

THE HANGING OF THE GREENS

by James C. Huffstutler



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The Hanging of the Greens

by JAMES C. HUFFSTUTLER

Background and Production Information

The Hanging of the Greens is a unique service for Christmas Eve during which the sanctuary or meeting place is decorated.

The basic fabric of music and dialog is provided by the script. The ingenuity of the "event" having to do with the greens is entirely dependent on the creativity of those designing the service and the architecture of the place where the event is staged. (For ease of explanation, it will be assumed that the place of presentation is a church sanctuary.)

Prior to the service, the sanctuary is barren of as much decoration as possible. The service begins with a Call to Worship and a processional hymn; then two readers set the tone for the service. Following these two readers is a dialog between two more readers, a man and a woman (Aaron and Rachael), portraying two characters who witnessed the miraculous Christmas events. The costumes for Aaron and Rachael may be biblical, but modern formal wear is equally appropriate and may be preferable.

Music in the service is sung by the congregation and choir, although soloists could be used instead of a choir by substituting music.

As the readings and music proceed, a group of eight to twelve people are involved in a number of "events" wherein greens are hung, candles lighted, a Christmas tree decorated, etc. These events will be entirely dependent upon the type of architecture in the room, the greenery available, the personnel available, the equipment at your disposal, etc. This is the area of the greatest individual creativity — and the greatest reward.

The following is a list of *suggested* events; all must be engineered in a way where they may happen quickly and easily:

Event #1

This event should bring a great burst of greenery into the sanctuary, preferably that part where the congregation is seated. If there are columns or posts down the side of the church, garlands of greenery could be hung between them or large sprays of evergreen hung upon them. (If you use sprays of greenery, you may want to drape ribbons between columns or posts prior to the service.) The same effect can be achieved,

where there are no columns or posts, by hanging garlands or sprays (on hooks) at a number of points along the side walls.

Event #2

This event should also bring greenery among the participants — now, perhaps, down a center aisle. Small wooden boxes can be manufactured with an inverted block “U” on the bottom to fasten or fit over the tops of flat-topped pews. In these will be placed poinsettias, small evergreen trees, bouquets of greenery, etc. An option would be a number of “candle poles,” about six to eight feet high, which would be fastened to a number of pews in the center aisle.

NOTE: Many localities will not allow live candles among the congregation. If live candles are to be used, they should be lighted after the congregation is seated and extinguished before the congregation exits. A suitable substitute would be small penlight flashlights in frosted glass chimneys.

Event #3

Now the front (chancel) needs some attention. Candelabra can be decorated with greens (ivy ropes are effective) and lighted. An alternative would be greens and candles brought in and placed on the communion table or altar.

Event #4

A Christmas tree has been previously set up in place. Tree lights, also previously set, are brought up on a dimmer. (A regular household dimmer can be used for this purpose.)

NOTE: Whenever using dimmers in a room in which a public address system is used, check out the combination to make sure the dimmers do not throw a hum into the sound system.

Event #5

On the top of the tree is a regular size, clear (not frosted) bulb, 60-75 watts. This is controlled with a second dimmer. This light is slowly brought up during the discussion of the star; then decorations are quickly placed upon the tree.

Event #6

This is the highpoint of the service and must be carefully conceived. There is a great deal of drama in something being

raised. In some churches, where there is a large cross (not a crucifix or a cross with figure) in the front, a huge wreath on a wire frame could be raised on the cross, by means of ropes and pulleys, to form a Celtic Cross. Or a large garland could be raised, again with ropes and pulleys, across the front of the church. Whatever event is chosen should be the "final touch," and dramatic movement must be carefully considered.

NOTE: It is best to sing familiar music at this point, since spectators may become so involved in watching the action that they are unable to watch printed words at the same time!

A Note Regarding Suggested Music

Christmas music is very personal with each congregation. For some, it just isn't Christmas unless certain music is sung. What is important is the mood suggested by the music and the story it tells. Some unfamiliar music may be introduced by the choir — if you have one and choose to use it; but this should be a service of generally familiar music.

Since the Christmas Eve service is often the highpoint in the church's celebration of Christmas, it may be possible to teach any music which is unfamiliar at times prior to the Hanging of the Greens, e.g., in the services in the weeks before Christmas or at a family night.

How the Greens Are Hung

This is an ideal service to involve young people. A group of young people may be responsible for wiring the greens (boughs, garlands, wreaths, etc.) to frames and doing all the necessary engineering work prior to the rehearsal. It is essential to know how everything will happen *prior* to the rehearsal. If there is fear that the greens will wilt if prepared too much (even a day!) in advance, practice with wire frames upon which the greens will later be tied. In the rehearsal, don't just "talk it through"; do what actually will be done to provide a simulated substitute activity if necessary.

Modifying the Script

Be sure the script fits with your events! The script talks about Christmas bells, for instance, near the end. These could be handbells, sleighbells, chimes on the organ, or even small angel chimes, amplified with a microphone. But if you're not going to have bells, make sure that the line is changed!

Personnel Required

Ideally, the service will be executed with four readers, twelve young people as "hangers," one stage director. Musicians could include organist, bell ringers, choirs, instrumentalists, etc. In addition, you may need separate technical personnel for sound amplification, house light control, and tree light control.

A Christmas Offering?

The service has been written with the possibility that an offering may be received. If this is to happen, it should follow the Call to Worship and precede the processional hymn.

An Extra Touch

Congregations, especially children, appreciate some focal point prior to the service. A simple manger could be placed in the chancel area and filled with straw. (This could be gently lighted with a spotlight or a light in the manger.) This device has a way of pulling people's imaginations back to the historical event as the story is told in other ways.

Source for the Music

Processional hymn: *O Come, All Ye Faithful* is found in numerous Christmas collections. *The Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A.* (1940 edition) includes six verses which may be necessary for a full processional. In addition, the author has translated a verse from the original Latin, which is not found in any other collection; it is suggested as a last verse:

"Soon shall we see the
Splendor of the Father,
Godhead Eternal robed in fleshly veil
Lying as a child now
Wrapped in swaddling raiment." (*Refrain*)

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing is in the Episcopal hymnal.

Oh Little Town of Bethlehem is in numerous collections, also the Episcopal hymnal.

In the Bleak Midwinter is in the Episcopal hymnal.

Silent Night is in numerous collections, also Episcopal hymnal.

Anthem, *As It Fell Upon a Night*, arranged by K. K. David, is published by Galaxy Music Publications, New York. Any song or

carol having to do with the star would be an acceptable substitute.

Carol of the Bells by V. D. Thompson is published by Lorenz Publishing Company, 501 E. 3rd Street, Dayton, Ohio 45401. A substitute carol might be *The First Noel* or *Joy to the World*.

Anthem, *What Is This Lovely Fragrance*, arranged by H. Willan, is published by Oxford University Press — Don Mills, Toronto. Another choir anthem might be substituted here. Be careful not to have two congregational carols too close together near the end if you should use congregation instead of choirs.

The closing congregational hymn should be a joyous carol and quite familiar. *Once In Royal David's City* (Episcopal hymnal) would be excellent.

Closing choir response, *Ah, Dearest Jesus, Holy Child* (Von Himmel Hoch) is found in many collections and *The Hymnbook* (United Presbyterian Church et. al.).

Suggested Program Format

THE HANGING OF THE GREENS

(Date)

(Time)

PARTICIPANTS

(list names)

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

THE CHRISTMAS OFFERING *(optional)*

OFFERTORY

CONGREGATIONAL HYMN: "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

(Print necessary verses including:)

"Soon shall we see the Splendor of the Father;
Godhead Eternal robed in fleshly veil
Lying as a child now wrapped in swaddling raiment.
(Refrain)

"This is the season of hope when people brighten drab corners with festive decorations and send messages proclaiming their joy and best wishes to those whom they have been too busy to remember throughout the course of the year."

CONGREGATIONAL HYMN: "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

"But quietly now. Listen outside. Come away from the fire, from your knitting, from your reading. Hear the singing. And listen: the Christmas bells are ringing!"

CHOIR: "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem"

THE PREPARATION

"Each time of desperation, times when some thought it would have been better if the sun were never to shine again, God gave us a leader — and more than that, he gave us hope."

CHOIR: "In the Bleak Midwinter"

THE BIRTH

"The child was magnificent: he was beautiful! And although I knew I must be imagining it, he seemed to have a look of confidence, of peace — of that word I keep saying since that evening — of hope!"

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL: "Silent Night"

THE PROPHETIC STAR

"The skies, for some reason, seemed alive that night...Doubtless there were few others than ourselves who noticed; but then, it appears to me that there are many who pass by the most obvious signs and think they are commonplace."

CHOIR: "As It Fell Upon a Night" (*arr. K. K. David*)

THE HOMAGE OF THE SHEPHERDS AND MAGI

"Hope means possibility. We had been waiting, but we didn't know what we were waiting for. And now we had it. Our lives had — possibility! That's what we wanted to tell you. That's what we wanted to share with you."

BELL CHOIR: "Carol of the Bells" (*Thompson*)

"The bells are ringing! It's not too late! The candles and the lights and the tree and the greens: it's Christmas Eve!"

CHOIR: "What Is This Lovely Fragrance?" (*arr. H. Willan*)

THE FEAST

"Now go finish with your preparations. We have a great feast to observe...but remember the stillness of the night in Bethlehem and the gift of the morning: the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ."

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL

BENEDICTION

"Yours is the hope of life in its fullness."

Yours is the love made manifest in Jesus Christ.
Yours is the gift of the Maiden of Galilee.
Yours is the peace of the silent night.
Yours is the joy of friends and family — remembered and
close by.
Yours is the blessing of God our Father,
whose gift to us this night is Christmas!”

CHOIR RESPONSE: “Ah, Dearest Jesus, Holy Child”

POSTLUDE

1 ORGAN VOLUNTARY

2 CALL TO WORSHIP: We've left our homes, with presents
3 under the trees and good plans for the day ahead. The
4 children are ready for the most miraculous night of the
5 year. We've taken this time to come together as the
6 people of God to worship him, to sing his praises and
7 hear again how he came to us in the birth of his Son,
8 Jesus Christ.

9 It is Christmas Eve: the night of the miracle — the
10 miracle which came to Mary and Joseph, the miracle
11 which comes to each of us when we open the doors of
12 our hearts and let Christ enter.

13 With this sense of expectance, of the miraculous close
14 at hand, let us put aside all other concerns and turn
15 ourselves to the worship of God. Glory in the highest!

16 THE OFFERING

17 OFFERTORY

18 HYMN: "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (*Processional*)

19 (*The only "Preparation of the House" to this point is a manger*
20 *with hay in the chancel; a soft light might come up on this as*
21 *the readers begin.*)

22 FIRST READER: We've come to dress the church and hear
23 again of the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ. We're
24 preparing for a birthday, an occasion of joy, but it is a
25 season of holy joy. It's a time of gifts, for remembering
26 especially those whom we love. It's a birthday which
27 has inspired legends, caused great songs and carols to
28 be written, warmed the iciest hearts, and reminded
29 people to speak of peace and good will in a world of
30 shaky truces and raging distrust.

31 SECOND READER: This is the season of hope when people
32 brighten drab corners with festive decorations and
33 send messages proclaiming their joy and best wishes to
34 those whom they have been too busy to remember
35 throughout the course of the year. But that hope — that

1 hope shines through, that hope stands before all people
2 — and for just a very few moments people stop and
3 wonder why they should not continue decorating
4 homes and streets and schools and offices. Why not
5 keep giving expressions of our concern to those whom
6 we love? Why not continue to work for peace and good
7 will — justice and happiness? Why not?

8 **FIRST READER:** Of course the adults among us will draw
9 themselves up and say, “But that’s not grown up! You
10 can’t have a birthday party every day!”

11 **SECOND READER:** And the child among us, who hasn’t yet
12 learned not to ask honest questions, will reply, “Why
13 not?”

14 **FIRST READER:** So we’ll celebrate the time of hope, the
15 moment of birth, the joyous night when the skies were
16 filled with the very sounds of God.

17 **MUSIC:** CONGREGATION sings “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

18 **EVENT #1:** During the singing of the hymn, garlands or decorated
19 boughs are hung at the sides of the nave.

20 **SECOND READER:** The night is cold, but it’s warm here
21 inside. The family is gathered together and the fire
22 burns brightly. The fire is almost alive; it not only
23 provides heat, it speaks of warmth. It dances on the logs
24 and sets color to all which it touches. The wood spits
25 and sizzles, then glows red with the warmth. The fire
26 sets off more than flames, though; it lights memories in
27 our minds. It makes the imagination dream and wonder.

28 **FIRST READER:** But quietly now. Listen outside. Come
29 away from the fire, from your knitting, from your
30 reading. Come in from the other rooms and your
31 unwrapped packages. Hear the singing; the carolers are
32 coming! And listen: the Christmas bells are ringing!

33 **MUSIC:** CHOIR sings “Oh Little Town of Bethlehem.”

34 **EVENT #2:** During the music, poinsettias are placed in pew boxes.

35 **AARON:** I remember. I remember it well. It was cold in

1 Bethlehem that winter. As I sit here thinking about it
2 now, warm and comfortable, it is hard to imagine just
3 how deeply the wind could bite as it cut through the
4 open spaces in the hut we called our home. It's not easy
5 for a man to subject his family to living conditions such
6 as those; but when it's all you've got, there's little reason
7 to make excuses.

8 **RACHAEL:** Aaron and I worried more about Nathan than
9 ourselves, though. Born in the warmth of the harvest
10 season, this was to be his first winter. And it was cold,
11 very cold.

12 **AARON:** Rachael and I wondered whether we had any right
13 to have children, to bring them into a world of misery
14 and disappointment. But she convinced me that parents
15 always had such questions. *Our* parents wondered that,
16 and yet we found happiness along the way. We found
17 love: we found each other.

18 **RACHAEL:** But I questioned if our love for each other would
19 be enough. What about the others? What bothered us
20 most was there seemed to be so little hope. Our people
21 had known tyranny and devastation in the past. But they
22 always had hope, and they always somehow made it.

23 **AARON:** You see, our God watched over us. When the world
24 turned from Paradise to corruption, God used Father
25 Noah to save a remnant to build again. And when
26 Father Abraham had been promised that his family
27 would become a great nation, he and Mother Sarah
28 were given a son through whom that promise might be
29 fulfilled.

30 **RACHAEL:** And when our people found themselves slaves in
31 Egypt, God gave them a leader in Moses to lead them
32 from their bondage.

33 **AARON:** When a nation needed to be built, God gave us our
34 beloved King David.

35 **RACHAEL:** Each time of desperation, times when some

1 thought it would have been better if the sun were never
2 to shine again, God gave us a leader — and more than
3 that, he gave us hope.

4 **AARON:** But where is that hope now? It has been a thousand
5 years since the time of David. We would still wonder
6 were it not for that night in Bethlehem.

7 **MUSIC:** CHOIR sings "In the Bleak Midwinter."

8 **EVENT #3:** The candelabra is decorated and lit.

9 **AARON:** As inadequate as our little shack was, it was better
10 than the places where some had to spend the night.

11 **RACHAEL:** Bethlehem was crowded to overflowing. People
12 were everywhere. With so many people, you would have
13 thought it was a holiday of some sort, but it was far
14 from that.

15 **AARON:** You see, our "wonderful" government decided the
16 time was right for what they euphemistically called a
17 "census." The proclamations, of course, assured us that
18 all this was happening so that Rome might bring us
19 even more benefits. But one does not need to be Caesar
20 Augustus to know that those token benefits are
21 achieved with record taxes.

22 **RACHAEL:** And an accounting of the people also means a
23 numbering of the young males; the ones who can make
24 the most trouble for a government in times of
25 dissatisfaction, the ones who can be pressed into
26 military service or labor gangs.

27 **AARON:** I was unhappy that so many people were without
28 accommodations, but what was I to do? Rachael, of
29 course, wanted to invite everyone in, but I finally
30 persuaded her that if we did, there would be no place for
31 us; and after all, we now had Nathan to watch out for.
32 There was no room at the inn next door — hadn't been
33 for days — but that night an unusual thing happened.

34 **RACHAEL:** I heard the back door of the inn close and I
35 looked out to see what was happening. I saw the

innkeeper ushering a man and a woman out to the stable behind the inn. It didn't take much to see that the young woman was ready to give birth to a child. I wondered what was so special about these two people, for others asked for the same provisions and had been emphatically denied them. I swear, that innkeeper had a heart of ice, and I wondered what it was, on that freezing night, that could melt such a heart.

AARON: Perhaps a mother *understands* what we men may always *wonder* about. Rachael went over to see if she could help the young woman in any way; but they assured her everything was all right.

RACHAEL: I soon knew what it was that changed the innkeeper's mind. You'd only have to speak a word to them to know they were different. I don't know exactly how to say it, but after I spoke only a few words to them, I had — hope!

AARON: A short cry some brief hours later told us that the young woman had given birth to a child. It was beautiful. The night was quiet, the stars were shining — I've never seen them shine quite so brightly — and there was a calm, not only over the town but a peace which touched our hearts and spirits.

RACHAEL: The child was magnificent; he was beautiful! And although I knew I must be imagining it, he seemed to have a look of confidence, of peace — of that word I keep saying since that evening — of hope! "What kind of child is this?" I asked Aaron. But he really didn't know what to answer.

MUSIC: CONGREGATION sings "Silent Night."

EVENT #4: During the carol, the lights on the Christmas tree, except for the light representing the star on top, come up very slowly, controlled by a dimmer.

AARON: I mentioned that the stars were shining that night. Something happened which you may not believe. The

1 skies, for some reason, seemed alive that night. It was
 2 almost as if angel visitors might appear any moment or
 3 the heavens would break into song. Oh, I know that's
 4 the language of poetry, but I don't know any other way
 5 to describe it.

6 **RACHAEL:** Aaron called me out to see, too. Otherwise, I
 7 would have thought sentimentality had taken over
 8 completely in this young husband of mine. He was
 9 watching one particular star. At first, it seemed no
 10 different to me. But as I watched it, it was different.

11 **AARON:** How do you say it? The night didn't become as day.
 12 Doubtless there were few other than ourselves who
 13 noticed; but then, it appears to me that there are many
 14 who pass by the most obvious signs and think they are
 15 commonplace.

16 **RACHAEL:** "Intensity" is probably the best description for
 17 it. That one star became so intense, it was almost as if it
 18 were heralding some special event, some divine
 19 manifestation, some gift from the heavens for all
 20 mankind.

21 **MUSIC:** CHOIR sings "As It Fell Upon a Night," arr. by K. K.
 22 David.

23 **EVENT #5:** During the singing, a clear bulb on top of the tree is
 24 slowly dimmed up to full intensity; at the end of the music, the
 25 bulb may be lowered to a moderate intensity.

26 *(During the following reading, ornaments are placed upon the*
 27 *tree.)*

28 **AARON:** In the days to come, unusual occurrences kept
 29 happening. First, a group of shepherds came to our
 30 shack looking for a newborn child. I told them of
 31 Nathan, but he was not the child they sought. I knew
 32 they were looking for the child in the stable — for
 33 Mary's child.

34 **RACHAEL:** I took them to the stable, and Joseph took them
 35 in to the manger. The same thing happened to them as



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