

Community-Developed

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God Surprises A Christmas Pageant

Introduction

*The original version of this pageant was first performed at Rockway Mennonite Church in 1985 by middle-school children. Part of my inspiration to write it was the experience of watching an outdoor performance of a medieval morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, with my young daughter. The angels and devils and colourful pageantry of that performance enchanted my four-year-old and I wondered why we don't make more of the dramatic possibilities inherent in our Bible stories. The children at Rockway performed this pageant with great rhetorical flourish. The scene between Hosea and Gomer brought the house down.*

This pageant uses lesser known stories from the Old Testament that are not usually associated with Christmas. But each story reveals how God comes into the world in unexpected and surprising ways, anticipating God's unusual arrival at Christmas. To acquaint the children (and congregation) with the stories, we presented one story for the children each Sunday in Advent leading up to the pageant. To help with character recognition, the program for the Pageant should list all the characters, including the Angel and Devil.

Bulletin announcement for Sunday before Advent:

During each Sunday in Advent, the children will hear a story from the Old Testament that shows how God works in the world through unlikely people and situations. We do not usually associate these stories with Advent (or focus on them at all), but like the Nativity story they illustrate the unexpected ways God comes to us and saves us. These stories will form the basis of the Christmas pageant.

- First Advent: Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 16 and 21)*
- Second Advent: Puah and Shiphrah (Exodus 1 and 2)*
- Third Advent: Rahab and Joshua (Joshua 2 and 6:22-25)*
Deborah and Yael (Judges 4 and 5)
- Fourth Advent: Hosea and Gomer (Hosea 1 - 3)*

Suggestions for the storyteller(s):

The children's storyteller should explain that these stories show how God chooses some very unlikely people to help save the Hebrew people from slavery and bring them to a new home. We are surprised by the people God chooses as friends and helpers, just as we are surprised every Christmas that God's son is born in a barn like a homeless boy. And God continues to come into our world today in unexpected and surprising ways. The Christmas pageant will be based on these stories from the Old Testament, stories that we do not usually associate with Christmas. (The first two stories do have echoes of the Nativity.) Obviously, the storyteller will have to soften and simplify these stories for young ears.

First Advent: Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 16 and 21)

We usually focus on Abraham and Sarah and their son Isaac, but Hagar and Ishmael are also in God's plan, even though they are outcasts.

Second Advent: Puah and Shiphrah (Exodus 1 and 2)

These brave midwives rescue Hebrew babies, making possible the birth of Moses, the hero who leads the Hebrew people out of slavery. Moses' mother, Jochebed, and sister, Miriam, also play an important part in this story of liberation.

Third Advent: Rahab and Joshua (Joshua 2; 6:22-25); Deborah and Yael (Judges 4-5)

Rahab, a "wicked woman," helps to bring Israel into the land God has promised them. She holds a place of honour in Israel's history as a model of faith and an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5, Hebrews 11:31). Deborah is an inspiring leader who plays a major role in bringing peace to the land after many wars. Yael is a brave woman who tricks an enemy general and kills him, bringing the war to a final end.

Fourth Advent: Hosea and Gomer (Hosea 1-3)

This story about an unhappy marriage is a way of describing our relationship with God. God loves us and takes us back even when we are unfaithful and keep running away from our responsibilities.

The Pageant

Characters:

Angel (boy)

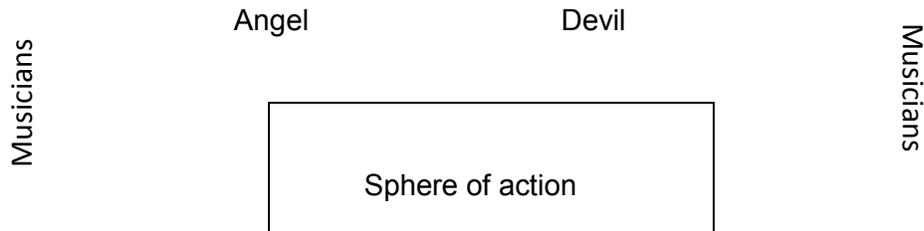
Devil (boy or girl)

Musicians Singers (or instrumentalists) that open and close each scene with a few lines from an Advent hymn. Suggestions: 'Veiled in Darkness Judah Lay,' 'Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus,' or 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel'.

Scenes:

Scene I:	Adam and Eve Cain and Abel (no speaking)	
Scene II:	Abraham, Sarah and Isaac Hagar and Ishmael	
Scene III:	Puah and Shiphrah Miriam (dancer) Jochebed with baby (no speaking)	
Scene IV:	Rahab and Joshua Deborah and Yael	
Scene V:	Hosea Gomer	Comic scene
Scene VI:	Mary with baby Joseph	No speaking parts

Stage set-up:



The Angel and Devil, along with the musicians, remain on stage for the whole pageant. The action takes place in front of them. Costumes can be minimal – just enough to suggest the characters. Scenes, though brief, should not be rushed.

Prologue

(Angel and Devil enter and meet in the middle of the stage.)

Angel: Where have you come from, Evil One?

Devil *(strutting around)*: From going to and fro upon the earth and from walking up and down in it.

Angel: And what did you see?

Devil: I saw many miserable people leading desperate, greedy lives. They poison their planet and kill each other in horrible battles. *(Gleefully)* Oh, how wicked the world has become. The old prophet Isaiah put it so well: "They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt.... The whole earth mourns and withers, it lies polluted under its inhabitants. A curse devours the earth and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt."

Angel: Did you not see one righteous person or one good deed? Surely there are some people who walk in God's ways.

Devil: *(Triumphant)* No, not one. They are all in my evil power. The earth belongs to me.

Angel: This cannot be. God would not desert the world and leave it in Satan's power. I will go to see for myself. Come with me and I will show you where God is.

Devil: Don't forget – I'm part of the story too.

Angel: Shhh. Let the action begin. "Let those who are wise, understand these things."

(They take their places at the back of the stage.)

Procession

Musicians enter singing (or playing) an Advent hymn and go to their positions on both sides of the stage, facing the action.

Scene I: Adam and Eve and sons

(Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel enter as Angel begins to speak. The boys are playfully pushing each other around.)

Angel: Here come Adam and Eve with their two sons. They were driven out of Paradise for disobeying God, but God has not forgotten them.

Adam: We have two fine boys, Eve. I think both Cain and Abel will be great men some day and bring us much joy.

Eve: I dream of them having many children and bringing great honour to our name. I pray that God will find favour with them.

(Boys now roughly pushing each other. Cain knocks Abel down. All freeze.)

Devil: I was a main character in this story. It didn't turn out so well for them, did it. Cain murdered his brother and his name was forever associated with evil.

Angel: It's not quite that simple. God said to Cain, "What have you done? Now you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer produce anything for you; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." But that's not the whole story. Cain cried, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." And God said, "Not so. I will protect you and no one will harm you." And God gave Cain a family and one of his descendants was Jubal, a musician and the father of those who play the harp and flute, bringing joy to the world.

(Music. Characters exit.)

Scene II: Abraham and Sarah with Isaac, Hagar with Ishmael

(Abraham and Sarah enter with Isaac, followed by Hagar and Ishmael)

Angel: Look, it's Abraham and Sarah with young Isaac, their pride and joy.

Devil: Don't forget the other mother and child tagging along behind. Hagar and Ishmael are part of this family too. Even though Sarah hates both of them, she has to admit that Ishmael is also Abraham's son.

Isaac: *(Whining)* Are we almost there? I'm tired of walking.

Sarah: Our home is just ahead, and a big birthday dinner is waiting for you. Your birth was a miracle of God and you are a very special child.

Ishmael: *(Weakly)* I'm so hot and thirsty. I can't go any further.

Hagar: There is no more water. I don't know what to do.

Ishmael: Can no one help us? We're going to die here. *(Sinks to the ground.)*

(All freeze)

Angel: "And God heard the voice of Ishmael and called to Hagar and said, 'Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy. Lift him up and hold him tightly with your hand, for I will make him the father of a great nation.'" And God blessed Ishmael with many ancestors and his name has never been forgotten. His brother Isaac, too, was blessed by God and became the father of the Israelite people.

(Music. Characters exit.)

Scene III: Puah and Shiphrah, Miriam with baby Moses

(Enter Puah and Shiphrah)

Devil: It's Puah and Shiphrah, the midwives of the Israelite people in Egypt. How do these women fit into the story? No one remembers them.

Angel: Puah and Shiphrah risked their lives to help Israelite women have their babies and keep them alive, even after Pharaoh ordered them to kill all the boy babies. If they hadn't been so brave, the Israelite people might never have gotten out of Egypt!

(Miriam runs in ahead of Jochabed who carries the baby)

Shiphrah: Miriam. How are you? How's your little brother?

Miriam: Look at him. Hasn't he grown? My mother is so glad she can take care of him, even though the princess has adopted him as her son. The princess has named him Moses. She says he will grow up to be a strong leader of his people.

Puah: What a beautiful child. God has been good to you, Jochabed. Let us hope your son does not forget his family.

Devil: Moses was crazy to give up his life as a prince and try to sneak the Israelite people out of Egypt. He led them into a desert and all they did was complain about him, and he never did get to live in the country that God promised them.

Angel: In spite of all the hardships and setbacks, Moses saved the Israelites from slavery and led them to a new home. It's a thrilling story that never gets old.

(Music begins and Miriam does a little dance as characters exit.)

Scene IV: Rahab and Joshua, Deborah and Yael

(Enter Rahab and Joshua)

Angel: Here comes Joshua, the great leader who brought the Israelite people into their new land. Do you remember how his army marched around the city of Jericho with trumpets blaring and the walls of the city just crumbled to pieces? Now the whole country of Canaan belongs to the Israelites. But who is that woman with him?

Devil: You didn't recognize her, eh? She's Rahab, a woman with a very bad reputation in Jericho. She's a prostitute and an enemy of the Israelites and she doesn't belong here.

Rahab: I want to thank you, Joshua, for saving me and my family during the war in Canaan and for letting us go free. You have been good to me even though I was on the enemy side. Your God is gracious, even to a person like me.

Joshua: It is we who have to thank you, Rahab. If you had not hidden my spies that night and helped them escape from Jericho, our whole plan would have been destroyed. You saved Israel that night, Rahab. We will always remember you for that.

(Exit Rahab and Joshua. Enter Deborah and Yael)

Angel: Here come two more women who helped save Israel from their enemies.

Deborah: My name is Deborah. Some have called me the Mother of Israel. I became a leader of those disorganized Israelites when no one else would. I tried to be a fair judge in settling their arguments. I tried to tell them what God wanted them to do. But times were difficult. We were

captured and held as slaves for 20 years. The leader of the Israelite army would not do anything unless I promised to lead the army with him. So I did and we defeated our enemies.

Yael: Even though the enemy army was defeated, one of their leaders escaped. I found out where he was and decided to trick him. I invited him into my tent, promising to protect him. Then, when he was sleeping, I killed him. It was a terrible thing to do but I felt I had to do it for my people.

Deborah: In spite of the fighting and killing, God used my leadership and Yael's terrible deed to free the Israelites from their enemies. After that Israel enjoyed peace for 40 years.

(Music as characters exit.)

Scene V: Hosea and Gomer

(Enter Hosea and Gomer)

Devil: Oh no. Here come Hosea and Gomer. What a couple! I wonder what they're arguing about this time.

Hosea: Gomer, will you listen to me? You can't just run off and leave me with the children. I'm supposed to be a prophet. How can I be a prophet if my wife won't even listen to me or live with me?

Gomer: Then why did you marry me in the first place? I told you I wasn't interested in settling down. But you insisted.

Hosea: But you have three children now.

Gomer: That's another problem. You insisted we give them these silly names: "Not my people" and "Not pitied". "Not pitied" – what kind of name is that for a girl? You have such strange ideas.

Hosea: I am only trying to be a prophet, Gomer. Come back. I still love you even though you've been a terrible wife. Will you come back to me?

(Characters freeze)

Angel: And God said to Israel: "I will make a covenant with you. And I will marry you to me for ever; I will marry you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will marry you to me in faithfulness. And I will have pity on 'Not pitied' and I will say to 'Not my people' you are my people and you shall say, You are my God."

(Music as characters exit lovingly together.)

Scene VI. Mary and Joseph and baby

Devil: I don't see why such strange characters were picked to be God's special people. Some of these people did really bad things. You'd think God would choose noble or at least likeable people to be part of such an important story.

Angel: That's not the way God works. Remember King David who took the wife of another man and then had that man killed? It was a terrible sin, and yet David and Bathsheba were blessed by God – from their descendants was born the man whom we call the son of God.

(Joseph and Mary with baby take centre stage and freeze in tableau as Angel continues.)

Angel: "And Joseph went up from Galilee from the city of Nazareth to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the family of David and Bathsheba. He went to be registered with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant." And Mary gave birth to Jesus, the child for whom Israel was waiting. And we wait for him in every generation, never knowing when or where he might be revealed to us.

Devil: But you'll never get rid of me. I've been around for a long time.

Angel: Someday we'll understand why God has let you stay around and tempt people to do evil things. Meanwhile, we have seen how God comes into the world in unexpected ways, in each generation. We've seen how God's plan includes even a murderer like Cain, a rejected son like Ishmael, and warriors such as Deborah and Yael. God also works through brave midwives such as Puah and Shiphrah, and foolish couples like Hosea and Gomer. And how surprising that immoral people like Rahab and David and Bathsheba are honoured as ancestors of Jesus. If they can be included in God's sacred story, then so can all of us. That is the good news that Christmas brings.

"Know that God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever, through all generations. Amen."

(Music, during which characters exit, followed by Devil and Angel.)