

LISTEN TO CHRISTMAS

by Judy Gattis Smith



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CAST

Narrator	Tells the Christmas story and directs the audience in sound effects.
Choir	Sings four Christmas carols.
Tableau Characters	Mary, Joseph, three Wise Men, two shepherds. Come to front of church as directed and form a silent, unmoving picture.
Readers	Five students who each tell a legend about a Christmas animal.

Author's Notes

Is it possible in this noisy, neon, commercialized Christmas season to help children experience the great awe and wonder of the first Christmas? Can children who have seen excerpts of the Christmas story on TV and billboards comprehend the freshness and simplicity of the first Christmas story? This play attempts to do these things by focusing on the simple aspects of that first Christmas: the unchanging sounds of nature, the comfortable presence of gentle animals, the stillness and mystery of the first Christmas eve.

Sight and sound are the two senses the play uses to capture this mood. The audience, directed by the narrator, creates the sounds of Christmas and becomes, not merely spectators, but a spontaneous creative force in the play.

As the eyes of the audience watch a silent tableau of the familiar Christmas scene unfurl, they also use their voices, feet, hands and songs to experience the events of that first Christmas.

—Judy Smith

PRESENTATION NOTES

This play was written to be presented in a church sanctuary, but a church fellowship hall or large church school classroom will serve equally well.

It was written initially for Church School boys and girls, aged 8 - 12, but can easily be adapted for younger or older children.

Though the basic body of the play should be presented as written, there are a few places where you may want to change the script to suit your situation and need.

For example, four Christmas carols are suggested. These may be sung by the entire audience, or by a youth or children's choir, or by a single musician. Feel free to substitute other music if it is more appropriate to your situation.

A tableau is suggested involving a Mary and Joseph, wise men and shepherds. This can be seven students or can be expanded to include more. If the tableau idea has been used frequently in your church, consider substituting this idea: have each child bring forward a ceramic figure depicting the appropriate nativity character. Throughout the presentation they would be building a nativity scene. An altar table with the backdrop already in place could be used.

If you have other children you wish to involve, the poem "The Friendly Beasts", in Scene II, can be read chorally by a group of students rather than the narrator.

REFERENCES

1. "So Hallow'd and So Gracious is the Time," p. 16, *The Animals Christmas*. Stories and Poems compiled by Anne Thaxter Eaton, The Viking Press, 1944.
2. "The Friendly Beast," p. 16, *Welcome Christmas*, ed. Anne Thaxter Eaton, The Viking Press, 1955.
3. Information on the animals legends from *The Animals Christmas* (see 1.)
4. Parts of "Christmas Legends" by Denis McCarthy, p. 11 *The Animals Christmas*. Stories and Poems compiled by Anne Thaxter Eaton, The Viking Press, 1944.

Informal Beginning

NARRATOR: We want to think together about the Christmas story and try to imagine what it would have been like to really have been there in Bethlehem on that first Christmas Eve. What would we have seen? What would we have heard? I am going to ask all of you here to help me tell the story of Christmas by making some of the sounds that were heard on that night. (*Divide the audience into four groups and practice. Choose someone to read the solo angel part.*)

**Group I: sleepers — light snore sound like stacked
Zzzzzs**

Group II: lambs — soft baas

Group III: cold wind blowing

Group IV: angels — “Glory to God in the Highest”

Solo Angel: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord”

When I point to you in the story, you make the sound.

The first scene of our story is the scene of the shepherds on the hillside. Ready?

SCENE 1

NARRATOR: The story begins many years ago. It was a chilly night. There was a *cold wind blowing* (*Sound*). Out on a lonely hillside a group of shepherds were *sleeping* (*Sound*). They were very weary. All day they had followed their flock of sheep up one hill and down the other looking for grass. Now the grass was white with frosted dew. The sheep were huddled together against the cold hill. Some of the little *lambs* (*Sound*) were still awake and could be heard. It was a dark night and cold.

There were no beds for these resting shepherds.

1 They wrapped themselves in their cloaks and lay on the
2 hard, cold ground and tried to *sleep* (Sound).

3 The *cold wind* (Sound) continued to blow over the
4 tired shepherds. The little *lambs* (Sound) nestled closer
5 to their mother to stay warm.

6 One shepherd was awake, pacing to and fro by the
7 fire, keeping a watch that no prowlers come thieving to
8 steal the sleeping flocks or no wild animal come to drag
9 off a tiny lamb. He stopped to listen. He heard the *sleeping*
10 *shepherds* (Sound). He heard the little *lambs* (Sound). He
11 heard the *cold wind blowing* (Sound).

12 Suddenly all was still. The dark sky became brighter
13 and brighter until it was a flash of silver light. The soft
14 voice of an Angel was heard.

15 SOLO ANGEL: Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings
16 of great joy. Unto you is born this day in the city of David
17 a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

18 NARRATOR: The shepherds awoke startled, amazed. They hid
19 their frightened, dazzled eyes. The huddled flocks began
20 to stir and mill about. The sky was as bright as morning.
21 Suddenly a multitude of angels appeared praising God
22 and saying: "Glory to God in the Highest" (Sound) repeat.

23 This is how it might have sounded on a hillside in
24 Bethlehem long ago.

25 CHOIR: "The First Noel." (During the singing children acting as
26 shepherds come forward and take a pose in the church.)
27

28 SCENE 2 — The Manger

29
30 NARRATOR: How do you picture the stable where Christ was
31 born? Close your eyes and try to see it in your mind. Do
32 you see Mary? and Joseph? Do you see the manger with
33 straw? Do you see any animals?

34 "Through the centuries since the starry night when the
35 Christ Child was born in a manger at Bethlehem, people

in all countries have joyously told and retold legends of the first Christmas Eve. In so many of these Christmas legends there are animals and birds and other creatures that it seems as though man must always have felt that, in this best-loved festival, all living things should have a share.”¹

There is a Christmas carol from the Twelfth Century called *The Friendly Beasts*. I'd like to read this to you now and ask you to be the animal noises. (*Assign four groups and practice.*)

Group I: donkey — bray

Group II: cow — moo

Group III: sheep — baa

Group IV: dove — coo

Jesus our brother, strong and good,
Was humbly born in a stable rude,
And the friendly beasts around him
stood,
Jesus our brother, strong and good.

There was a *donkey* (*Sound*)

“I”, said the donkey, shaggy and
brown,

“I carried his mother uphill and
down,

I carried her safely to Bethlehem
town;

I”, said the donkey shaggy and
brown. (*Sound*)

There was a *cow* (*Sound*)

“I”, said the cow, all white and red,

1 **"I gave him my manger for his bed,**
 2 **I gave him my hay to pillow his head;**
 3 **I", said the cow all white and red.**

4 *(Sound)*

5
 6 **There was a *sheep*** *(Sound)*

7
 8 **"I", said the sheep with the curly horn,**
 9 **"I gave him my wool for his blanket**
 10 **warm,**
 11 **He wore my coat on Christmas morn;**
 12 **I", said the sheep with the curly horn.**

13 *(Sound)*

14
 15 **There was a *dove*** *(Sound)*

16
 17 **"I", said the dove, from the rafters**
 18 **high,**
 19 **"Cooed him to sleep, my mate and I,**
 20 **We cooed him to sleep, my mate and I;**
 21 **I", said the dove from the rafters**
 22 **high. *(Sound)***

23 **And every beast by some good spell,**
 24 **In the stable dark was glad to tell,**
 25 **Of the gift he gave Immanuel,**
 26 **The gift he gave Immanuel.²**

27 *(Twelfth Century Carol)*

28
 29 **CHOIR: "Away In A Manger"** *(During the singing those children*
 30 *acting MARY and JOSEPH come forward and take their place*
 31 *in the tableau.)*

32 **NARRATOR: A donkey was there, a cow, a sheep, a dove.**
 33 **What other animals have been there? There are legends**
 34 **about the animals around the manger from countries all**
 35 **over the world.**

READER I: A dog might have been there. Among the Albanian people, the first bite of food on Christmas morning is given to the house dog as a sign of the sympathy which people believe animals have with the Nativity. In some parts of the world, (and perhaps this is a custom we can adopt) every animal indoors and out has extra food on Christmas.

READER II: Bees and glowworms have been connected with Christmas. In some parts of England, it is believed that if you listen outside the bee-hive at midnight on Christmas Eve, you will hear bees inside humming in honor of the Holy Child. There is also the legend of the little beetle who made his home on the roof of the stable in Bethlehem, and heard the angels tell the good news of the Christ Child's birth. Flying to one of the angels, he begged that he might be allowed to tell the other animals the good news. The angel was pleased, and placed a tiny glowing spark between the beetle's wings. Animals, birds and insects saw the little light, and knew what it meant. When the little beetle returned to the stable, he continued to fly about all night, giving out a faint light by which Mary and Joseph could watch the child. Ever since then, the beetle has been known as the glowworm.

READER III: Have you heard the legend of the Christmas robin? This legend says the robin's breast is red because he fluttered his little wings to quicken the dying fire which had been built to warm the Christ Child as he lay in the manger. As the fire grew brighter, the feathers on the robin's breast caught the glow from the flames and has remained red ever since.

READER IV: There might have been a spider at the first manger. There is a Polish folk legend that says that on Christmas night, the Christ Child began to weep with the cold. A little spider who lived in the stable brought

1 his silken web, and laid it at the baby's feet. It was soft
 2 as thistledown and warm as wool. The child stopped
 3 crying, and smiled at the little grey spider.³

4 **READER V:** And there is a final legend that says at midnight
 5 on Christmas Eve, all the animals kneel to pray.

6 "Horse and cow and wooly sheep,
 7 Wake themselves from their heavy
 8 sleep. . .

9 Far away in the forest dark,
 10 Creatures timidly wake and hark.
 11 Feathered bird and furry beast,
 12 Turn their eyes to the mystic East. . . .
 13 Christmas morn, the legends say:
 14 All the cattle kneel to pray;
 15 Even the wildest beast afar;
 16 Know the light of the Saviour's star."⁴

17
 18 *SCENE 3 — The Wise Men*
 19

20 **NARRATOR:** For our third scene, we want to think about
 21 the visit of the Wise Men to the stable. Again, I'd like you
 22 to be the sounds of Christmas. (*Divide into four groups or*
 23 *use the four groups from Scene 2. Practice the sounds.*)

24 **Group I:** star of Bethlehem — soft whistle

25 **Group II:** people whispering: "What does it mean?"

26 **Group III:** camels — soft footsteps

27 **Group IV:** servants of the king: "Yes, O King."

28 **NARRATOR:** In the east, where the Wise Men came from,
 29 there were great astrologers. They studied the stars to
 30 determine the weather, winds and storms. The stars told
 31 them many things. When Christ was born in Bethlehem,
 32 a new *star* arose (*Sound*). It was greater and brighter than
 33 any they had ever seen before. The astrologers murmured
 34 together in awe. (*People whispering sound*) At last, one said,
 35 "This is a mighty sign. A king will rise, his power beyond

1 **all kings, and he will be born beneath that *star*** *(Sound)*.

2 They hurried to tell their king. The king knew their
3 words were filled with wisdom, and he quickly called his
4 servants. “**Servants, make ready my swift departure**
5 **across the desert. Toward the west I travel many weeks.**”

6 **SERVANTS:** *(Sound, “Yes, O King.”)*

7 **NARRATOR:** “**With retinue in full of camels**”

8 **SERVANTS:** *(Sound, “Yes, O King.”)*

9 **NARRATOR:** “**With servants, raiment, food**”

10 **SERVANTS:** *(Sound, “Yes, O King.”)*

11 **NARRATOR:** “**Wait, one thing more. Let frankincense of**
12 **costliest kind be carried on the camel next to mine. Go.**”

13 **SERVANTS:** *(Sound, “Yes, O King.”)*

14 **NARRATOR:** Two other kings from the East had also seen
15 the wondrous star. They, too, assembled a proud array.
16 One carried a marvelous box full of gold, and one a barrel
17 filled with costly myrrh.

18 The three kings came riding from far away *(Sound*
19 *of footsteps)*. And they traveled by night and they slept by
20 day.

21 They were always guided by the beautiful white *star*
22 *(Sound)*.

23 Sometimes they stopped to rest, and they would talk
24 with the people they met. “We go to find the King of the
25 Jews.” And when they left, the people would murmur
26 together, “What does it mean?” *(Sound)*

27 *(Footstep Sounds)* Can you imagine them traveling?
28 Camels with huge, soft strides plodding through sandy
29 deserts, where there were only oases and cloudless skies;
30 on and on, to forest and plains and grasses and trees and
31 splashing of rain on their backs; through Persia’s sandy
32 plains, through Syrian land, now through Moab they
33 went. *(Footsteps throughout)*

34 And the large, white *star* of Bethlehem led them.
35 *(Sound. Then footstep sound.)* Can you see the kings



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