

Introduction

We did this in our family and it seemed to go down well (the first time with a three and a five year old) so I wanted to offer it as a potential resource for others. The idea was very simple – to divide up the biblical narratives about Jesus’ birth into daily chunks for Advent (the Advent calendar version: 1–24 December) and retell in age-appropriate language.

The rules were:

1. Leave nothing out – everything that is written in the bible narratives should be covered. (Although I have amplified/unpacked things to the best of my knowledge and limited research.)
2. Don’t mix up the stories – we tell Luke’s story, then Matthew’s.

The fact that we have different Gospels makes things a whole lot more interesting. I hope everyone will enjoy noticing the differences – and especially noticing what is different to the nativity play.

There is nothing complicated (only on day 17 do you need a piece of paper – look ahead now). It is intended to be family storytelling, preferably while the Advent candle is burning. We did it at tea-time, or after the bath.

You may want to look ahead to Christmas Eve and decide what you want to do as a family that day. All the storytelling is done by then. I have put in a few random suggestions but you will have better ideas.

Be flexible. Take the material with a pinch of salt (but remember the idea was to leave nothing out). There are interjections in square brackets from time to time, there as suggestions/reminders to make the storytelling as interactive/two-way as possible. It is better told, not read, so try and get it in your head a bit first if you can. But it doesn’t really matter. Just use it how you want.

The questions at the end of each day are totally optional and may need rephrasing for your unique audience!

Finally, this is still very much “in beta” as we like to say these days. Please give me feedback and suggestions!

Jeremy Woodham

Luke's Story

Day 1 – A LONG TIME AGO...

(Luke 1: 5-10)

A long time ago in a country called Judea, when Herod was the king, there lived, in a town in the hills, a man and a woman.

They were happily married, but they were sad at the same time, because they had never been able to have a baby. Now they were getting old – too old to have a baby.

They were both good people and they were fair and kind to others – it made God smile.

The woman's name was Elizabeth.

The man's name was long – Zechariah.

Zechariah was a priest, someone who did a special job – he helped people pray to God and to understand how much God loved them.

He worked in a very special building in the big city of Jerusalem – it was called the temple – and the people said it was where God lived. I reckon they knew really that God doesn't live in a house – even a big and special one. But they believed that God was there in a special way in the most secret part of the temple.

One day was very important and exciting for Zechariah, because it was the day he was chosen for a big job. It was his turn to say some special prayers in that secret part of the temple where everyone said God lived. He also had to burn something called incense. Incense made a lovely smell – at least, God thought so.

While he was doing this lots and lots of people waited and prayed outside...

Inside, Zechariah was burning the sweet smelling incense and the smoke wafted up into the air – it reminded people of the way their prayers went up to God – and how God thought their prayers were lovely.

Then, something amazing happened...

Find out what tomorrow!

QUESTION: Elizabeth and Zechariah would really love to have a baby - what are you looking forward to / excited about / really hoping for?

Day 2 – AN AMAZING MESSAGE

(Luke 1:11-17)

TIPS: *We like to big up the “Don’t be afraid” message of the angels all through the story. Just because it is an amazing message for children to grasp.*

RECAP: *Remember yesterday’s story? What were the names of the people [you will be surprised when they remember them!]? Where did we get to? Zechariah is in the temple burning the incense – the people smelt it and thought of their prayers rising up to God like the smoke from the incense...*

Suddenly, Zechariah felt funny. Not funny like a joke. Funny like he had a wobbly tummy. He was burning the incense – but he had smelled that lots of times before. He didn’t think it was that making his tummy feel wobbly.

Huh! [GASP] He saw someone else there! No one else was supposed to be in this secret part of God’s temple while Zechariah was saying his special prayers.

But the man – well, Zechariah thought it was a man – or was it a lady? – the ‘person’ said: “Don’t be afraid Zechariah. God has heard your prayers, God has been listening to you. He is going to give you and Elizabeth a baby! It’s going to be a baby boy – and soon he will start growing in Elizabeth’s tummy. He will grow up to be a very important man for God. God is going to work with him to help lots of people: he will help them to listen to what is the right thing to do and to be friends with God. He will even help mummies and daddies listen to their children and understand what they really want.

QUESTION – If you could tell mummy and daddy something really important / something that you really wanted, what would it be?

Day 3 – QUIETLY HAPPY

(Luke 1:18-25)

RECAP: *Remember yesterday's story? Who was in the story? Can you remember where they were? Who had come to talk to Zechariah?*

[Yes, that's right...] The angel was standing there, telling Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a baby...

But Zechariah couldn't believe it! He said to the angel – how will this happen – because I and my wife are old – too old to have babies!

The angel said:

My name is [*guess?*] Gabriel and I stand in the presence of God – and God sent me to tell you this. But because you did not believe me – you will not be able to speak until the baby comes.

All the people outside were beginning to wonder what had happened to Zechariah - he had been a *really* long time inside the temple.

After a really, really long time, Zechariah came out – the people asked him what was going on – but he couldn't speak – he had to try signing! [*This is a great opportunity for some mime.*]

But he hadn't seen Singing Hands so he couldn't sign very well. [*- a duo we love who do songs with Makaton sign language - you may have your own reference point. If not, leave it out :)*] Some of the people began to wonder, what had happened inside the temple? Had Zechariah seen something - had God appeared to him?

[Who had he seen? What had happened? You might want to explore what you think angels are - or you might not!]

Well, after a week or so, Zechariah had finished his special jobs at the temple and went home to the little town in the hills.

And sure enough, before very long, Elizabeth found out she was pregnant - she had a baby growing inside her. She was *really* happy.

QUESTION – Can you think of a time you were really surprised and happy?

Day 4 – THAT ANGEL AGAIN

(Luke 1:26-33)

RECAP: *What happened yesterday?*

So, Elizabeth was going to have a baby – [*how long does it take to have a baby? – ask and get to the right answer!*]

So there's a long time to wait till we find out about Elizabeth's baby...

But that angel – what was the angel's name? – was busy:

Gabriel went to another town in the hills – a town called Nazareth... There lived another lady – a very young lady called Mary. She was soon going to get married to a man called Joseph.

Gabriel – the angel – suddenly appeared to Mary! I wonder what she thought when she saw the angel appear?

What do you think he said? He said: Hello – you are a special person! God is with you!

Well Mary was really surprised – and she must have been scared because the next thing the angel [*what was the angel's name?*] said was “Don't be afraid. You are going to have a baby – and his name will be... [*leave space for the answer*]... Jesus! And he will be a really important baby and a really important person when he grows up – in fact, he will be a king!”

And what did Mary say to the angel? We'll find out tomorrow!

QUESTION – What do you think it was like for Mary to see the angel Gabriel?

Day 5 – MARY TALKS BACK

(Luke 1:34-38)

RECAP: *What happened yesterday? Who came to see Mary?*

But just like Zech– [*who was that man with the really long name who also had a message from the angel Gabriel?*]

Just like Zechariah before the angel stopped him talking, Mary had some questions to ask.

Mary said to Gabriel – how on earth can this happen? I haven't even got married yet –

Gabriel said: “Don't worry – God's holy spirit will make it happen. So your child will be very special. God can do anything! You know Elizabeth – your cousin? Well, she was far too old to have a baby – but now she is pregnant and in just a few months she is going to have a baby!”

So Mary said – “OK, I will do what God wants and I will trust that what you say is true...”

And then suddenly, Gabriel was gone.

But I think Mary wanted to find out if what the angel had said was really true because she set off to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Was the angel Gabriel really right?

We'll find out tomorrow...

QUESTION – Mary said yes to God, even though she knew it would be difficult. People would think she was a bad person for having a baby before she got married.

Have you ever done something really difficult because deep down you knew it was the right thing to do?

Day 6 – JUMPING JELLYBEANS

(Luke 1:39-45)

RECAP: *What happened in our story yesterday? Mary said she would do what God wanted, and have the baby. And what did the angel Gabriel say to help her believe it could happen? Gabriel told her that Elizabeth her cousin was pregnant even though she was too old to have a baby.*

So, Mary set off straight away to go and visit Elizabeth to see if it was true – was she really going to have a baby? Was the angel really right?

So off she went to the little town in the hills where [who?] Zechariah and Elizabeth lived... She called out “Hello” to Elizabeth and when Elizabeth heard her she felt the baby jump inside!

Well, this made Elizabeth really excited and God’s Holy Spirit gave her some special words to say [*sometimes this happens – that we might feel like we should say something really helpful or encouraging to someone and that’s the Holy Spirit helping us*].

She said: “Oh Mary you are so lucky and your baby is so special – and I am really lucky that you have come to visit me. The baby inside me started kicking and jumping when I heard you say hello. Well done for believing what the angel told you and trusting God.”

QUESTION – Elizabeth was so excited to see Mary that her baby jumped inside her tummy. Can you remember the last time you were so excited you jumped up and down?

Day 7 – MARY’S AMAZING SONG

(Luke 1:46-56)

RECAP: *What has happened in our story so far? Mary went to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, who was going to have a baby as well.*

The way Elizabeth said hello to Mary and welcomed her – well, it made Mary feel so good that she wanted to sing a song. Here is the song she made up. We don't have the tune, so we can just read the words:

Every part of me from the inside out;
 from my toes to my nose;
 is bursting with happiness;
 God is our rescuer;
 he is kind to his people who are in trouble.
 Everyone in the world will call me lucky
 because God has done great things for me.

When people keep on trusting God
 from when they are little children
 to when they are grannies and grandpas,
 God looks at them with loving kindness.
 He shows how strong he is:

He puts down the people who think they are better than other people;
 he lifts up the people who are treated badly.
 He fills you up if you are poor and hungry;
 but if you are rich and eat too much
 he will send you away with nothing.

He has helped his people; because he promised he would –
 he promised to our grannies and grandpas
 and their grannies and grandpas and *their* grannies and grandpas...
 And when I am a granny he will still be helping us.

And then Mary stayed with Elizabeth until Elizabeth’s baby was born.

QUESTION – Have you ever made up a song? When? What was it about?

Day 8 – A BABY IS BORN – BUT NOT BABY JESUS!

(Luke 1:57-64)

RECAP: *What happened in our story yesterday? Who had gone to visit who? Why did Mary go to visit Elizabeth? How long did she stay there? She stayed until ...*

Finally the time came for Elizabeth's baby to be born – and it was a baby boy! Everyone was very happy and they had a big party.

In those days in that country, the people gave their children a name when they were eight days old. And in those days when you had your first son, you would name him after his daddy. So if I had a son it would be [*insert Daddy's name here*].

But Elizabeth said, no – he must be called ... John. Everyone thought this was a bit of a funny name.

Zechariah still couldn't speak [*some more miming here!*] So they gave Zechariah something to write on, so that he could tell them what he wanted the name to be. He wrote down: his name is John.

Everyone was amazed. But they were even more amazed when suddenly Zechariah could speak again; he started thanking God for his baby and now he could tell them all about the angel in the temple and what had happened.

QUESTION – How do you think Zechariah felt when he could talk again? What do you think was the first thing he said?

Day 9 – ZECHARIAH’S POEM

(Luke 1:65-80)

RECAP: *What happened in our story yesterday? Who had a baby? What was the baby’s name?*

All the funny things that happened made people talk and wonder what was so special about the baby John... and Zechariah also made up a song or a poem – just like Mary had.

And this is what was in Zechariah’s poem:

We are so thankful to our Lord God,
because he looks at us with loving kindness
and he has made up for all the things we have done wrong –
he is [*toot de toot*] playing a trumpet that he has rescued us –
he sent people to speak God’s words for hundreds of years
telling us he was going to rescue us from trouble –
and now it is happening.

He promised Abraham – the great great great great grandfather of
our people – that he would be Abraham’s God and give him lots of
children
and then his children would have lots of children
and then their children would have lots of children.
And in the end their children had more children
and some of those children were our grannies and grandpas
and mummies and daddies –
and all through hundreds of years God remembered
that promise: to rescue us and and to let us live
without being afraid of anything –
doing what God wants for our whole lives.

And you, my son, John – you will be called God’s trumpeter
because you will be like someone blowing a trumpet
[*Toot de toot!*]

to say “God is doing a special thing”
and when they hear it people will be happy and know
that God is calling to them
and telling them they can be peaceful and not afraid
if they open up their hearts to God.

And then he said a lovely thing

Because of God’s loving kindness, it is going to be like
the bright, warm sun coming out after a dark night –
and everyone who can’t see in the dark will be able to see where to
go and the sun will guide our feet into the way of peace.

And baby John grew up to be a big strong man.

QUESTION – If you were going to make up a poem about something amazing – what would it be about?

Day 10 – A BABY IS BORN – IT IS BABY JESUS!

(Luke 2:1-7)

RECAP: *What do you remember about our story yesterday?*

There was a king of the country where Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph lived – he was called Herod. But he was not the most powerful person – because that country was ruled by the Emperor who lived in Rome in the country we call Italy now [a world map might be called for here]. [*Do you know what an emperor is?*] An emperor is like a king but a king who rules over lots of countries, not just one country.

The Emperor decided that he wanted to count up all the people in all the countries he ruled over. We have something a bit like this. It's called a census, and the government counts up everyone who lives in our country and asks them questions about themselves so they can find out who lives here and what they think is important.

Joseph went with Mary to Bethlehem, because everyone had to go and be counted in the town their family was from. Bethlehem was also the town where someone very special and famous had been born hundreds of years before – old King David.

Joseph and Mary still hadn't got married but Mary was already expecting a baby [- *who is it?*].

While they were staying in Bethlehem, the time came for the baby to be born and Mary gave birth to her very first baby boy!

She wrapped him up tightly with strips of cloth and put him down to sleep in the animals' feeding trough because there was no room for them to stay in the usual place for visitors.

Q - Mary and Joseph had to go on a journey even though Mary was pregnant with baby Jesus. Have you ever had to do something you didn't want to do?

Day 11 – SHEPHERDS AND MORE ANGELS

(Luke 2:8-15)

RECAP: *What happened in our story yesterday? Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem – can you remember why? And what happened while they were staying in Bethlehem? [Baby Jesus was born!]*

Nearby there were some shepherds – they lived out in the fields with their sheep, to make sure none went missing or got eaten by wild animals.

Suddenly one of God’s angels was there – standing right in front of them – and God’s presence was there – it was like the whole field was shining.

And what did the angel say to them? *[wait for answer DON'T BE AFRAID!]*

Don’t be afraid, said the angel – I am bringing good news! The person who is going to save you – God’s special person – the one you have been waiting for – has been born today in the town King David was from (that’s Bethlehem, remember). And God’s special person is someone just like you – you will find a baby wrapped up tightly in strips of cloth and lying in an animals’ feeding trough.

And then, even more amazingly, an army of angels appeared and they said: Glory to God and peace to the people God cares for.

And the shepherds decided they should go to Bethlehem to see if what the angel said was true. Was it true? Well, we will find out tomorrow when the shepherds go to see if God’s special person really is an ordinary baby boy.

QUESTION – What do the angels keep saying to people when they appear? [DON'T BE AFRAID!] So it must have been scary to see an angel. When was the last time you felt scared? What is God’s message to us when we feel scared?

Day 12 – SHEPHERDS VISIT THE BABY

(Luke 2:16-20)

RECAP: *This is a shorter episode, so it might be fun to do a longer recap of the angel appearing to the shepherds, perhaps the kids retell it with the aid of a crib scene. (Remember, shepherds only! Don't let the stories get mixed up if you can help it.)*

The shepherds went quickly to Bethlehem and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the feeding trough. When they saw that everything had happened just as the angel said, they told Mary and Joseph what the angel had said about the baby – that he would rescue them and be God's special person.

And Mary remembered what they said and thought about it and kept their words in her heart.

And the shepherds went off back their fields in a very happy mood and said thank you to God for their amazing experience.

**QUESTION – Can you think of a time when you had a big surprise?
What happened? How did you feel?**

Day 13 – A NAME AND A TRIP TO THE TEMPLE

(Luke 2:21-26)

RECAP: *What happened yesterday?*

Now, in Mary and Joseph's country, you gave a baby its name when it was eight days old. And they called their baby ... Jesus!

There was another tradition in their country too. A few weeks after having a baby people would say some special prayers and if it was your first baby boy the mummy and daddy took him to the big temple in Jerusalem – the place where Zechariah saw the angel – to say to God: “Here you are – we want you to be in charge of this boy's life.”

Now in Jerusalem lived a man call Simeon. He lived in a way that made God really happy – and God's holy spirit loved to spend time with Simeon. He had been waiting for a long time to see God do something special for his people. They had a hard time living under the Emperor [*do you remember what an emperor is?*] and mean King Herod – and Simeon was waiting for God to keep his promise that he would rescue his people.

The holy spirit had told Simeon that he would not die before he had seen God's special person come. One day, the holy spirit was with Simeon and showed him that he should go to the temple.

I wonder why [*feel free to accept guesses*]...we'll find out tomorrow!

QUESTION – Who else in the story was old and lived in a way that pleased God? Who do you know who is old and lives in a way that makes God smile?

Day 14 – SIMEON’S POEM

(Luke 2:27-35)

RECAP: *Can you remember what happened in yesterday’s story? Why did Mary and Joseph go to the temple? Why did old man Simeon go to the temple?*

So the holy spirit had shown Simeon he should go to the temple, and when he saw Mary and Joseph come in with Jesus he just knew that was the reason why.

He took baby Jesus in his arms and he made up a poem – just like Zechariah. I think the holy spirit was helping. Simeon said to God:

“Now I don’t mind if I die,
because I have seen the person who will rescue us –
and not just us in our country but everybody in the whole world –
he will show everyone who God is
and we will be famous because he is one of us!”

Well, Mary and Joseph were amazed at what he said.

But there was more, because Simeon said a prayer for Mary and Joseph and then he said to Mary: “I’m afraid this baby is going to cause a lot of trouble when he grows up! Lots of people won’t like him because he will show them what they are like on the inside – and you, his mummy, will feel very very sad sometimes.”

QUESTION – How do you think Mary and Joseph felt about the things Simeon said?

Day 15 – ANNA – NOBODY WROTE DOWN WHAT SHE SAID

(Luke 2:36-40)

RECAP: *Do you remember what happened yesterday? Where were Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus? What special building were they in? And who did they meet there? Who started talking to them?*

There was also an old lady – nearly as old as *Granny [name the person closest to 84 that you know]* – called Anna, who lived in Jerusalem. In fact she lived in the temple – she never left! She was always praying to God – she didn't want to do anything else!

Well, Anna too came over to Mary and Joseph and began talking to the people around about baby Jesus – there were lots of people wondering if God was going to do something to help them.

But Luke didn't write down what Anna said!

Sometimes people didn't think it was very important what girls and ladies said – and people like Luke who wrote down the stories didn't bother to write it down. Maybe no one could remember what Anna said, or he couldn't find anyone who was there to ask – or maybe he just didn't think it was important.

QUESTION – Do you think God thinks girls and ladies are important?

[God asked Mary to have baby Jesus, which was probably the most important job ever! And Elizabeth had a special baby. And Anna was a prophet...]

After all this, Mary and Joseph took Jesus back to Nazareth to live and he grew up to be big and strong and God loved him very much.

Day 16 – LOOKING BACK OVER LUKE’S STORY

Tomorrow we start Matthew’s version of the story of Jesus’ birth. To emphasise the change, let’s take a teatime to recall Luke’s story together – to see what everyone remembers and to see what their favourite bits were.

Depending on how it goes you could have a family challenge to retell the whole story, or just leave it at the above.

Whatever, don’t have the story or Bibles open – see what has stuck in the memory for everyone. If you are struggling an adult can prompt gently with some characters’ names.

Matthew's Story

Day 17 – JESUS' FAMILY TREE

(Matthew 1:1-17)

Today requires an actual prop -- probably just a big sheet of paper and some pens to demonstrate some kind of family tree.

Once you have a simple diagram, wonder together about why people might make family trees (explain they are called trees because the connecting lines look like branches). Go back to great grandparents if you can. Spend a bit of time together looking at it.

It's not just a list of names – but about important people we love. It tells the story of our family...

Yesterday we looked back at Luke's story about the baby Jesus. Today we are starting Matthew's story about how Jesus was born. See if you can notice anything different to Luke's story.

Matthew starts his story by telling the story of Jesus' family – he wrote down Jesus' family tree.

And what he wanted people to know was that Jesus was related to two very special people that everyone would have heard of. One was old King David, who had lived hundreds of years before Jesus – he was the most famous and greatest king of Israel – which was the name of Jesus' people. And the other one lived hundreds of years before King David! He was called Abraham – and he was the person God chose when he wanted one set of people to be special and do a special job for him. Those people were the people of Israel – and Abraham was the first one – he was like the great great great x great grandfather of the whole country! That's how people thought of him.

So Matthew starts his story this way because he wants people to know that Jesus is important too – really important – as important as King David and Abraham were.

QUESTION – Ask mummy or daddy to tell you something about *their* mummy or daddy.

DAY 18 – THE ANGEL CHANGES JOSEPH'S MIND

(Matthew 1:18-25)

RECAP: *What did we talk about yesterday in Matthew's story? What was important about that?*

Matthew says:

Now Jesus – God's special person – was born this way: His mother Mary had got engaged to Joseph, but before they got married they found out she was pregnant. In those days people thought it was very bad to have a baby before you were married and Joseph thought it would be better to cancel getting married as quietly as he could.

But that night...

Joseph went to bed and was fast asleep when he had a dream. In the dream he heard a voice: the voice said "Joseph, do not be afraid." Who was it?

That's right – an angel – another messenger from God. Matthew doesn't say if this angel had a name – but Joseph dreamed of an angel from God who told him:

"Don't be afraid to get married to Mary. The baby inside her is from God's holy spirit: it's going to be a boy, and you must call him Jesus – because he will rescue his people." The name Jesus means "Rescuer".

Matthew remembered an old saying from one of God's friends that his people had written down hundreds of years before.

"Look, a young girl will have a baby and they will give him the name 'Emmanuel' – which means 'God with us'."

And when Joseph woke up, he went ahead with his plans to marry Mary. And he looked after her until her baby son was born – and Joseph gave him the name... Jesus.

QUESTION – Has God ever talked to you in a dream? / Have you ever been rescued?

Dray 19 – MYSTERIOUS VISITORS

(Matthew 2:1-9a)

RECAP: *What happened yesterday in Matthew's story? [Baby Jesus was born!]*

Can you remember from Luke's story what the king's name was in the country where Jesus was born? [King Herod] And what was the biggest, most important city - where the temple was? [Jerusalem]

Well, one day some very strange looking men arrived in Jerusalem city. They had come from another country to the east and they were priests like Zechariah but from a very different mysterious religion that the people did not know much about. They were asking people:

"Where is the child that has been born and will be your new king? We have come because we saw his star rise in the sky and we want to show him respect."

Well, King Herod heard about these strangers and – well, he was very worried, and confused and upset – there was going to be a new king – and he didn't know anything about it. The next king *should* be Herod's son – and he hadn't had a baby! The news about the strange visitors and the new king spread around the city too – and lots of people felt confused and worried. This was big news – but it wasn't about anyone in the Royal Family – so they must have wondered what was going on.

So King Herod got all his cleverest people – the people who understood the holy books and knew about the law.

He asked them – we are all waiting for God's special person to come and save us from the Romans – where will God's special person be born?

Well, the experts quoted one of God's messages that had been written down hundreds of years ago and they said: God's special person will be born in Bethlehem. Because God's message said: "From you Bethlehem will come a very important person who will be a great leader for my people who will care for them like a shepherd cares for his sheep."

So King Herod called for the strange visitors and told them they should go to Bethlehem and search very carefully for this child – and he said: “When you find him, come back and tell me – so that I can go and pay my respect to him as well.”

So off they went...

QUESTION – Have you ever met anyone from a far-away country? What was different about them? In what ways were they the same as you?

Day 20 – THE STRANGE MEN MEET THE BABY

(Matthew 2:9b-12)

RECAP: *So, what happened in our story yesterday? Who arrived in the big city? Can you remember why? What happened – what did people think when they heard about these strangers?*

So the strange visitors set off, as King Herod had told them, to go to Bethlehem and search for the new king.

When they set off they saw the star in the sky – the one they had followed all the way from their homes in the far-off Eastern lands. The star seemed to stop in the sky – this made them really excited – it had stopped above the place where this new little king was. They went into a house and saw the child – [*who is the child? Jesus!*] with his mummy [*what's his mummy's name? Mary!*]

The mysterious visitors knelt down in front of Jesus to show him respect and that they knew he was a special child.

Then, they opened up their treasure chests! Inside they had many precious lovely things. They gave him presents – one was a gift of shiny gold.

Another present was frankincense – and another present was some myrrh.

[Frankincense and myrrh were very expensive – do you remember Zechariah – he was burning something like these in the temple to make a lovely smell. You could use frankincense and myrrh to make perfume and sometimes medicine.]

Next, a funny thing happened – because when the strange visitors had gone to sleep, one of them – or perhaps all of them – had a dream.

Matthew doesn't tell us much about the dream – except that someone warned the strange visitors from the east not to go back and talk to Mean King Herod about what they had seen, and how they had met Jesus. So they set off back home by a different road, one that didn't go through the big city Jerusalem.

QUESTION – Do you like giving presents? Is it better than getting them?

Day 21 – ESCAPE!

(Matthew 2:13-15)

RECAP: *What happened yesterday? The mysterious visitors from the east left to go home – did they go and tell Mean King Herod where to find Jesus? [NO!] How did they know not to go back and tell Herod [THEY HAD A DREAM]...*

Now in today's story, Joseph has a dream [*Who is Joseph? – I think we can go with "Jesus' daddy"*]

Guess who comes to visit Joseph in a dream? [*An angel. Can you remember another dream Joseph had earlier in our story (when the angel tells Joseph to go ahead and marry Mary)?*]

An angel came to Joseph in a dream – and what do you think the angel said? [*DON'T BE AFRAID should likely be the answer by now, however...*]

The angel didn't say to Joseph "Don't be afraid" – the angel said "get up!" The angel said: "Get up, and take the child and his mummy – and run away! You must escape – go to Egypt – [*it would be like someone telling us to go to France – the next country to ours*]. Stay there until I tell you – because King Herod is about to try and find the child – and kill him!"

Well, can you imagine how Joseph felt – and how Mary felt when he told her?

Imagine how they got up in the middle of the night and started the long journey to Egypt to find a place where they would be safe. Imagine how frightened they must have felt – and how lonely they felt when they got to the strange new country of Egypt. But I suppose they made friends – because they lived there a long time – until Mean King Herod died.

And Matthew – who is telling the story – remembers a line from an old poem from the Bible, that goes like this: "Out of Egypt I have called my son"... It was a poem about how God rescued his people from a mean king a long long time ago, hundreds of years before.

I think maybe Matthew remembers this bit of poem because he wants to say: don't worry – I know this part of the story is scary – but Egypt is the place where God rescues his people! God did it before – and God can do it again!

QUESTION – Can you think of time when you felt scared or lonely? Tell mummy or daddy about it. They can tell you about a time when they felt scared too.

DAY 22 – THE SADDEST DAY

(Matthew 2:16-18)

RECAP: *what happened in our story yesterday? [Joseph warned in a dream. The family run away to Egypt.]*

Do you remember how the angel told Joseph: King Herod wants to kill Jesus!

Well, today is the saddest day in our whole story.

Back in the big city, Jerusalem, King Herod had been waiting for the strange visitors from the East to come back and tell him if they had found the new child-king.

But eventually he realised they had tricked him – they weren't coming back!

Then, that horrible king worked out when the mysterious visitors said they first saw the star that they followed, the star that had appeared in the sky at Jesus' birth. He decided to get rid of anyone who could be as old as Jesus – he told his soldiers to go out and look for all the children in Bethlehem who were two years old or younger – and kill them!

That's right – kill them!

It really was the saddest day.

And Matthew – the storyteller – remembers another old poem from the Bible. Sometimes when we are sad, and especially when we are really sad, a poem can say what we would like to say if we weren't so upset.

It went a bit like this:

*A voice! A loud voice – crying and wailing and crying even more!
A mummy is crying for her children –
No one can make her feel better –
Because her children are not here any more.*

Q: Can you remember a time when you felt so sad that you cried and cried and cried? Talk about it – and mummy or daddy can tell you about a time when they felt really sad too.

Perhaps talk to God to say thank you that God knows what it is like to feel really sad.

DAY 23 – HOME AT LAST?

(Matthew 2:19-23)

RECAP: *What happened yesterday? [A very sad day, lots of children died. Lots of mummies and daddies cried.]*

Do you remember how Joseph and Mary and little Jesus ran away to Egypt – to make sure that Jesus wouldn't be killed with all the other children.

They had to wait and wait in their new country of Egypt. I suppose they worked and played and made friends and perhaps they began to think they would stay there forever.

But next, in Matthew's story, guess who appears? An angel!

Joseph had another dream. In his dream he saw an angel who said [*What do you think the angel said?*] – Well this time, the angel said "Get up!" – just like when the angel told Joseph to get up and run away from Herod with Mary and little Jesus. "Get up," said the angel. "Take the child and his mummy and go back to your country – Israel – because the people who wanted to kill him have died." That's right, Mean King Herod had died, so it was safe to go home.

But then Joseph had another dream telling him it might not be safe to stay near Bethlehem or the big city Jerusalem because Mean King Herod's son was now the king (I suppose Matthew thought Herod's son might go looking for Jesus again).

So Joseph took his family far away to the north, to a town called Nazareth in an area that was named after a big big lake in the middle of it – Galilee.

There they made their home. And that was where Jesus grew up!

And last of all, Matthew remembered another old poem, because the word for Nazareth in his language sounded a lot like the word for "branch" – and that was one way the people talked about God's special person, the rescuer they were waiting for – that person was going to be like a strong new branch growing out of an old tree stump.

Matthew really loved old poems – and he kept writing down bits of them when he told Jesus’ story. I think this was because he wanted people to know that Jesus was the one – God’s special person, our rescuer - he was the one they had been waiting for, and talking about for a very long time. And now, he was here!

I wonder what will happen next?

QUESTION – Have you been waiting for anything for a really long time?

Day 24 – LOOKING BACK AND EXPECTATION...

We've had 23 days of stories and we have heard everything that the Bible says about when Jesus was born.

Now it's time to look back – and forward to tomorrow. Freestyle today – it's Christmas Eve – you're probably quite busy. Here are a few suggestions of things to do/discuss if you have time to kill. Kids may want to do some of these activities during the day. (The results could be presented while you're burning down the last of the Advent candle.)

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What is one thing from our story you remember the most?

What was missing from our story? Was anything different? (Talk about what happens in the school/nursery nativity play and ask – is that bit in the Bible? [It's okay to have a story with an innkeeper and a crib scene with the magi and the shepherds there at the same time – as long as we know which bits we are making up for ourselves. Older children might like to discuss this some more.])

Were Matthew's story and Luke's story the same?

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES

Make up a prayer in response to the story / in expectation of Christmas.

Make up your own Christmas song.

Get out the paints/glue/stickers/glitter and make a celebratory Christmas picture.