**Follow the Star: The Advent Countdown**

***A “Scratch” Nativity Play/Crib Service***

|  |
| --- |
| This nativity has been written by **Clare Williams**, Head of Schools & Family Learning at Norwich Cathedral, based on her rhyming nativity that features in the [Follow The Star Advent Calendar](https://www.chpublishing.co.uk/books/9781781404430/follow-the-star-advent-calendar)produced by Church House Publishing in 2023.The material is © The Archbishops’ Council of the Church of England 2023 but may be copied and performed locally without formal permission. |

*Explain that it’s nearly Christmas (whenever you have your nativity play or crib service) but not quite yet, so we are still in Advent. Talk about Advent calendars and who has been counting down since the first day of December, ensure that everyone knows there are 24 days of counting down and work out which day you are on – how many have passed and how many are still yet to go. Explain that’s how today is going to work by counting down and thinking about lots of characters from the Christmas story.*

*You could have people dressed as the characters to come forward at the right time and create a tableau or invite children present who are dressed up to come and take part at the moment when their character is mentioned.****(See page 6 for a full list of suggestions about characters, costumes and props.****)*

*Have* ***large numbers 1-24*** *and give them out to* ***people in the congregation*** *to ‘pop up’ with
when they hear that number!*

*Have someone dressed as a* ***star*** *who will* ***narrate*** *and introduce the refrain which will come back after each group of three ‘verses’*

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

*You might wish to develop a cue for when this needs to be said by everyone, either using a word from the narrator, a hand signal, e.g. jazz hands to emulate twinkling stars, or you could even come up with your own Countdown-style theme tune! You could perhaps also have stars for everyone to hold so that everyone can hold these up during the refrain. This would mean that more than 24 people have something to do during the service.*

*Begin by singing a carol, e.g. O Little Town of Bethlehem, to set the scene, but explain that to begin to tell the Christmas story you have to go right back to the beginning. See if anyone can guess where the story starts but explain that you mean the very beginning of the Bible – the beginning of God’s story.*

***CAROL e.g. O Little Town of Bethlehem***

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

*If you can, begin in* ***darkness****.*

In the beginning there was nothing, just **darkness** (that’s it),

with nothing and no one, not even a nit!

*Turn the* ***lights on*** *at this point and have two people to represent* ***Adam*** *and* ***Eve****.*

Then God filled the world with goodness and **light**

and two people to care for it and to choose right.

*Make* ***Adam*** *and* ***Eve*** *disappear by raising a blue cloth up above over them (to represent the rising waters) and then out from behind the blue cloth, bring out a* ***rainbow*** *and/or a* ***dove****.*

The people got things wrong and God sent a flood,

but Noah and his three sons shared a **promise** to make good.

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

*Have someone dressed as* ***Isaiah*** *in a long cloak and with a beard holding up a lantern – they could perhaps shout some or all of Isaiah 9.6 after the verse has been read, e.g. "Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God … Prince of Peace.” Or you could perhaps play a recording of the opening few bars of “For unto us a child is born” from Handel’s Messiah.*

We hear from a prophet in verse number four:
His vision of God’s plan opened the **door**.

***CAROL e.g. The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came***

*Someone dressed as an angel (****Gabriel****) comes and takes the lantern from* ***Isaiah*** *and then unfurls a large scroll.*

Five hundred years later the plan starts to unfold
when an **angel** called Gabriel had a message to be told.

***Mary*** *enters and kneels down in front of* ***Gabriel*** *who mimes reading the message to her, she looks shocked and worried!*

It was month number six in the town of Nazareth
when **Mary** heard the news she was going to give birth.

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

*A* ***guiding******star*** *(not the Narrator) appears at the opposite end from where your service is taking place, have* ***those at the front*** *point to it, so that everyone notices it.*

One evening round then (perhaps just after seven),
a bright new star appeared, shining in the heavens.

***Gabriel*** *disappears but* ***Joseph*** *comes on to greet* ***Mary****.* ***He Joseph*** *mimes shock and horror, then goes to sleep – with his head on a small cushion – and, upon waking, comes back to stand happily with* ***Mary****.*

Back in Nazareth Mary told **Joseph** the news.
After eight hours dreaming, he would know what to choose.

*Quickly* ***Mary*** *develops a pregnancy bump (Joseph could hand her the cushion he’s been sleeping on for this purpose!) and a* ***donkey*** *arrives to take them to Bethlehem.*

Nine months on they were ready to greet Jesus,
but had a long ride to **Bethlehem** because of a census.

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

***Mary*** *and* ***Joseph*** *journey around miming knocking on doors and being turned away.*

Ten days or so later they arrived in that city.
If only an **innkeeper** on them would take pity!

*Eventually an* ***innkeeper*** *comes to welcome them in.*

After knocking on more than eleven closed doors,
the couple found a stable where they could rest on the **straw**.

***Mary*** *and* ***Joseph*** *hold* ***baby Jesus*** *and then place him in a* ***manger****.*

Sometime after twelve in the middle of the night,
the baby was born and in a **manger** wrapped tight.

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

***CAROL e.g. Away in a Manger***

***Shepherds*** *appear warming their hands around a ‘campfire’.*

Thirteen tired **shepherds**, their work still not done,
were out in their fields when a great light shone.

*Suddenly a group of* ***angels*** *appear with the shepherds.*

They were outnumbered by **angels** (at least fourteen or so)
with a message for the shepherds: ‘To Bethlehem – quick, go!’

***Shepherds*** *hurry towards where* ***Mary and Joseph*** *are with* ***baby Jesus***

In just fifteen seconds they were running that way,
and found the promised king amongst **animals** and hay.

*If you have them, a* ***donkey****, cow or other farm animals could sit down or be placed around the manger.*

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

*One or more* ***shepherds*** *could hold up* ***toy******sheep*** *– and place one in front of the manger.*

The shepherds couldn’t stay long to watch Jesus sleep,
verse sixteen reminds us they returned to their **sheep**.

***CAROL e.g. The First Nowell***

***Wise men*** *(any number of them you like!) appear at the opposite end from where the action is taking place, where the* ***guiding******star*** *(not the same person as the narrator) has been waiting.*

Away in the east, **wise men** watched each bright star beam.Were there three? We don’t know. Could have been seventeen !

But however many wise men there actually were,
verse eighteen shows one of three gifts they brought – **myrrh**.

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

*Have the* ***guiding******star*** *lead the* ***wise men*** *and some* ***camels*** *(if possible!) to where the main action
is taking place.*

They set out on their journey, following the star.
It’s nineteen for the **camels** which carried them far.

*Ideally time this so that the* ***guiding******star*** *leading the* ***wise men*** *passes by the* ***star******narrator*** *at this moment. If possible, the* ***guiding******star*** *would twinkle brightly at this point – thanks to battery-powered LED lights, or a spotlight or similar.*

Although **other stars** also shone on that night,
the star that they followed was twenty times more bright.

*The* ***wise men*** *place the myrrh and gold in front of the manger.*

Now being king doesn’t start at twenty-one years old:
Jesus was born royal, so the wise men brought him **gold**.

**Follow the star, come join in the fun
Christmas is coming the countdown’s begun.**

*All the* ***wise men*** *now kneel down in front of the manger.*

The star drew them to worship right under its glow,
**frankincense** for twenty-two a holy child shows.

*Invite* ***all the children*** *to come and gather around the manger. Perhaps hold a* ***halo*** *(tinsel-and-wire or similar) and place it above the baby Jesus’ head.*

For twenty-three verses you’ve been waiting patiently,
and what we’re celebrating will soon be **clear** to see …

*Invite* ***all the children*** *to take part in a way of offering something to Jesus by e.g. lighting a candle, placing a star gem around the manger or in another way appropriate for your space and the number of people expected.*

Following the star leads us to sing and to pray

to **Jesus**, who is with us twenty-four hours a day.

*At this point you may wish to say one or more short prayers, such as this one:*

Dear God, thank you for Jesus who is with us 24/7.
Help us to celebrate this special gift
through prayer and song and worship.
Give us gifts of your love, joy and peace
in our homes this Christmas.
**Amen.**

***CAROL e.g. O Come, All Ye Faithful***

***Characters who are mentioned and could be included in the cast:***

* Narrator
* Adam and Eve
* The Prophet Isaiah
* The Angel Gabriel
* Mary
* Joseph
* Donkey? (or a soft toy/cut-out one)
* The Innkeeper
* Baby Jesus (a doll would be fine – but some churches do invite parents of newborns to help!)
* Shepherds
* Sheep? (or soft toy/cut-out one)
* Angels
* Wise men (three at least – or more!)
* Camels? (or a soft toy/cut-out one)
* Guiding Star (not the narrator).

***Props and costumes you could use to bring the rhyme to life***

*NB You don’t need to have all of these by any means – you can be creative as to how you represent the different characters and objects in the story.*

* Large cards with numbers 1 to 24 on to be held up at the appropriate verse
* Star/star costume for the Narrator
* Main/stage lights to switch off at the start/switch on for verse two
* Adam and Eve ‘costumes’ (to avoid any awkward situations involving fig leaves, it might be an idea to have
your actors playing Adam and Eve dressed simply, ideally in t-shirts with ‘Adam’ on one and ‘Eve’ on the other to make it clear who they are)
* A large blue cloth to represent the flood waters
* A rainbow and/or dove for verse three
* Isaiah costume (beard, cloak)
* Lantern (which Isaiah carries and passes to Gabriel, and can be used by Innkeeper)
* Angel Gabriel costume (e.g. wings, halo)
* Scroll for Gabriel to read from
* Bright/twinkling costume for the Guiding Star (from verse seven)
* Mary costume (with cushion or similar borrowed from Joseph to add a pregnancy bump!)
* Joseph costume (Joseph might lay his head on the cushion for verse eight and hand it on to Mary)
* Donkey costume – or toy donkey/cut-out picture
* Innkeeper costume (the lantern could be passed to them for verse ten)
* (Perhaps) Bales of straw (verse eleven)
* Manger
* Baby Jesus doll
* Shepherd costumes
* (Perhaps) Something to represent a campfire
* Sheep costume(s) – or one or more soft-toy sheep
* Angel costumes (perhaps with musical instruments?)
* Cow or other farm animal costumes/soft-toys (for verse fifteen)
* Toy sheep (especially for verse sixteen)
* Wise Men costumes
* Objects to represent Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh
* (Perhaps) Halo for Baby Jesus for verse twenty-three
* (Optional) candles or tea-lights, star gems or other items for all children present to place around
the manger (verse twenty-four).