

Choose the Joy of Christmas

*An Advent Program by Jill Kaufman
From Walking in Love: One Body, One Spirit
Mennonite Women*

Advance Preparation

Make four signs (poster board size), each with one word written in large letters: *Praise, Obedience, Action, Giving*. Set up a long table in the front of the room. Tape the signs to the table so they are all hanging down in a row across the front of the table. Then flip them back so they are lying on the table. Each sign will be flipped as it is mentioned during the program. Place a pillar candle near each sign. Decorate the table with greens.

Place a nativity scene on a small table next to the signs. The narrator will stand at a podium at one side of the long table, with the nativity scene on her other side.

Distribute small pieces of paper and pencils for each person at tables where they will sit. Table centerpieces might feature small nativity sets.

Optional: Make small refrigerator magnets to place at each person's seat as gifts. Write the words *Praise, Obey, Act, Give* on paper, decorating them as you wish. Make copies onto construction paper, laminate, and cut out. Place a magnet strip (found at craft stores) on the back of each one.

You will need a narrator, someone to light the candles and flip the signs, a song leader and musicians, scripture reader, and at least four readers for the opening skit and the readers' theater.

Program, part 1: Introduction

Someone walks in front of the long table with a sign that says, "Nov. 26."

Speaker 1: *(Enters slowly and thoughtfully. Unwraps Christmas ornaments or candles as she speaks. "Silent Night" plays in the background.)* Ah, the joy of Christmas. Family gathering together, friends sending greetings, lights brightening the world. Cookies baking, carols playing, candles flickering. . . . *(She takes a deep breath.)* Ah, I just love Christmas.

Someone walks in front of the long table with a sign that says, "Dec. 21."

Speaker 1: *(Walks quickly in and out of the tables while she frantically reads her list. A fast-paced Christmas carol plays in the background.)*

Make a centerpiece for the Miller family gathering.
Restraining the lights that went out on the bush out front.
Bake eight dozen cookies for the Christmas tea.
Find the address for the Neufelds' card.
Tape together the Christmas carol booklets.
Wrap the children's presents.
Scrape the old wax out of the candleholders.
Put out new candles.

Oh my, I have got to cut something out. Why does this happen every year? There are just too many things that need to be done. People expect me to do too much. Next year, I am really going to cut back and experience the real meaning of Christmas—if I can remember what that is anymore.

Narrator: Choices. We all make choices. But so often we choose to get caught up in the *stuff* of Christmas. The baking, shopping, singing, and gathering are all wonderful activities *if* they don't rob us of the joy of Christmas. Let's take a look at some of the people in the Christmas story. All made choices about how they would respond to God. As we remember them, think about the choices you make, and reflect on how you respond to God, during the Advent season and throughout the year.

Part 2: Mary

Scripture reader: (*Reads Luke 1:26-38*)

Narrator: Mary chose to respond to an unexpected, out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancy with *praise* (*flip over the "Praise" sign and light the candle*). Let's read together Mary's response and words to Elizabeth.

Read HWB 840 (Luke 1:47-55). Play gentle piano music (live or taped) in the background.

Narrator: Mary chose to respond with *praise* even though so many un-knowns were ahead of her. Even though there would be moments of pain, sorrow, and uncertainty, she clung to Yahweh, her rock and her salvation.

Optional: Have someone perform a creative movement, signing, or solo of "Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song)" by Amy Grant. Or someone could portray Mary and recite the song's lyrics as a poem.

Narrator: How do you respond to the unexpected in your life? This Christmas, strive to see the unexpected as a gift from God and offer praise for how God uses surprises to draw us nearer to him.

Sing together HWB 76 "Praise, I will praise you, Lord."

Part 3: Joseph

Scripture reader: (*Reads Matthew 1:18-25*)

Narrator: What a twist in plans Joseph experienced. And yet he responded with *obedience* (*flip over "Obedience" sign, light the candle*). An unspeakable joy comes with obedience to God. But it is also accompanied by wonder and questioning. Listen to the words that Joseph may have thought.

Play a prerecorded tape of a man reading or singing "Joseph's Song" by Michael Card. Or ask a man to come and recite or sing it.

Narrator: At times God's will may seem mysterious or difficult. This Christmas, think about ways in which God is calling you to walk in obedience.

Sing HWB 389 "Take my life" or 544 "When we walk with the Lord."

Part 4: Shepherds

Scripture reader: (*Reads Luke 2:8-20*)

Narrator: Even though they were caught off guard in the middle of the night, the shepherds responded to Jesus with *action* (*flip the “Action” sign, light the candle*). Interrupting their work, they went immediately to find the newborn Messiah. (*The next section may be performed by readers initially speaking from their tables and gradually gathering in the front, or by readers seated on stools up front.*)

Reader 1: There we were.

Reader 2: By the fire.

Reader 3: Listening.

Reader 4: Tending.

All: Waiting for the dawn.

Reader 1: There we were.

Reader 2: In the night.

Reader 3: Watching.

Reader 4: Caring.

All: Waiting for the dawn.

Reader 1: And there it was.

Reader 2: All of a sudden.

Reader 3: We weren't sure.

Reader 4: We were afraid.

All: We fell to the ground.

Reader 1 and Reader 2: (*softly*) But the voice was gentle.

Reader 3 and Reader 4: (*softly*) The voice was kind.

All: (*strong and clear*) The light was bright with joy.

Reader 1: We felt the joy.

Reader 2: We felt the excitement.

All: The news was good.

Reader 3: Good news.

Reader 4: Great joy.

All: A Savior. Born tonight.

Reader 1: Glorious song.

Reader 2: Glorious night.

Reader 3: Glorious news.

Reader 1 and Reader 2: (*slowly and thoughtfully*) We had been waiting.

Reader 3 and Reader 4: (*slowly and thoughtfully*) We had been waiting.

All: So we went.

Reader 1: Searching.

Reader 2: Looking.

Reader 3: Listening. (*Short pause.*)

Reader 4: Hearing.

Reader 1: A gentle cry.

Reader 2: A beautiful sight.

Reader 3: A glorious night.

All: A glorious night.

Narrator: The shepherds took action even though it may have been inconvenient. This Christmas, take action when the Spirit leads you—even if it isn't in your plans. Even if it messes up your schedule and interrupts your activities. God is a God of action and calls us to be active in furthering his kingdom here on earth.

Pray together the Lord's Prayer.

Sing HWB 197 "Angels we have heard on high."

Part 5: Magi

Scripture reader: (*Reads Matthew 2:1-12*)

Narrator: The magi responded to Jesus by *giving* (*flip "Giving" sign and light the candle*). They gave gifts of perfume and incense, but they also offered the gift of their lives by disobeying Herod's command that they report back to him. What intangible gifts are you giving others this Christmas? Take a piece of paper from your table and write down a gift you can give to others that shows them the love of Christ. Perhaps it is one-on-one time with your children. Perhaps it is a visit to a nursing home. Perhaps it is a note of encouragement to a friend in sorrow. Think about how God is calling you to give to others. Then bring your paper up and lay it next to the manger, giving in the name of Jesus. (*While people are writing and coming forward, have a small group singing Christmas carols or have someone playing carols instrumentally.*)

Part 6: Conclusion

Narrator: Our God is a God who interacts with us and calls us to be part of his story. This Christmas remember Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi. Follow their lead and respond to God by praising, obeying, acting, and giving. Please rise for the benediction:

May the baby in the manger remind you
to celebrate this Christmas with joy and simplicity.
May you be spiritually refreshed
through celebrating this miraculous reality of "God with us."
Praise. Obey. Act. Give. Go out with joy.

Sing HWB 318 "Joy to the world."