

Critters around the Crèche

**Activities for
Sensing the Seasons of
Advent, Christmas,
and Epiphany**

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The Pastoral Center

Dedication

To Adam Nagel ...

... whose carpentry skills fashioned the best crèche ever. A.L.L.

To Maddox Jacob Pallo ...

... my first great-grandchild, who brings joy to every celebration. P.V.W.

Thanks

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Introduction

Overview

In *Critters around the Crèche* ...

a donkey guides us to hear love,
a dog leads us to smell hope,
a dove helps us to taste peace,
a cow steers us to touch joy,
a lamb shepherds us to see light,
and a camel prompts us to follow faith.

Critters around the Crèche weaves together several themes: animals that might have been present at the time of Jesus' birth, each "critter's" connection with the five senses, and words traditionally associated with the weeks of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. As humans, our primary way of learning from the world around us is through our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin. Our senses evoke both our physical awareness of the world and our spiritual perception beyond this world. Using

the gifts each animal brings to these seasonal stories emphasizes how we can better sense God's presence in our lives.

The beauty of this thematic approach is that it also benefits learners who may prefer one style of understanding over another. Some are inspired by seeing, many by hearing, and still others by their sense of touch, or taste, or smell. Using a theme that emphasizes each of those senses challenges participants to use sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch to appreciate the true gifts of Christmas: faith, hope, light, love, joy, and peace. Activities used in church, home, and school provide many ways for children—as well as youth and adults—to explore, learn, and remember as they use their senses to celebrate the birth of the Savior.

Themes At a Glance

<i>Sunday</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Scripture</i>	<i>Sense</i>	<i>Animal</i>
First Sunday of Advent	Hear Love	Luke 2:1-5	Sound	Donkey
Second Sunday of Advent	Smell Hope	Luke 2:6-7	Smell	Dog
Third Sunday of Advent	Taste Peace	Luke 2:8-14	Taste	Dove
Fourth Sunday of Advent	Touch Joy	Luke 2:15-16	Touch	Cow
Christmas	See Light	Luke 2:17-20	Sight	Lamb
Epiphany	Follow Faith	2 Corinthians 5:7	Instinct	Donkey

Settings

What?

Critters around the Crèche: Sensing the Seasons of Advent, Christmas & Epiphany offers congregations, families, and schools a unique approach to anticipating and celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Savior, and the re-birth of the Christ Child in the heart of every believer—child, youth, adult. Resources in the book are organized into five sections:

- ▶ Designs for **Hearing the Story**
- ▶ Services for **Celebrating the Story**
- ▶ Tools for **Learning the Story**
- ▶ Materials for **Living the Story**
- ▶ Suggestions for **Sharing the Story**

Where?

Critters is intended for use in four main settings. They include:

- ▶ Liturgical Services
 - ▶ Children's Church
 - ▶ Children's Liturgy of the Word
 - ▶ Children's Time
- ▶ Leader-facilitated Education Classes
 - ▶ Christian/Religious Education Programs
 - ▶ Faith Formation Groups
 - ▶ Sunday School Sessions
 - ▶ Week-day Ministries
 - ▶ Week-day Schools
- ▶ Leader-led Intergenerational Gatherings
 - ▶ Church Community Events
 - ▶ Multi-family Groups
 - ▶ Parent-Child Sessions
- ▶ Parent-led Home Sessions

How?

Liturgical Services

Critters may be used in liturgical settings that take place during a service of worship or in a program that occurs in a separate location.

During worship, incorporate the call to worship, lighting of the Advent candle, scripture passages, and suggested music into the design of the service. Share the story during the time with children as an age-appropriate homily, message, or sermon.

In a separate program such as Children's Church or Children's Liturgy of the Word, share the message by using the outline provided for each week of Advent, as well as the days of Christmas and Epiphany.

If additional activities are needed in separate programs, refer to the chart in "Learning the Story" and pick from the extensive list. A simple plan might be:

- ▶ Engage: Hearing the Story
 - ▶ Lead the service for the week.
 - ▶ Read the scripture for the day.
 - ▶ Tell the story for the session.
- ▶ Explore: Learning the Story
 - ▶ Facilitate one or more activities: construct animals, add to a bulletin board, sing songs, tell a hymn story, play the game, enjoy a snack.
- ▶ Extend: Sharing the Story
 - ▶ Send home a service project.

Refer to the Introduction of "Hearing the Story" for additional information about using *Critters* in liturgical settings.

Leader-facilitated Education Classes

During Christian/Religious Education programs and faith formation groups, on Sundays and weekdays, *Critters* may be used in churches and schools. In addition to sharing the children's messages from "Hearing the Story," enhance the lesson with art, games, music, and snacks from the "Learning the Story" section of the book. Refer to the At-a-Glance chart in that chapter for a week-by-week outline of possibilities.

A sample plan might be:

- ▶ Enter
 - ▶ Gather group: add to a bulletin board, play the game, sing a song.
- ▶ Engage: Hearing the Story
 - ▶ Share the message of the day from "Hearing the Story." Or, use the material in "Living the Story" for a shorter version of the lesson for each week.
- ▶ Explore: Learning the Story
 - ▶ Expand the lesson of the week by constructing animals to use in the congregation or at home, singing a song and telling a hymn story, or enjoying a snack.
- ▶ Extend: Sharing the Story
 - ▶ Send the participants home with a service project.

Leader-led Intergenerational Gatherings

For sessions involving individuals and groups from the congregation, several families, or even parent-child sessions, there are many choices.

If this type of gathering is held on a weekly basis, follow the suggestions for Liturgical Settings or Leader-facilitated Education Classes.

If this is a one-time session, or even a gathering on an occasional basis, offer the Family Advent Festival found in "Living the Story." In addition, the five outlines for Advent activities and seasonal service projects in "Sharing the Story" will work well with mixed ages and participants.

- ▶ Experience: Living the Story
 - ▶ Hold Advent festival
- ▶ Extend: Sharing the Story
 - ▶ Lead Advent activities or service projects.
- ▶ Explore: Learning the Story
 - ▶ Enhance with activities: sing a song or provide snacks.

Parent-led Home Sessions

Although the section "Living the Story" is designed for use by families in home settings, the learning activities in "Learning" and the projects in "Sharing" are all appropriate for use on Sundays and weekdays as ways for families to prepare for and celebrate the birth of Jesus.

- ▶ Experience: Living the Story
 - ▶ Lead family time and use follow-up suggestions.
- ▶ Explore: Learning the Story
 - ▶ Coordinate activities.
- ▶ Extend: Sharing the Story
 - ▶ Take part in service projects.

Why?

Regardless of the setting—liturgical, educational, or home...

Regardless of the messages shared and the activities used...

Regardless of the people that participate—children, youth, and adults...

...the goal of this seasonal experience is the same. *Critters* offers a fun, fresh, faithful opportunity for everyone to use the gifts of their senses to hear love, smell hope, taste peace, touch joy, see light, and follow faith during Advent preparations, Christmas celebrations, Epiphany experiences... and every day of their lives.

Hearing the Story

Introduction

Overview

In this section, the resources are intended to help children, as well as youth and adults, *hear* the story of Jesus' birth during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. While these materials are designed for use in liturgical settings such as Children's Church, Children's Liturgy of the Word, and as children's homilies, messages, or sermons in worship services, they are adaptable for faith formation classes, family devotions, and intergenerational gatherings. Regardless of the setting, the materials in "Hearing the Story" may serve as the focus for a wide variety of seasonal experiences including: lighting Advent candles, sharing Bible stories, singing songs, reading scripture, decorating displays, and providing special holiday celebrations.

In order to use the thematic approach offered in *Critters*, the people coordinating the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany decorating and programming must adapt the elements suggested to best fit the individual congregation's needs.

In addition to weekly liturgical helps, *Critters* includes a "Celebration of Christ's Birth," suitable for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and a litany based on the senses for Epiphany.

Components/Outline

For each Sunday of Advent, as well as the days of Christmas and Epiphany, the outline is the same. Information about each component, in the order they are listed in the materials for the week, is provided. They include:

Theme

In one sentence, the theme for the day or the week is summarized.

Scripture

Scripture lessons for the six weeks of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany are taken from Old Testament and New Testament passages that connect to the themes of animals and senses. Readings for the Celebration of Christ's birth are from the Christmas story, found in Luke 2.

Lectionary passages for each week of Advent and the days of Christmas and Epiphany can be read, as appropriate.

Animal Symbols

To make the theme visible and concrete, an animal associated with the birth of the Babe of Bethlehem is added to a display each week. Animal figures for the four weeks of Advent and the days of Christmas and Epiphany include camel, cow, dog, donkey, dove, and lamb. Patterns are supplied in the "Learning the Story" section. Cut the shapes from foam core, poster board, wood, or another material. Pieces, ranging from ceramic to plastic, may also be purchased. The figures can be small enough to place near the candles of the wreath or they may be large and stand on a table or floor.

Call to Worship and Benediction

A Call to Worship for the beginning of the time with children and a Benediction for the end is provided. These fit with the theme of the week.

Advent Candles/Wreath and Words of Preparation

Various traditions abound regarding colors and displays of Advent candles and wreaths. Candles for the four Sundays of Advent are usually purple to denote the penitential nature of the season and the royalty of Christ, but some use the color blue to suggest hope and to differentiate the season from Lent. Often the candle for the third week is pink to symbolize joy. The Christ candle must be white to convey the purity of the Savior. On Epiphany, the Christ candle may be relit.

Candles may be arranged in a wreath made from a circle of evergreen with the Christ candle positioned in a separate holder in the center. Or candles could be set in a row with two candles on either side of the white Christ candle. As another alternative, arrange candlesticks of varying heights on a display table with the Christ candle being the highest.

Candles may be lit at any appropriate time in the liturgical setting. If the ritual is part of a children's message, the candles may be lit as part of the story. The previous week's candles should be lit at the beginning, or prior to the "Words of Preparation," or as each candle is reviewed in the children's story.

The Words of Preparation may be used prior to lighting each Advent candle. If the candle is lit at a time other than during the children's story, the words can be read by a different family, group, or person each week. If the candle is lit during the message an adaptation of the "words" is already included in the dialogue.

Music

Suggestions for carols are included to complement the theme for each week's lesson. The animal name or the essence of the week's focus will be found in those lyrics. In addition to singing, the music may be shared as choral numbers by adult or children's choirs or as instrumental performances.

A verse and the chorus of the theme song for the series, "Light the Advent Candles," is used each week. Sung to the tune, "Go, Tell It on the Mountain," it recaps the animal as well as the focus for the day.

Story

Six children's stories are included, one for each Sunday of Advent, one each for Christmas Eve/Day and Epiphany. The messages may be shared during programs known as Children's Church or Children's Liturgy of the Word or they may be offered during a moment for children in a service of worship as a mini, age-appropriate, homily, message, or sermon.

Each story lists the teaching tools—which always include the animal of the week—needed for the message, provides dialogue to use in an interactive format with the participants, and concludes with a prayer.

Display

Create a visual display as a focal point for liturgical settings during Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. In addition to the candles and the wreath, an animal symbol should be added each week, making visible the theme and reinforcing the message. Considerations must be given to the dimensions of the space where the stories are told when determining size and placement of a display. As an addition, or an alternative, create a large banner and add a new animal symbol during each session.

Supplies

To create the display, to light the candles, and to share the stories, assemble the following materials:

- ▶ Advent wreath or candle holders
- ▶ Animals for display—camel, cow, dog, donkey, dove, and lamb
- ▶ Bible
- ▶ Candle lighter, matches, or tapers
- ▶ Candles in colors such as 3 purple or blue, 1 pink, and 1 white
- ▶ Garland or ornaments to enhance the display
- ▶ Greenery for wreath
- ▶ Music for selected songs
- ▶ Props for stories:
 - ▶ First Sunday: Book of legends; Donkey figure
 - ▶ Second Sunday: Box of spices; Dog figure
 - ▶ Third Sunday: Christmas bread; Dove figure
 - ▶ Fourth Sunday: Baby blanket; Cow figure; Straw
 - ▶ Christmas: Lamb figure
 - ▶ Epiphany: Camel figure

Leadership

Coordination of *Critters around the Crèche* in a liturgical setting, as well during education or at home, can be done by one staff member such as a Christian/Religious Education Director, Music Director, Pastor, or Principal. Duties may also be assigned to volunteers such as members of seasonal task forces, worship committees, and teachers. Whomever assumes responsibility must see that leadership is provided for:

- ▶ coordinating decorations
- ▶ creating displays
- ▶ lighting candles
- ▶ offering "words of preparation"
- ▶ reading scripture
- ▶ selecting music
- ▶ sharing stories.

Hear Love!

Theme

Advent calls us to experience the miracle of Christmas—to listen and hear the Good News of God's love.

Scripture

Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Animal Symbol

Donkey

Call to Worship

One: The Good News of Advent is that God hears our groanings as well as our whispers and responds to our needs.

All: In the quiet of this time, we listen for the still, small voice of God calling each of us to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

One: Hear love!

Lighting the First Advent Candle

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the day we light the first Advent candle. Listen! Do you hear the sounds of Christmas—sounds of advertising jingles, shopper's frenzy, and singing trees? The commercial noise of Christmas can insulate us from the sound of the still, small voice of God. And so the Advent candle reminds us to "Hear Love!"—Jesus is coming! We, too, like the trusting donkey, can follow our Master's voice—all the way to Bethlehem.

[Light the first Advent candle.]

Music

Carols

- ▶ "O Come, All Ye Faithful"
- ▶ "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"

"Light the Advent Candles"

[Tune: "Go, Tell It on the Mountain"]

Verse One

The donkey starts our journey
to Bethlehem to hear
the news the people long for
that Christ is drawing near.

Chorus

Light the Advent candles!
Let them burn brightly far and near!
Sending out their message
that Jesus will soon be here.

Story

Teaching Tools

- Book of Legends
- Donkey figure

Dialogue

This is an exciting day, isn't it? Today is the First Sunday of Advent. That means we are getting ready for a very important day, the birth of a very special baby. Who knows what important day we're getting ready for?

[Christmas!]

And what special baby's birthday is it?

[Baby Jesus!]

Yes, on each of the four Sundays of Advent, we will share a story and light a candle to remind us to get our hearts ready for the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day.

This year our Advent stories will be about the animals that could have been with Baby Jesus and his family on that first Christmas Day. Their stories will teach us how to get ready, so that when Christmas Day finally gets here, we will be prepared to receive God's message of Christmas with all of our senses. Our first sense is the sense of hearing. Can you listen to a story?

[Hold up a book of Christmas legends.]

This is a book of Christmas legends. Do you know what a legend is?

[Wait for possible ideas before explaining.]

A legend is a story that does contain some truth, but has some made-up parts, too. This book is full of made-up stories about Christmas. Many of the Christmas legends are about animals, and they make wonderful stories to help us get ready for the birth of Jesus. That's what we do in Advent, right? In only four short weeks, Christmas will be here, and we want to be ready for Christ's birth.

Part of the challenge of the holidays is to sort out the truth from the pretend. Interestingly enough, legends—stories built on our imagination—can help us discover what is real and what is important.

One legend of Christmas is about the donkey that carried Mary to Bethlehem when Jesus was born. He was an old, gray, pitiful donkey. His owner didn't want him anymore because the donkey was blind, and not being able to see made him even more stubborn than donkeys usually were. The owner decided to get rid of him.

At this same time, Joseph had to obey an order to return to his family's home town to register for the Roman tax. He needed some way to take Mary on the long journey because she was expecting a baby, and she couldn't walk all that distance. Unfortunately, Joseph didn't have much money to buy a horse or cart. The donkey's owner laughingly offered his old, blind donkey to Joseph, who gladly accepted such a gift. Tenderly, Joseph placed his expectant wife on the little gray donkey's back.

Now, that donkey could have used its big ears to listen to all the scary noises out in the desert. He could have planted his feet and refused to move. In fact, that's what the original owner expected to happen. But instead, Joseph spoke so lovingly, so kindly and reassuringly, that the little donkey stepped out in faith to follow the sound of his new master's voice. He allowed himself to be led all the way to Bethlehem.

Isn't that a wonderful legend? Is that story in the Bible? Well, no. In fact, the Bible doesn't even say that Mary rode on a donkey. Over the years, people have used their imaginations to picture the story of the holy family traveling to Bethlehem. They must have traveled some way. It isn't unrealistic to imagine that Mary rode on a donkey, is it? That is why the donkey with its big ears is our first Advent symbol.

[Refer to or place the donkey in the Advent display.]

Although the legend of the blind donkey is based largely on imagination, the story is built on important truth. God is our loving leader. We can trust God even when we can't see what lies ahead. Like the little donkey, we must take steps of faith to follow God's voice as we find our way from the beginning of this holiday season all the way to the manger of Bethlehem. There we will find not a legend, but the reality of Jesus, our Savior.

As we light our Advent candle today, we begin our journey to Bethlehem. Let's ask God to help us be good listeners so we can hear the Good News of God's message of love.

[Light or refer to the first Advent candle.]

Prayer

Dear God,

Help us to listen and follow in faith as you lead us to Christmas.

Amen.

Benediction

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear! God speaks to hasten our steps to the manger, to quiet our hearts for Christ's birth, and to assure us that love is the language. Go so others may hear love through you.

Visuals

For the First Sunday of Advent, add the symbol of a donkey to an Advent wreath or to a worship center arrangement. As an addition, or an alternative, create a banner to highlight the animal of the week or to add the animal to a banner depicting a nativity scene.

Learning the Story

Activities Overview

Art projects, bulletin boards, group games, seasonal songs, hymn stories, tasty treats—all are offered in "Learning the Story" as ways to enhance the use of *Critters around the Crèche*. While these activities are primarily intended for use in leader-facilitated education classes, they may also be incorporated into liturgical settings, intergenerational gatherings, and home sessions. Suggestions for using these learning activities in each setting is provided in the introduction of the book.

An at-a-glance chart outlines options. While the chart is a guide, the suggestions should be adapted to fit the user's needs.

A simple plan for a leader-facilitated education class could be:

- ▶ Enter
 - ▶ Gather by singing a song, adding to a bulletin board, and playing a game.
- ▶ Engage
 - ▶ Share the seasonal message of the week found in "Hearing the Story"—which is the longer version—or "Living the Story"—the condensed outline.
- ▶ Explore
 - ▶ Facilitate animal-themed crafts, learn music, tell a hymn story, and share a snack.
- ▶ Extend
 - ▶ Suggest a service project, from "Sharing the Story," to do during the week.

Activities At-a-Glance

<i>Sunday</i>	<i>Art</i>	<i>Bulletin Board</i>	<i>Game</i>	<i>Music</i>	<i>Snack</i>	<i>Service</i>
First Sunday of Advent: Hear Love: Donkey	Life-sized animals: Church display	Sound: Music notes	Riddle Me! Hear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Anthems : ▲ "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" ▲ "The Friendly Beasts" ▲ Theme Song—"Light the Advent Candles" ▲ Hymn Story: "O Come, All Ye Faithful" ▲ Suggestions: Sound 	Donkey Face No-Bake Cookies	Sound: Advent Offering Calendar
Second Sunday of Advent: Smell Hope: Dog	Fimo or Sculpty miniatures: Home	Smell: Graffiti wall	Riddle Me! Smell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Anthems: ▲ "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" ▲ "The Friendly Beasts" ▲ Theme Song: "Light the Advent Candles" ▲ Hymn Story: "Away in a Manger" ▲ Suggestions: Smell 	Puppy Chow without Peanut Butter	Smell: Savor the Seasons
Third Sunday of Advent: Taste Peace: Dove	Finger puppet animals & Paper bag animals: Children's Center	Taste: Recipes	Riddle Me! Taste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Anthems: ▲ "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" ▲ "The Friendly Beasts" ▲ Theme Song: "Light the Advent Candles" ▲ Hymn Story: "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" ▲ Suggestions: Taste 	Dove-Shaped Butter Cookies	Taste: Christmas Is for the Birds

Sunday	Art	Bulletin Board	Game	Music	Snack	Service
Fourth Sunday of Advent: Touch Joy: Cow	Thumbprint animals: Gifts	Touch: Textures	Riddle Me! Touch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Anthems : ▶ "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" ▶ "The Friendly Beasts" ▶ Theme Song— "Light the Advent Candles" ▶ Hymn Story: "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice" ▶ Suggestions: Touch 	Cow-Shaped Cheese Slices	Touch: Gifts That Touch Others
Christmas: See Light: Lamb	Recycled Animals Christmas packaging/ wrapping	Sight: Christmas cards/ pictures	Riddle Me! See	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Anthems: ▶ "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" ▶ "The Friendly Beasts" ▶ Theme Song: "Light the Christmas Candle" ▶ Hymn Story: "The Friendly Beasts" ▶ Suggestions: Sight 	Lamb Layer Cake	Sight: Seeing the Story
Epiphany: Follow Faith: Camel	Diorama: Keepsake	-	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Theme Song: "Light the Christmas Candle" ▶ Hymn Story: "Joy to the World" 	Camel Fruit Figures	-

Art

Animal Crafts Overview

Birds, camels, doves. Cows, donkeys, mice. Goats, horses, sheep. For many children, as well as youth and adults, a favorite part of the Christmas story is imagining the animals that might have been around the manger when Baby Jesus was born. In *Critters around the Crèche*, the focus is on a different animal each week that may have been in the stable during the birth of the Savior. In addition to associating one of the senses with each animal, the scenarios also highlight the themes of faith, hope, joy, light, love, and peace.

Since animals are a focal point of the stories in *Critters*, and are added to crèche scenes and visual displays each week, use different art techniques as well as various materials to create the figures used to enhance or recount the tales. The following methods can be used to construct any type of animal, not just the one that might be featured in the instructions. These projects are easily adapted to different ages as well as to classroom and home settings.

In addition to use in educational settings, try one of the animal projects each week during Children's Church, Children's Liturgy of the

Word, after Children's Time, or in preparation for the pageant, *The Menagerie at the Manger*. A suggested plan is:

- ▶ First Week of Advent—Life-sized animals for a display at church
- ▶ Second Week of Advent—Fimo or Sculpy animals for a crèche at home
- ▶ Third Week of Advent—Finger puppet and/or paper bag animals to give to a children's center
- ▶ Fourth Week of Advent—Fingerprint animals on bookmarks and cards to give as gifts
- ▶ Christmas—Recycled animals constructed from Christmas packaging and wrapping
- ▶ Epiphany—Diorama to save as a keepsake.

In addition to the instructions, patterns for the six featured animals are provided on the resource sheets. There is also a reproducible illustration of all of the "critters around the crèche" for use as a graphic for bulletins, correspondence, and programs as well as posts on social media and websites.

Animal Masks

Materials

- ▶ Brushes for paint
- ▶ Glue
- ▶ Markers
- ▶ Paint
- ▶ Paint paddles or stir sticks
- ▶ Paper, colored scraps
- ▶ Paper plates—white, tan, brown and other animal-toned colors
- ▶ Pencils or pens
- ▶ Pictures of animals for reference
- ▶ Scissors
- ▶ Tape
- ▶ Yarn

Method

Find pictures of the animals that are to be made as masks.

Assemble brown, tan, or white paper plates or paint plain plates whatever color will look best for the face of each animal. Using markers, pencils, and pens, draw the face on the plate and add any distinguishing features. Cut two eye holes large enough to see through and exaggerate the eyes by outlining the openings.

Check to see what type of ears the animals will need. Draw or trace them on matching paper, then cut out the shapes and attach them to the head. Enhance the faces by adding three dimensional features such as noses, whiskers, and fringed eyelashes.

Attach yarn ties to the sides of the finished plates so they can be worn as masks. Another option is to tape a strip of cardboard or a stick, such as a paint paddle or stirrer, to the center of the back of the plate. To use the mask, place it in front of the face holding the stick as a handle.



Carton Critters

Materials

- ▶ Cartons, various sizes from cardboard juice or milk containers
- ▶ Glue
- ▶ Markers
- ▶ Paper, construction
- ▶ Patterns or pictures of animals
- ▶ Scissors
- ▶ Stapler
- ▶ Staples
- ▶ Tape

Method

Turn cardboard cartons, from juice and milk, of all sizes into animals. Select a variety of containers and wash them thoroughly. Allow time for them to dry. Then glue, staple, or tape the tops shut.

Decide which animals to make and find a pattern or a picture of each of them, if necessary. Cover the carton with construction paper, the same color as the animal's body. Cut ears and attach them to each side of the top of the carton. Cut or draw facial features, as well as anything that makes the animal distinct, such as spots and stripes, and add them to the carton, too.

Create a variety of critters, using pint cartons for animals like rabbits, quart containers for shapes like giraffes, and gallon boxes for large creatures such as elephants.

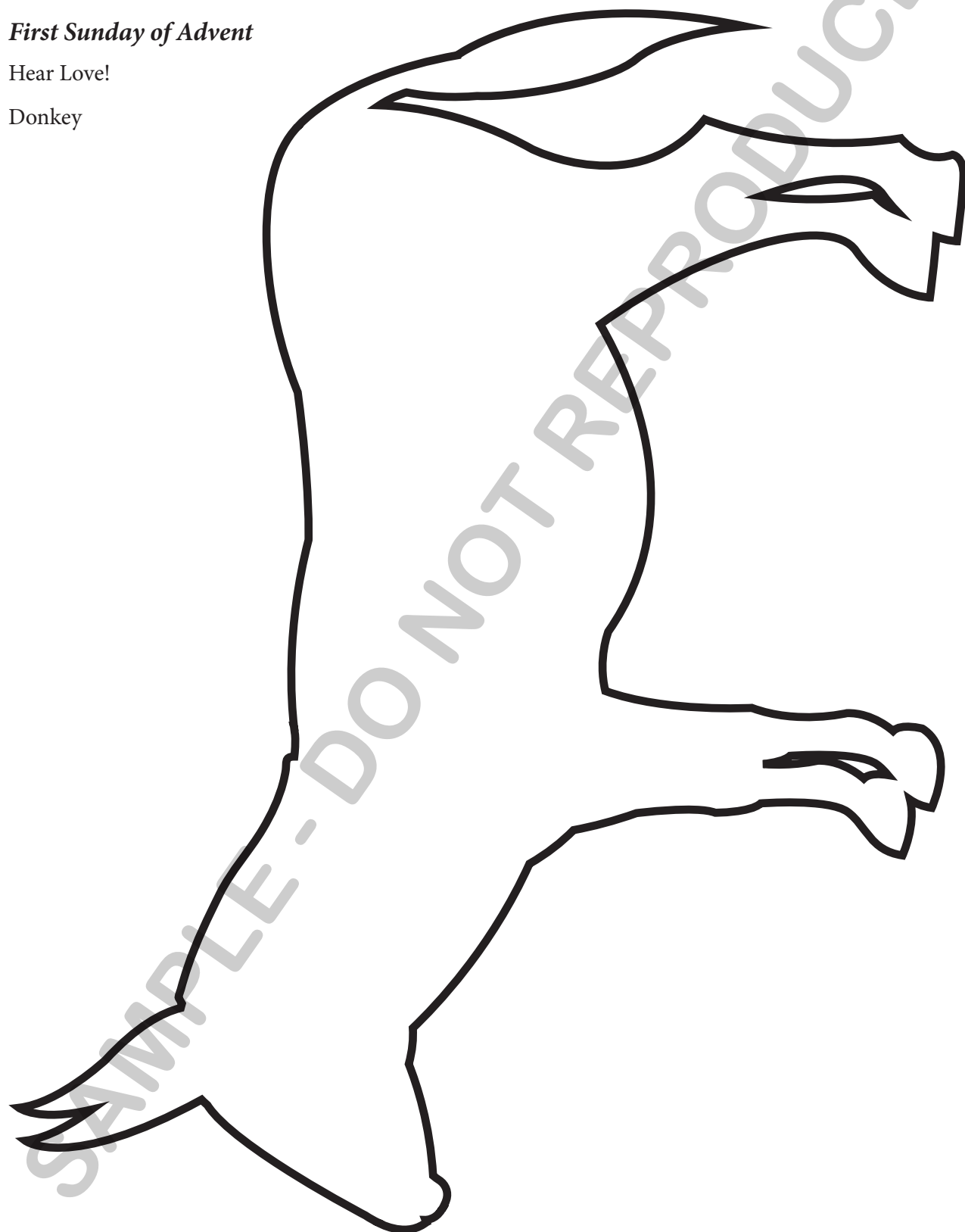


Animal Patterns

First Sunday of Advent

Hear Love!

Donkey



Music

THEME SONG

"Light the Advent Candles"

Tune: "Go, Tell It on the Mountain" • Lyrics: Anna L. Liechty and Phyllis Vos Wezeman

Verse One [Scene One: Hear Love!]

The donkey starts our journey
to Bethlehem to hear
the news the people long for
that Christ is drawing near.

Chorus [Verse One—Verse Four]

Light the Advent candles!
Let them burn brightly far and near!
Sending out their message
that Jesus will soon be here!

Verse Two [Scene Two: Smell Hope!]

The dog can sense the fragrance
of hope that's in the air
expectantly awaiting
God's Christmas joy to share.

Verse Three [Scene Three: Taste Peace]

The dove within its mouth holds
the olive branch of peace.
And everyone who's hungry
is invited to God's feast.

Verse Four [Scene Four: Touch Joy]

The cow provides her warmth for
the baby from above.
The hay holds baby Jesus
who touches hearts with love.

Verse Five [Scene Five: See Light]

The sheep kneels at the manger
and bows his horns so curled
to see the Lamb of God who's
the Savior of the world.

Chorus [Verse Five]

Light the Christmas candle!
Let it burn brightly far and near!
Sending out the message
that Jesus Christ is here.

Introduction

There are many resources that trace the stories behind the hymns we sing in worship, yet most parishioners have not heard them and certainly children and youth are unaware of them. Since music is the basis for much of our faith and songs are an integral part of our services, learning about hymns seems a logical place to derive ideas for children's lessons and stories.

The basis for the hymn stories provided—for carols connected with the lessons in *Critters* and for the music in the *Menagerie* pageant—is a design for a children's message using an object lesson related to a familiar hymn text. A unique part of these stories is that directions for making the object are provided with the intent that the teaching tool also be used as a learning activity in faith formation classes, worship services, or family activities. Included are directions for creating the teaching tool, a suggested script, and instructions for leaders. To reinforce the message, each learner may be given directions for creating the story-related object either at church, school, or home. Of course, to best connect the lesson with the words of each hymn, the song should be sung in worship, in classes, or at home.

The following is a suggested script for introducing the concept of a hymn story:

[Hold up a hymnal or refer to words of a song on a screen.]

What is this?

[Give the children time to answer.]

This is a book of hymns—a volume of songs we sing to praise and worship God.

Did you ever think about how a book like this gets started? Each of the hymns in this book is a story because each hymn was written by a person trying to tell his or her story of faith. Over the years these hymns became a part of our church's story. Maybe you have a favorite song that you like to sing—and that way hymns become our stories of faith, too. What we are going to do together is to look at some of the hymns we sing, maybe learn some new ones, and find out the story behind them.

Hymn stories invite all ages to hear the message of faith behind the words we often sing. More than just hearing, however, participants can become involved in creative experiences that celebrate both the people whose hymns we share and the God whose name we praise.

Hymn Story:

"Joy to the World"

Background Information

- ▶ Composer: Isaac Watts (1674-1748)
- ▶ Year of Publication: 1719
- ▶ Tune: ANTIOCH by Lowell Mason based on Handel's *Messiah*
- ▶ Scripture Reference: Psalm 98

Theme

God's gift of salvation brings joy to the world.

Teaching Tool: Świąt/World (Polish paper ornament)

Materials

- ▶ Embroidery needle
- ▶ Paper, construction, foil, or poster board
- ▶ Scissors
- ▶ Thread

Method

Because of its many sections and its spherical shape, the Polish ornament known as the Świąt is commonly called the world. Cut three equal circles from construction paper, foil, or poster board. They may be the same or different colors. Follow the illustrations and cut the indicated lines on each circle. Write the following words on each circle:

- ▶ Circle A: Joy to the ... / World / Isaac / Watts
- ▶ Circle B: Messiah / George / Frederick / Handel
- ▶ Circle C: Antioch / Lowell / Mason / American.

Fold circle A in half and insert it through the center slot of circle B. Unfold A. Fold A and B so that the cut slots line up. Insert the two folded circles through C. Unfold the circles and arrange them to form a ball.

Make a hanger for the ornament. Thread an embroidery needle and bring the needle and thread through the edge of one of the circles. Knot the loop and cut off the thread. The ornament is ready to place on the tree.

Suggestions for Dialogue and Discussion

How do you spell joy? I'll give you a hint: there are three letters just like the three circles.

[Hold up the three circles.]

J-O-Y spells "joy!" What does joy mean?

[Probably most will suggest happiness. Add the idea that surprise is often a part of our joy.]

Can you think of a famous carol we sing about joy at Christmastime?

[They should be able to guess "Joy to the World."]

"Joy to the World" is indeed one of the most famous Christmas carols we sing, written by Isaac Watts.

[Hold up the circle with his name.]

You might be surprised to learn that Isaac Watts didn't write this song as a Christmas song! It was his interpretation of Psalm 98 in praise of God's goodness and power. Isaac Watts didn't have a lot in his life to be joyful about: he was often sick, he was so small and

homely no one wanted to marry him, and he had to live as a guest in a friend's home for 36 years because he wasn't able to work and support himself. That does not sound like a very happy life, does it? However, Isaac Watts had discovered a source for joy in his life: God's presence! Like the Psalms celebrate the power and glory of God, "Joy to the World" celebrates God's coming to earth in the form of Jesus to bring hope to all the world.

At the same time Isaac Watts lived in London, so did another great man named George Frederick Handel.

[Hold up the circle with his name.]

He wrote his music to the glory of God, so he knew about the joy of God's presence, too. One night, after prayer, he rose to begin his most famous work *Messiah*, and he composed all 53 musical numbers in just 23 days. Although Isaac Watts and George Frederick Handel probably knew each other, it was almost 100 years later in America before Handel's music and Watts' words were put together.

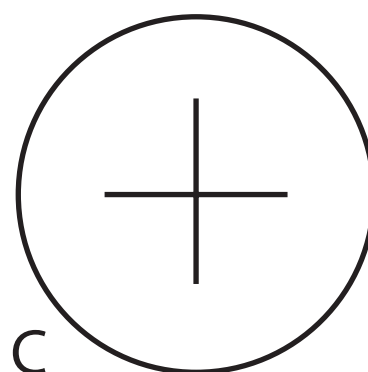
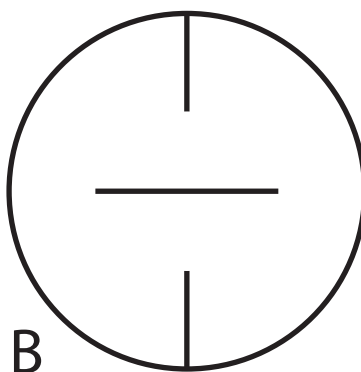
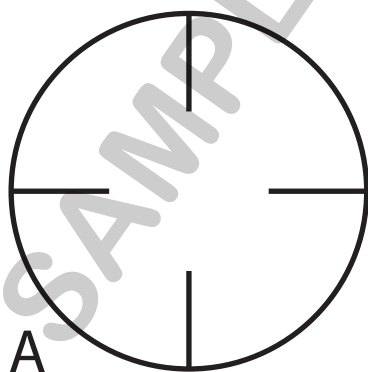
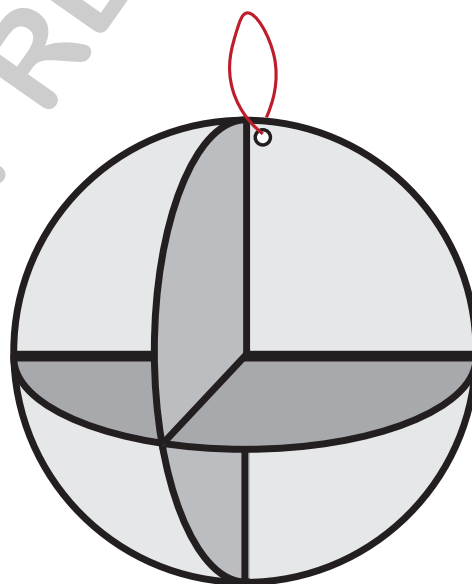
[Insert the first circle into the second.]

An American named Lowell Mason was a choir director and a public school teacher. He adapted Handel's music for churches to use in worship in a tune now called "Antioch," and combined it with the words of Isaac Watts, renaming the new song "Joy to the World." So it took three gifted people nearly 100 years to put together what is now one of the world's favorite Christmas carols.

[Add the third circle to the ornament, as directed.]

Our last circle creates a paper world called a "Świąt," which is a Polish Christmas ornament. That's surprising, isn't it? We can create a three dimensional ball out of three flat pieces of paper.

It's surprising, too, that God could bring together the talents of three people to create this beautiful song. Of course, it is also surprising that God sent a baby to bring the gift of salvation, which is the true joy for all the world. Our three musicians knew that—and now so do we.



Snacks

Animal-Themed Treats

In keeping with the theme of *Critters around the Crèche*, enjoy animal themed treats as refreshments at events, snacks in class, and desserts at home. These recipes can be made in advance and ready-to-serve during a lesson or a social. They may also be created by people of all ages and used as a cooperative project during family time and intergenerational gatherings. Besides the snacks suggested there are many more that could be made; check the internet for additional ideas.

While the ingredients, supplies, and instructions provided are a guide for preparing the snacks, additional supplies such as plates, napkins, and forks may be needed to serve them. In addition, if drinks are offered with the treats, beverages and cups are required.

Of course, with any food project, be sure to sanitize the work space at the beginning and the end of the session. Provide clean up supplies for the participants so they may wash and dry their hands throughout the process as well.

Donkey Face No Bake Cookies

Ingredients [24 Cookies]

- ▶ Candy eyes, 24
- ▶ Cookies: Milano or Nutter Butter, 12 of one variety plus mini vanilla wafers, 12
- ▶ Icing tubes—black, brown, white
- ▶ Tootsie roll, 1

Supplies

- ▶ Kitchen shears
- ▶ Plate

Instructions

Create long-faced donkeys from a combination of purchased cookies. While Milano by Pepperidge Farm or Nutter Butter by Nabisco work well for the project, be aware of peanut allergies when deciding which one to use as the face of the donkey.

Begin by setting out twelve mini vanilla wafers. With black icing, draw a smiley face on each of them. A curved line may serve as the mouth and the two dots can become the nostrils. Using a small dab of frosting on the back side, attach a decorated vanilla wafer to the bottom of each Milano or Nutter Butter cookie, following the curve of the base.

Using kitchen shears, cut the Tootsie Roll into thin pieces to use as pointed ears. Roll each piece of candy between fingers to achieve the desired shape. Use a dab of frosting to attach the ears to either side of the top of the cookie head. With brown frosting, add a tuft of hair between the two ears. Finish the face by using frosting to attach two candy eyes to the head. If candy eyes are not available, make two circles with white frosting and add a black dot in the center of each of them.

Place completed donkey faces on a plate.

Living the Story

Family Time

Overview

Critters around the Crèche offers families an opportunity to prepare for Christmas by using an Advent Wreath at home as the focus for activities and devotions. Building on the theme of the animals that might have been with Baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph during the first Christmas, a new symbol is featured each week which correlates with one of the human senses. As well, family worship suggestions are provided for Sunday devotions including scripture, music, story, and prayer. Six ideas for living out the message complete each week's preparation, building toward Christmas Day and the birth of Christ and continuing through the celebration of Epiphany.

Advent wreaths come in a variety of styles. One common arrangement is a circle of evergreen branches with purple or blue candles for three Sundays, a pink candle as the light of Christ comes closer, and a white candle in the center, lit on Christmas Day.

Critters around the Crèche is based not only on lighting an additional candle each week, but also on highlighting one of the senses

and adding an animal symbol to represent the theme. Families may devise the symbols from a variety of sources such as toys, stickers, pictures, and ornaments or simple illustrations can be traced, decorated, and cut out, with the shapes used to add a personal touch to a family's worship center. Instructions for many craft projects and patterns for the animals used in *Critters* are supplied in the "Learning the Story" section of this book.

While one verse of a carol is suggested for each week's devotion, favorite or more familiar songs may be substituted. The stanza provided matches one of the songs sung during "Hearing the Story." In addition, background on this hymn—which may have been shared in church or school—is supplied in this book's "Learning the Story" materials.

Critters around the Crèche challenges family members to use Advent as an opportunity to explore sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch as they experience the true gifts of Christmas: faith, hope, light, love, joy, and peace.

Hear Love!

Animal Symbol

Donkey

Read

Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud,
O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to
you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble
and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a
donkey.

Say

As we light the first Advent Candle, we
remember to listen and to hear the Good
News—God loves us!

[Light the first Advent candle.]

Sing

"O Come, All Ye Faithful"

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
come and behold him born the King of angels.

Refrain

O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.

Say

Why are donkeys so stubborn? Maybe it's
because their big ears hear so many sounds
that they don't know which way to go, so
they just stop. Some people can be like that at
Christmas. There are so many holiday sounds
they get confused and they just stop listening
for the true message of the season. We can
learn from the story of the donkey who
listened to Joseph's loving voice and carried
Mary safely all the way to Bethlehem. During
Advent, while we travel toward Christmas,
we, too, must listen for God's voice. Like the
donkey, we'll recognize the sound of love.

Pray

Dear God, Help us listen and follow in faith as
you lead us to Christmas. Amen.

Do This Week

- ▶ Attend a Christmas concert and listen to the music of the season.
- ▶ Make a jingle bell wreath for the door.
- ▶ Read the story of a carol before or after singing it.
- ▶ Share a children's Christmas book and add sound effects.
- ▶ Visit a zoo or live nativity scene and listen to the sound a donkey makes.
- ▶ Write a list of all the Christmas sounds that are heard in a day.