

CHRISTMAS IN JULY

by Mary Lou Williams



CHRISTIAN PUBLISHERS

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Christmas In July

A holiday program for summer

by Mary Lou Williams

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

ADULT READERS

Narrator

Advent Reader

Reader 1

Reader 2

Reader 3

Poem Reader

Pastor

Scripture Reader

CHILD ACTORS

Zechariah — *aged priest of Abijah*

Gabriel — *angel*

Mary — *young girl betrothed to Joseph*

Elizabeth — *aged wife of Zechariah*

Joseph — *carpenter betrothed to Mary*

Shepherds and Angels — *any number for final tableau*

SUPPORT PERSONNEL

Ushers

Pianist

Song Leader

Soloist

Food Servers

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Synopsis: *Christmas in July* celebrates everyone's favorite holiday when they least expect it. It is a great attention-getter and outreach event during the summer months. We invited former members and family members to attend and to bring pictures and memories. We sent Christmas cards to remind them two weeks in advance (see copy-and-personalize invitation on page vi) and urged them to invite their friends. The beloved carols and familiar Scriptures, Nativity tableau and pageant performances, readings of Henry van Dyke's "Keeping Christmas" and poetry, gift giving and receiving, candle lighting, holiday decorations, and Christmas cookies afterward all work together to create a warmth that will match the temperature outside.

Cast: Your church's children may be involved in the mini pageant as well as a tableau when the Christmas story from Luke is read.

As it is written, the script calls for a narrator plus seven readers; however, if your group is small, the Narrator may also read the parts of Readers 1–3, Advent Reader, Poem Reader, Pastor, and Scripture Reader, thus trimming the adult readers from eight to one.

Setup: You will need to set up the Advent wreath on a table at one side of the chancel area. The podium should be positioned centrally. A manger should be set up on the side of the stage opposite the Advent wreath. A palm plant should sit on the altar table or another visible place. Make sure there are adequate microphones for the participants.

Decorations: The centerpiece of the decorations is a potted palm plant. You may decorate the pot with tinsel if desired. The Advent wreath with candles should be placed on a small table in the chancel area. Any other decorating is optional. You may wish to place some garlands, candles, or holly around your sanctuary and/or on the table that holds the food at the fellowship after the program.

Costumes: You will need biblical-style robes, headpieces and sandals for the children playing the roles of Zechariah,

Gabriel, Mary, Elizabeth and Joseph. You may wish to have gray wigs for Zechariah and Elizabeth to show their advanced age. Gabriel should wear a white robe. The shepherds will need staffs. **Music:** Music is a big part of Christmas, and this program includes several Christmas carols that may be sung by soloists, ensembles or the congregation: “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” “Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” “Joy to the World,” “Silent Night” and “O Holy Night.” These carols may be found in the Christmas section of your hymnal. Please feel free to add, delete or substitute Christmas songs of your choosing.

Gifts: A meaningful part of the program is when the congregation writes down their gifts to Jesus. Pencils, slips of paper and envelopes may be stocked in the pews, or the supplies may be handed to each person upon entering the sanctuary. The ushers collect the envelopes by passing “Christmas gifts,” which are empty boxes wrapped in Christmas paper. A slit that is large enough to accommodate the envelopes should be cut into the top and a bow may be affixed. You may even add a “To Jesus” name tag. The envelopes should be held for six months until Advent, and then they may be returned to each person as a reminder of their special gift of the heart.

In addition, you may wish to provide a small token gift for all attending. Suggestions for inexpensive gifts include mini candy canes (purchased the previous Christmas), pens with a Christmas message (from a Bible bookstore purchased the previous season), or Christmas tree ornaments or bookmarks (handmade, perhaps by your church’s children). These small gifts may be placed in baskets for distribution when the congregation exits.

Post-program social event: It is fun to have a social event following the program to continue the theme of celebrating Christmas. This program was originally given on a Sunday morning, and we organized a lunch with cold cuts, cheese, salads, breads and Christmas cookies. Everyone enjoyed visiting and reminiscing. If your program is at night, you may simply have a Christmas cookie event afterward without the meal.

SUPPLIES AND PROPS

Christmas card invitations copied from page vi
 (They may be placed in church members' mailboxes or handed out after the service a couple weeks prior to the program.)

Small candles with shields — one for each person attending.
 (They may be placed in large baskets for people to take as they enter the sanctuary.)

Advent wreath and candles

Palm plant

Christmas decorations as desired

Biblical costumes for the pageant cast

Handwork, such as sewing or knitting, for Mary

Chair

Manger

Doll

Envelopes, slips of paper and pens or pencils
 (These items may be placed in the holders on the backs of each pew or distributed as the congregation enters the sanctuary.)

Wrapped gift boxes
 (May be only one or as many as the number of offering plates you usually use, depending on how you decide to collect the slips of paper.)

A small gift for all those present

Christmas cookies and coffee or other beverages for the social time following the program

Come celebrate the Good News!

Christmas in July

A baby is coming ...

*Christmas is just too cool to
celebrate once a year!*

*Come on out to celebrate and
invite a friend for the fun of it!*

*Day
Date and Time*

*Location
Address*

ORDER OF SERVICE

Prelude

Call to Worship: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Carol: “O Come, All Ye Faithful”

Sharing and Prayer — Closing with the Lord’s Prayer

Carol: “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

Offering: “On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh” (Matthew 2:11).

Doxology and Prayer

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Lighting of the Advent Candles

Carol: “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”

Pageant: Children’s Sunday school department

Carol: “Go, Tell It on the Mountain”

Solo: “The Greatest Gift”

Poem: “Mary of the Manger”

Lighting of the Christ Candle

Carols: “Joy to the World” and “Silent Night” by candlelight

Scripture: Luke 2:1–19

Solo: “O Holy Night”

Sermon: “Keeping Christmas” by Henry van Dyke
Read by the pastor

Benediction

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NARRATOR: (*From podium*) Christmas in July. Does it sound like some retailer's harebrained scheme to haul out the Christmas merchandise even earlier than usual? Relax. This program has nothing to do with wish lists and overcrowded shopping malls. Why Christmas in July? Because Christmas is too special to celebrate just once a year. Because we enjoy hearing from friends, we *ooh* and *ahh* at the decorations, we sing the old familiar carols with gusto and we like sharing cookies and gifts. But most of all, we love to hear the story of Jesus' birth — the best Christmas present the world has ever known. Each year we thrill to the news: A child is coming.

This summertime Christmas program enables us to celebrate these special holiday happenings at a less hectic time of the year so we can fully enjoy them without the stress of endless to-do lists. Together, we can rejoice at the Good News of Christ's birth. (*ADVENT READER enters and stands at Advent wreath.*)

ADVENT READER: (*Picking up matches*) During Advent, we mark the time until Christmas by lighting one candle on the Advent wreath every Sunday. On the first week, we light the candle that stands for peace. (*ADVENT READER lights one candle.*) The second week's candle symbolizes love. (*ADVENT READER lights a second candle.*) Joy is the theme of the third candle. (*ADVENT READER lights a third candle.*) The fourth week's candle represents hope. (*ADVENT READER lights a fourth candle.*) It is this hope that enabled the Israelites to wait patiently for their Messiah, the "long-expected Jesus." (*ADVENT READER exits.*)

CAROL: "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

NARRATOR: (*Gestures to the decorated palm tree.*) A palm tree seems appropriate as a decoration for Christmas in

July. The palm tree was the life support of the family back in biblical times — it was a “money tree” of sorts. Some palms provided food, such as dates, coconuts and sugar. The leaves tasted like cabbage when they were boiled. The roots were used to make a coffee-like drink or ground into flour. Palm oil was eaten as butter or made into soap and candles. The seeds were eaten as a nut. Sometimes they were dried, and they turned transparent and hard as ivory. The people made jewelry out of them. Palm wine was popular and cheap in this land where wine was often safer to drink than the water. The branches became roofs for houses. The bark was fashioned into baskets and mats. The wood was carved into utensils, bowls, spoons and ladles. The veins of the leaves were used to make thread and rope. The timbers were perfect for boat masts, as they were resistant to saltwater and rot. The blossoms made an exotic perfume. Because of the palm tree’s importance to Judea, its emblem was on the coins of the era.

The palm figured into biblical history when its branches were used to announce Christ’s triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. The palm tree represents a blessing from heaven and was associated with the chosen ones of God. God’s ultimate chosen one was his only son, Jesus. Hear now the story of his birth on that first Christmas. (*NARRATOR steps back. The CHILDREN playing the roles of ZECHARIAH, GABRIEL, MARY, ELIZABETH and JOSEPH gather Backstage in preparation for the pageant. READERS 1, 2 and 3 enter. READER 1 steps to the podium.*)

Pageant

READER 1: So how did it all begin? The Messiah had been promised by the prophets Isaiah, Micah and even lowly

1 Balaam, but in spite of their predictions, the people
 2 were not expecting him to come as a baby. It is safe to
 3 say that the Annunciation was unexpected.
 4 Annunciation is defined as “The event of the angel
 5 Gabriel’s announcement of the Incarnation.” Some
 6 churches celebrate this in a festival on March 25.
 7 (*READER 1 steps back. READER 2 steps to the podium.*)

8 **READER 2:** In reality, there were several announcements
 9 by the angel Gabriel. (*ZECHARIAH and GABRIEL enter*
 10 *and pantomime conversation, with ZECHARIAH looking*
 11 *shocked.*) The first event occurred about six months
 12 before Gabriel visited Mary. Gabriel appeared to
 13 Zechariah as he entered the Holy of Holies in the
 14 temple at Jerusalem. (*ZECHARIAH looks surprised.*) He
 15 informed the shocked priest that he and his wife were
 16 to have a son and that his name would be John.

17 **ZECHARIAH:** (*To GABRIEL*) How can I be sure of this? I am
 18 an old man, and my wife is well along in years.

19 **GABRIEL:** I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and
 20 I have been sent to speak to you and tell you this
 21 good news.

22 **READER 2:** You might say this left Zechariah speechless.
 23 (*ZECHARIAH holds his hands to his throat and tries in*
 24 *vain to speak, then shrugs helplessly.*) Because he had
 25 doubted the possibility of his son being born, God took
 26 away his ability to speak until after the baby’s birth.
 27 (*ZECHARIAH and GABRIEL exit. READER 2 steps back.*
 28 *READER 3 steps to the podium. MARY enters, sits and sews*
 29 *or engages in some type of handwork.*)

30 **READER 3:** In the small village of Nazareth lived a young
 31 woman named Mary who was engaged to marry a
 32 carpenter named Joseph. Six months after the angel
 33 appeared to Zechariah, he appeared to Mary. (*READER*
 34 *3 steps back. GABRIEL enters.*)

35 **GABRIEL:** Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor

1 with God (Luke 1:30).

2 **MARY:** Why are you here?

3 **GABRIEL:** Peace be with you. The Lord is with you and has
4 greatly blessed you. You will be with child and give
5 birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.
6 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most
7 High (Luke 1:31–32).

8 **MARY:** How will this be, since I am a virgin (Luke 1:34)?

9 **GABRIEL:** The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the
10 power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the
11 holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even
12 Elizabeth your cousin is going to have a child in her old
13 age. She who was said to be barren is in her sixth
14 month. For nothing is impossible with God (Luke
15 1:35–37).

16 **MARY:** I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have
17 said (Luke 1:38). (*GABRIEL exits. MARY walks around On-*
18 *stage, pantomiming a walking journey. READER 1 steps to*
19 *the podium.*)

20 **READER 1:** Mary went with haste to visit Elizabeth. She
21 couldn't tell anyone, but she had to confirm the angel's
22 news that Elizabeth was expecting a baby. It was a
23 three-day journey, giving her time to sort out her
24 thoughts. What would she tell Elizabeth? Would
25 Elizabeth laugh at her? (*READER 1 steps back.*)

26 **MARY:** (*Stops walking.*) Finally — Elizabeth and Zechariah's
27 house. But what shall I tell them? How can I make
28 them understand when I don't understand myself?
29 (*ELIZABETH enters.*) Shalom, Elizabeth.

30 **ELIZABETH:** Mary, oh dear child, sit and rest. (*MARY sits.*)
31 Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child
32 you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother
33 of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of
34 your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb
35 leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what

1 the Lord has said to her will be accomplished (Luke
2 1:42–45)! (*ELIZABETH exits. READER 2 steps to podium.*)

3 **READER 2:** Mary stayed there until shortly before the birth
4 of John, (*JOSEPH enters, then he and MARY pantomime*
5 *conversation, with JOSEPH expressing disappointment*) and
6 then she returned to face the difficult task of telling
7 Joseph. To say Joseph was upset would be an
8 understatement. What was he to do? If he stayed in the
9 relationship, he would be humiliated. Yet if he cast
10 Mary aside, she could be put to death. (*MARY exits.*
11 *JOSEPH lies down on the floor.*) That night he went to bed
12 discouraged and directionless. Then he had a dream in
13 which yet another announcement was made. (*GABRIEL*
14 *enters.*)

15 **GABRIEL:** (*To JOSEPH*) Joseph, son of David, do not be
16 afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what
17 is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give
18 birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,
19 because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew
20 1:20–21). (*GABRIEL exits.*)

21 **JOSEPH:** (*Rises.*) Thank you, God. (*JOSEPH exits.*)

22 **READER 2:** All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had
23 said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child
24 and will give birth to a son, and they will call him
25 Immanuel — which means, “God with us.” When Joseph
26 woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had
27 commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he
28 had no union with her until she gave birth to a son.
29 (*JOSEPH and MARY enter. MARY holds a blanket-wrapped*
30 *doll. She places the doll in the manger.*) And he gave him the
31 name Jesus (Matthew 1:22–25). By doing this, he took
32 responsibility as legal father to Jesus. (*MARY and*
33 *JOSEPH exit. READER 2 steps back. READER 3 steps to the*
34 *podium.*)

35 **READER 3:** There was one last announcement. In a faraway

land, a sign in the heavens had alerted three wise men, and they made their preparations for a trip in search of the King of the Jews. That may have coincided with this time of the year, “Christmas in July,” five months before Christ was born. By then the baby had made his presence known to the village by Mary’s expanding middle. (*READERS 1, 2 and 3 exit.*)

CAROL: “Go, Tell It on the Mountain”

NARRATOR: (*At podium*) The announcements had one thing in common: The people who heard them had to change their attitudes. They had to make room for a new person in their lives and prepare to accept him.

Pretend you are one of those people. What preparations would you be making? (*Allow a few moments of silence.*) It was a time of anticipation. What would you change in your life as a gift to God this Christmas? Please give this some thought, as we will revisit this topic in a few moments.

(*Picks up one of the wrapped gift boxes.*) Everyone likes gifts. But if you think about it, it isn’t the big gifts you remember. It’s the random acts of kindness that brighten your days and make both giver and receiver feel a glow of happiness: holding a door open, remembering a birthday, talking to a child, paying a compliment, praying for someone in need. (*Sets gift down.*)

Thomas Kinkade, the painter of light and author of inspirational books, suggests we focus on the simple question, “What small thing can I do today to bring a blessing to someone else?” You will develop a servant’s heart and grow steadily and dependably joyful when you look for ways to help others.

When we give each other Christmas gifts in God’s name, let us remember that he has given us the sun and

1 the moon and the stars and the earth with its forests and
 2 mountains and oceans and all that lives and moves upon
 3 them. He has given us all green things and everything
 4 that blossoms and bears fruit. He has given us all that
 5 we quarrel about and all that we have misused. To save
 6 us from our own foolishness, from all our sins, he came
 7 down to earth and gave us himself. (*NARRATOR steps*
 8 *back. POEM READER enters and stands at podium.*)
 9

10 *POEM: "Mary of the Manger" (author unknown)*
 11

12 **POEM READER:** These were things she understood:

13 The stamp of cattle in the barn,
 14 Their gentle lowing;
 15 And sheep that huddled
 16 In the light of the lamp of stars
 17 That hung in the night,
 18 Softly glowing.

19
 20 Could she have chosen for his birth
 21 A place of princely largesse, of loud
 22 And kingly splendor,
 23 It would not have done so well as this,
 24 A space the humble too could share.
 25 For did not God tender Jesus to man
 26 As a lamb, and his exquisite love to the highest and
 27 lowest?

28
 29 Mary drew the cloth about her child,
 30 But the edge of it rested
 31 Across a lamb by a
 32 Mother ewe, and Mary saw and smiled
 33 And left it there
 34 As a symbol of
 35 God's all-encompassing care.

1 *(POEM READER exits. NARRATOR steps back to the*
 2 *podium.)*

3 **NARRATOR:** At this time we're taking an offering of a
 4 different sort. I asked you to think about what you
 5 would want to work on as a gift to Jesus. This may be
 6 anything in your life that you want to change or
 7 perhaps something you want to add to enhance it.
 8 Please take a slip of paper and pencil from the back of
 9 the pew ahead of you *(Substitute appropriate instructions*
 10 *as needed for your congregation)* and write down your gift
 11 to Jesus. Place it in the envelope, seal it, and write your
 12 name on the front. As our ushers come by, place your
 13 envelope in the slot of the Christmas present. *(Or, "You*
 14 *may file up the center aisle and place your sealed envelope in*
 15 *the slot of the Christmas present.")* We will save your
 16 sealed envelopes and then in December, as we're
 17 celebrating the *real* Christmas, we'll redistribute them
 18 so you may review your personal progress. Let's take a
 19 moment to write down our gifts and then the ushers
 20 will place them around the manger. *(Christmas carols*
 21 *play softly in the background as the congregation writes.*
 22 *When a few minutes have passed or all have finished writing,*
 23 *the USHERS may pass the Christmas presents and people*
 24 *may place their envelopes in the slots. When the USHERS*
 25 *have collected all the envelopes, they may then bring the*
 26 *presents to the front and arrange them around the manger.)*
 27 Let's pray. Our kind and loving Father in heaven, we
 28 thank you for giving us Jesus. We offer to you now our
 29 own gifts — of love, of time, of resources, of discipline.
 30 Please accept them and use them for your glory. Amen.
 31 *(USHERS exit.)*

32 **ADVENT READER:** *(Stands at Advent wreath and picks up*
 33 *matches.)* After lighting the candles of peace, love, joy
 34 and hope, at last it is Christmas, and we light the candle
 35 in the center, the grandest one of all: the Christ candle.



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