

VOICES OF BETHLEHEM

by Mary Lou Williams



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Voices of Bethlehem

A spontaneous audience participation
drama for Christmas

by Mary Lou Williams

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PASTOR

READER

INNKEEPER'S WIFE

ELIZABETH

MIDWIFE

WIFE (AND HUSBAND)

SOLDIER'S WIFE

SHEPHERD

MELCHIOR

CENSUS TAKER

WIDOW

SHEPHERD'S WIFE

JOSEPH

MARY

ANNE (MOTHER OF MARY)

CASPAR'S WIFE

HEROD'S WIFE

BALTHASAR

CARPENTER

YOUNG WOMAN

INNKEEPER

PRODUCTION NOTES

I love the Italian Nativity sets that have a story for each figure and involve the whole village experiencing the event, not just the shepherds, wise men, and other traditional characters. The idea of a living Nativity for a Christmas program started to develop in my mind. I sat down one evening and started to write and the idea came to life. I wrote the stories as I thought of our congregation. Each part took on the personality of a specific person.

This play is written as a spontaneous presentation. The excitement will build as your pastor enlists the help of unwitting congregants to play the roles of the characters in this Christmas drama. The element of surprise will cause your congregation to sit up and take notice! The participants will find that the experiential “hands-on” approach involves them in the historical events of that first Christmas in a new and compelling way. It was originally performed with a small group, so everyone had a part.

It is helpful if the Pastor and/or drama director can give some forethought to which people would be willing to participate in this “on-the-spot” drama. You’ll want to choose people who attend regularly and aren’t overly inhibited. You’ll probably have a good idea of which people would be best suited for the various walk-on roles. If someone defers, promptly ask someone else, or you can solicit volunteers. If you prefer, you can ask people to join the drama privately, as they enter the building. In the original production, the parts were distributed the week before the service. Even shut-ins were invited to participate from afar. They received a part to read aloud during the time the service was taking place. Whichever way you choose, make sure you communicate the circumstances and the lack of rehearsal to the congregation so they can share in the excitement of “on-the-spot” drama and so they are forgiving in case any slip-ups occur!

This drama is very easy to present. No rehearsal is needed — a plus for busy churches during the holiday time. All the parts are very brief mini monologs, so they are simple to do as “cold” readings. No costumes are required. The only set piece needed is a straw-filled manger with a blanket-

wrapped doll inside. Besides the doll, the only other prop needed is a blanket, and optionally, a rough-hewn wooden rattle. When the characters are called to the front, they gather in a tableau around the manger — some kneeling, some standing, and some sitting, for visual interest. Mary and Joseph should be at the center of the tableau. The characters may speak from their places around the manger, passing a hand-held microphone around, or they may break away from the tableau and go to the podium to say their lines, returning to the tableau when finished.

The Reader should be cast beforehand. This will give the drama a strong beginning and ending. It is very helpful to highlight each character's part so no one misses a cue. Before the production, you'll also want to enlist the help of someone to lead singing.

May your congregation experience Christmas in a fresh, new way through this spontaneous program on the events of Jesus' birth.

1 (PASTOR is at the pulpit. READER is at a well-lighted
2 podium over to one side.)

3 **Welcome**

4 **Call to worship**

5 **SONG: "O Come, All Ye Faithful"**

6 **Prayer**

7 **Offering**

8 **READER:** *(Reads Micah 5:2, KJV)* But thou Bethlehem
9 Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of
10 Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that
11 is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been
12 from of old, from everlasting.

13 **SONG: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"**

14 **PASTOR:** *(These remarks are merely a guideline and may be*
15 *modified to fit your circumstances and congregation.)* In Italy
16 every house has a *precipio*, or manger set that includes
17 not just the traditional characters at the stable, but the
18 whole village. Each of the villagers has a name, a history,
19 and a story of his or her own experience on that night
20 two thousand years ago. This Christmas program is
21 reminiscent of that "whole village" approach. As part of
22 our worship this evening, we are re-enacting the scene
23 from the first Christmas in a new, impromptu manner. I
24 will call several of you up here to play the parts of the
25 characters in Bethlehem for our Christmas drama.
26 *(PASTOR proceeds to select the CHARACTERS, either by*
27 *appointing them or by requesting volunteers. As each person*
28 *comes to the front, he/she is handed a highlighted script and*
29 *directed into position around the manger. When all are in place,*
30 *the PASTOR continues.)* Thank you all for participating in
31 this living Nativity! We look forward to each of you
32 sharing "your" experience with us. Let's go now to
33 Bethlehem, to the scene of our Savior's birth.

34 **READER:** *(Reads Luke 2:1-11, 17-18, KJV)* And it came to pass
35 in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar

1 Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this
 2 taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of
 3 Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one unto his own
 4 city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the
 5 city of Nazareth into Judea, unto the city of David which
 6 is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and
 7 lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused
 8 wife, being great with child.

9 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days
 10 were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she
 11 brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in
 12 swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger; because
 13 there was no room for them in the inn.

14 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding
 15 in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.
 16 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the
 17 glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were
 18 sore afraid.

19 And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for behold, I
 20 bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all
 21 people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David
 22 a Savior which is Christ the Lord.

23 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad
 24 the saying which was told them concerning this child.
 25 And all they that heard it wondered at those things
 26 which were told them by the shepherds.

27 Hear now the voices of Bethlehem.

28 INNKEEPER'S WIFE: *(Holds a blanket.)* I am so tired tonight.

29 All these people. There is no room anywhere. We even
 30 have people sleeping on the tables and under them. How
 31 am I to get breakfast tomorrow? And that poor girl who
 32 was about to give birth ... I'm so sorry we had to turn
 33 her away. I hope she's all right. Her husband was so
 34 worried. At least the stable is warm and clean — and
 35 quiet. She would not have had any privacy here. But I

1 feel bad that she was alone, with only her husband to
 2 help her. I think I'll take a blanket out there and see if
 3 there's anything I can do.

4 **ELIZABETH:** Mary is my cousin. We live many miles apart,
 5 so we don't see each other often. My husband, Zechariah
 6 and I live near Jerusalem with our baby John. Mary
 7 came to visit us some months ago while I was waiting for
 8 John's birth. As she approached us, the baby inside me
 9 jumped for joy, and I knew she was pregnant, too ... not
 10 with an ordinary child, but with the Son of God. It is
 11 near her time. I hope she is safe and well.

12 How strange the sky looks this night. There is a star I
 13 have never seen over Bethlehem. How bright it is.

14 **MIDWIFE:** I am the midwife of Bethlehem. When I was told
 15 a peasant girl was giving birth in a stable, I was busy
 16 with a difficult birth for a Roman soldier's wife. By the
 17 time I reached the stable the child was born, a strong
 18 boy. There were no complications, and the child was
 19 sleeping peacefully. I rewrapped the baby in his
 20 swaddling clothes and laid him back in the bed they had
 21 made in a manger. The animals in the stable created a
 22 warmth in the cold night that soon let the mother fall
 23 asleep as the father kept watch. As I left, I noticed a
 24 huge star directly over the stable, lighting the night as I
 25 made my way home.

26 **WIFE (AND HUSBAND):** When I was young, I worked
 27 alongside my husband to help raise our family. Now that
 28 we are old, the children are busy with their own families,
 29 and we live quietly. My husband used to lead the entire
 30 village in the songs of praise at the festivals. His voice
 31 would boom out in love and joy for God, and I would
 32 sing with him. Now he sits and dreams, lost in his
 33 thoughts, but sometimes I can see in his eyes the
 34 memories of what was once his great joy. I can no longer
 35 do much, but I think I will make a meal for the new

1 family. I would like to hold a tiny baby again.

2 **SOLDIER'S WIFE:** My baby was also born this night, also a
3 boy. I have had a dream that sometime years from now,
4 these two children will meet again. I cannot sleep. I saw
5 a hill and three crosses. I wonder what it means.

6 **SONG:** "Silent Night"

7 **SHEPHERD:** Bethlehem was David's town. David wrote, "the
8 Lord is my shepherd." I try to be a good shepherd to my
9 sheep and keep them safe. So when the angels appeared
10 as we were half dozing by the fire, our first thought was
11 for the sheep. But they were not afraid. Then the angel
12 told us to fear not, he had good news for us. A child was
13 born. A child that was the promised Messiah, Christ the
14 Lord. We must go to Bethlehem to see this child. But
15 someone must stay with the sheep to keep them safe. We
16 all want to go. As the head shepherd, I will stay until one
17 of them returns to let me go. We shall never forget the
18 song of the angels.

19 **MELCHIOR:** Our journey was long and difficult. At my age
20 riding a camel is not comfortable. The winds of the desert
21 were strong, blowing sand in our eyes and mouths. But my
22 friends and I were not afraid. We had waited for years for
23 the sign. When the star appeared we were ready, and we
24 followed it until we found the baby with his mother and
25 Joseph. My gift is gold. They may need the money it'll
26 bring to get away safely. I fear Herod means to harm the
27 child.

28 **CENSUS TAKER:** I have always worked with records and
29 handling money, so I was not surprised to be sent here
30 to help with this great census. But I wonder if even
31 Caesar realized what he was ordering. This small town
32 doesn't have the facilities to handle so many people at
33 once. Who would have dreamed so many could be
34 descendants of King David? He should have been born in
35 a larger city. There is nothing to do here. But tonight is

1 different somehow. People have been coming and going
 2 all night ... shepherds with loud tales of seeing angels ...
 3 and just now I saw some travelers on camels. Those men
 4 weren't descendants from David! What are they doing
 5 here? And look! It is late, but the streets are lighted by
 6 that strange star. What could it mean? I think I will
 7 record this in my census report.

8 WIDOW: I, too, came to see the baby. I waited until the
 9 crowds had gone. It takes me longer to walk and to talk.
 10 But I wanted to see the child, too. He lay there in the
 11 manger wide awake, just looking at me — not like a
 12 newborn, but as if he knew me. Then he reached his
 13 hand for me, and I knew he loved me just as I was. It
 14 was then I knew that he was God's Son.

15 SHEPHERD'S WIFE: My husband and son were in the fields
 16 with the sheep. I hadn't expected to see them for several
 17 weeks, until they needed more food. Imagine my surprise
 18 when they burst through the door, both talking at once
 19 about an angel ... no, *many* angels, and a baby who was
 20 a king. I thought at first they had found some wine, but
 21 they urged me to go back to the stable with them. Oh,
 22 what a precious baby. I took them some food — just
 23 cheese and bread, but they were very grateful. Poor girl,
 24 so far from home.

25 SONG: "What Child Is This?"

26 JOSEPH: (*Picks up the blanket-wrapped doll from the manger.*)
 27 My son. So tiny and precious, and yet so strong. See how
 28 he holds my finger? Someday he will hold the whole
 29 world in his hands. Yes, he is the Son of God, but he is
 30 my son also, mine to love and protect and to teach. Yes,
 31 he will know the Scriptures, but I will also teach him
 32 how to get along in the world, how to work with his
 33 hands, how to work with wood so that a yoke will rest
 34 easy on the back. I will protect him and his mother, for
 35 they are my life.



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