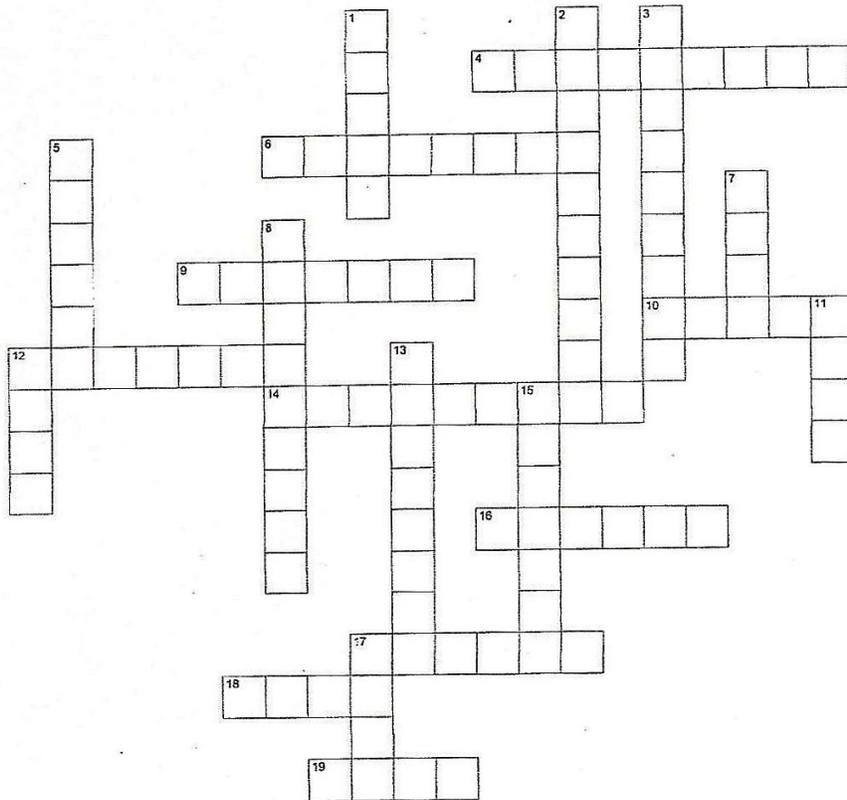
Word Search Puzzle

Nativity-3

F
 MXY
 THIRD
 CHARITY
 XEJBLMARY
 CHILDLESSDY
 PIXANGELSYKTC
 AJPMLQNOZCEHLEB
 OROERHOLYOFHOLIES
 FJCFFROIUTHEOTOKOSP
 KKRHJAFUPSCAVEGABRIEL
 BTIUAMQSESHAYZACHARIASK
 JHBRNNETNTRAEIEEUBTEMPLEM
 MVVVQCGSJHOIILCAIKLQPRIESTG
 QVKXLESCORRNNEIHKEPRAYERM
 GBVELINGAEEGGMETSVABABY
 PUREAIYWCEJQMPSSINXNL
 MFUHJBUWHQEVYTI RNST
 BARRENEHIBCXANGAE
 SHEPHERDMHTYGI
 GOLDENGATEEON
 KESCORNEDHD
 YBHPZADRG
 VIRGINF
 RWOAN
 PDD
 S

Angels	Gabriel	Priest	Uncle
Anna	GoldenGate	Prophecies	Virgin
Archangel	Holy of Holies	Pure	Virgin
Baby	Isaiah	Rejected	Zacharias
Barren	Jerusalem	Scorned	
Blessing	Joachim	Shepherd	
Cave	Mary	Temple	
Charity	Messiah	Theotokos	
Childless	Offering	Third	
Fasting	Prayer	Three	

Nativity Crossword Puzzle



Down

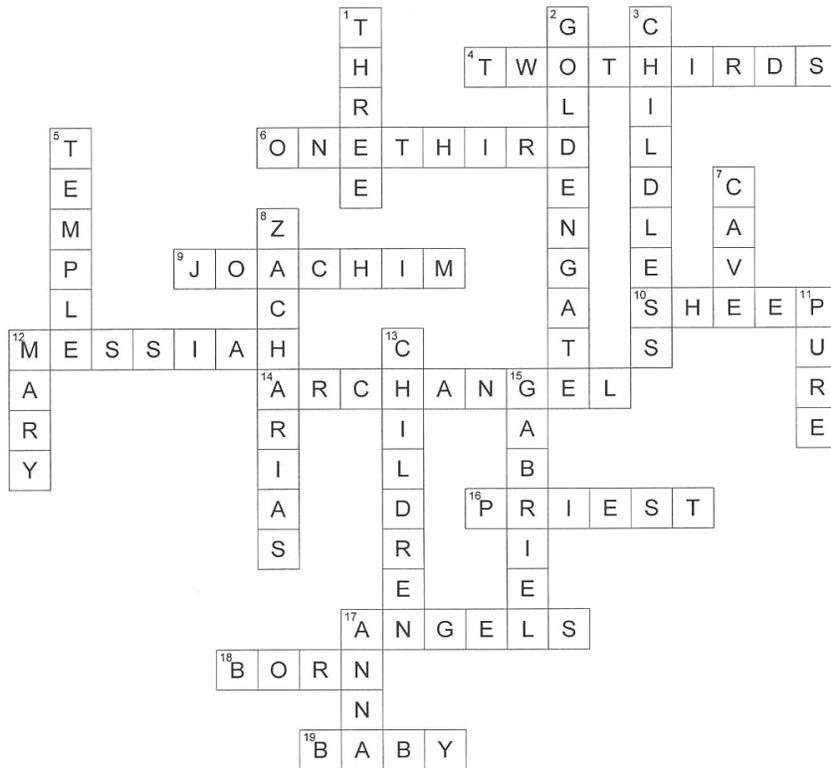
1. When Mary was this age, she went to live in the temple.
2. The angel told Joachim his wife would meet him at this place, as a sign from God.
3. Joachim and Anna were scorned because they were _____.
5. Anna went to this place to pray when she heard of their troubles.
7. Joachim went to a shepherd's _____ to pray to God.
8. The priest who received Mary in the temple was her uncle _____.

Across

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Joachim and Anna gave this amount of their yearly income to the temple, and to the poor. 6. Joachim and Anna lived on this much of their income. 9. The name of Mary's father 10. Joachim had many flocks of _____. 12. All of Israel prayed that some day, a pure girl would give birth to the _____. 14. God sent the same _____ to Anna that had gone to Joachim. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. The _____ refused Joachim's offering because they had no child. 17. While she lived in the temple, these messengers of God often came to her. 18. The people were amazed when Mary was _____. 19. The angel told him God had heard his prayer, and they would have a _____. |
|--|--|

11. Mary wanted to remain unmarried and _____ out of love for God.
12. When Joachim and Anna's child was born, they named her _____.
13. People believed that to have _____ was a sign that God was pleased with you.
15. God sent this Archangel to Joachim.
17. The name of Mary's mother

Nativity Crossword Puzzle Answers



Across

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>4. Joachim and Anna gave this amount of their yearly income to the temple, and to the poor.</p> <p>6. Joachim and Anna lived on this much of their income.</p> <p>9. The name of Mary's father</p> <p>10. Joachim had many flocks of _____.</p> <p>12. All of Israel prayed that some day, a pure girl would give birth to the _____.</p> <p>14. God sent the same _____ to Anna that had gone to Joachim.</p> | <p>16. The _____ refused Joachim's offering because they had no child.</p> <p>17. While she lived in the temple, these messengers of God often came to her.</p> <p>18. The people were amazed when Mary was _____.</p> <p>19. The angel told him God had heard his prayer, and they would have a _____.</p> |
|---|---|

Down

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1. When Mary was this age, she went to live in the temple.</p> <p>2. The angel told Joachim his wife would meet him at this place, as a sign from God.</p> <p>3. Joachim and Anna were scorned because they were _____.</p> <p>5. Anna went to this place to pray when she heard of their troubles.</p> <p>7. Joachim went to a shepherd's _____ to pray to God.</p> <p>8. The priest who received Mary in the temple was her uncle _____.</p> | <p>11. Mary wanted to remain unmarried and _____ out of love for God.</p> <p>12. When Joachim and Anna's child was born, they named her _____.</p> <p>13. People believed that to have _____ was a sign that God was pleased with you.</p> <p>15. God sent this Archangel to Joachim.</p> <p>17. The name of Mary's mother</p> |
|---|--|

Other Ideas for Celebrating the Nativity Season

Advent Wreath

The practice of using an advent wreath is something often seen in Europe and America. While the western practice is to mark western advent with four weeks, it is something easily adapted to our traditions. We have found it a special way to keep the focus on the journey toward Christmas.

Start with an evergreen wreath, and place six candles at equal intervals around the wreath, and one candle in the middle. The six candles around the wreath stand for the six Sundays of the Nativity fast. The one candle in the middle is for Nativity itself. Some years Nativity may fall on the last Sunday, so you would light both candles that day.

In a church school setting, light one candle the first week, lighting it and an additional candle every week. On Nativity itself, all seven candles would be lit! If a family wishes to do this at home as well, they can light the candle every evening, adding the next candle every Sunday.

When lighting the candle, it is nice to sing this simple song.

♩ = 120

Ad-vent, ad-vent, the can - dle burns! First one, two, thr - ee

7

four, fi - ve, and six! Then stands the Chri - st - child i - n our midst!

Gathered in the candle glow is a wonderful time to read Christmas stories, to sing Christmas carols, and to practice the Nativity troparion and kontakion as well!

Living Creche Scene

A living creche is a depiction of those who gathered in Bethlehem at the Nativity of Christ. The scene is set with real people in costume, not moving or talking, silently and reverently adorning the Christ Child, witnessing the miracle of the Incarnation.

There are many ways of doing this—in the church courtyard, or in a darkened classroom, lit gently by candles or luminaria (which are paper bags with votive lights inside). You can have a narrator read the text of the Nativity from the Gospel of St. Luke if you like.

You will need these characters—Mary, Joseph, shepherds, wise men, angels, and baby Jesus. We have done it with adults, and a child or two among the angels and shepherds, but you can use older teens and make it a youth group activity. (If you do it outside, you may need to use a doll for the baby as it might be too cold.) You can also have live animals if they are available!

You might have an “angel” escort people in after Mary and Joseph and Jesus are in position. The shepherds and wise men can enter or be in position, as you choose.

Plan for the living crèche to be in place for about 30-45 minutes. It is simply a silent opportunity to join the angels and others in the adoration of the birth of Christ. If you have a choir, or the youth group is able, sing some carols as well.

This is also a good activity to invite the public to attend.

Advent Calendar

In an Orthodox Church School setting, you can make a very nice Advent calendar that helps to reinforce the important steps along the way to the feast of Nativity.

You will need two large sheets of paper or posterboard. One will be the backing and the other the front cover. You will also need a paper icon of the Nativity (larger than the other icons is nice), and 6 other icons that depict the lessons you are using. Some suggestions are:

Joachim & Anna, Annunciation, Jesse Tree, Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple, Joseph the Foster-father of Christ, and Archangel Gabriel.

Using double-sided tape, attach the icons to the backing page. Place the Nativity icon in the center of the backing page. Arrange the other icons around it, not in the order they will be opened.

Using a sheet of tissue paper, trace carefully where the icons are on the page. Using this as a guide, mark the places of the icons on the paper that will be used as the cover. Using blue pastel chalk or watercolor paint, color the front piece. If painting, you can use a wet sponge instead of a brush to get a nice swirly heavenly effect. Cut away the areas you marked so that the icons can be revealed. You can either cut these as a door, leaving a side attached, or cut the entire door off, and reattach it using gold and silver stick-on stars. Generously adorn the front piece with stick-on stars in different sizes, in gold and silver. To indicate the order in which to open the doors, place numbers on a star on each door.

For the Nativity icon, you can either remove the entire door as a whole, or make additional cuts to reveal portions of the icon to talk about before removing the rest of the cover. Doing this helps to highlight the special elements of the Nativity icon. The Holy Spirit, the wise men, the shepherds, the midwives, Joseph being tempted, the animals, the angels, and finally, the Theotokos and Jesus Christ. If making the entire calendar is not possible, you could simply do a small calendar using the Nativity icon only, and use the cut outs described above as the piece that is removed. You can simply use the lesson time to discuss that aspect of the Nativity and why it is important.

Source Materials

The Holy Bible, especially the Nativity as related in Sts. Matthew and Luke

The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, Volume 4; Published by Holy Apostles Convent and Dormition Skete (Buena Vista CO), 1989.

This book uses text from the Holy Scriptures, the Orthodox church services, sermons of the Holy Fathers, and information from the Protoevangelium of St. James*, to fill in more detail about the events in the life of the Theotokos and the birth of Christ. Excellent resource for the teacher, not to read to the children.

The Service for the Nativity of Christ from the Festal Menaion—especially matins, and the services for the other feasts that are mentioned in the lessons.

The Christ Child, By Maud Petersham (illustrator) and Miska Petersham. Doubleday, 1985. This book is beautifully illustrated and has the text from the gospel of St. Luke. Very nice just to read to the children. It is out of print, but can be found online. It is worth the effort to get it!

The Law of God by Seraphim Slobodskoi, Holy Trinity Monastery Publications

The Prologue of Ochrid by St. Nikolai Velimirovic

Lives of the Saints by St. Dimitri of Rostov

The Life of the Virgin by St. Maximus the Confessor, Yale University Press

Mary the Mother of God: Sermons by St. Gregory Palamas, Mount Thabor Publishing

* The Protoevangelium of St. James

Although this book has been regarded as apocryphal (not actually written by the Apostle James), and therefore was not accepted as Holy Scripture, it relates traditions concerning the Mother of God that were accepted as part of the deposit of faith by the Early Church.