



Holy Family Parish
Religious Instruction - Grades K-5
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Lesson 9 - Eamus Usque Bethlehem - Let Us Go to Bethlehem

Uh oh! When I Google directions from Little Falls to Bethlehem, my GPS said, “Can’t find a way to get there.” Good thing we have the nativity scene in the church so we can bring Bethlehem to us. That’s right, nativity scenes—sometimes it’s called a crèche or a manger—help us to understand and ponder what the very first Christmas may have been like. Every nativity scene is unique. Ours is rather big and full of different figures or statues that help tell the story and bring it to life. St. Francis of Assisi, in the 1200s was so moved by the birth of Christ, that he organized a nativity with real people and live animals!

The first Nativity occurred in Bethlehem, over 2000 years ago when Our Lord Jesus Christ was born. Bethlehem is a few miles from Jerusalem, Israel. This region is part of what is known as the Middle East. Bethlehem was a quiet little town at the time of Jesus’ birth, but it was a special place, because the prophet Micah predicted that a great king would come from Bethlehem: “And you Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, for from you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Micah 5:1) Another great king came from Bethlehem too. His name was King David. He began his life as a shepherd, but was called by God to lead the people of Israel as king. During his time he united all of Israel and helped bring about a time of great peace. When I look at the nativity scene, I see peace and harmony because Jesus is our true shepherd and King.

The name Bethlehem is a Hebrew word (the language of the Jewish people) which means, “house of bread.” You’ll notice the Baby Jesus is laying in a manger? What’s a manger? It probably comes from the Italian word mangiare which means, “to eat.” A manger is a place where animals eat, like a feeding trough or a dog dish. Why is Jesus laid in a stinky manger? Because He will become food for His people in the Eucharist (house of bread, get it?) Let’s look closer. Who is with Jesus? Nearest Him are Mary, the Mother of God, and St. Joseph. Mary feeds him and takes care of the baby Jesus making sure He will stay healthy and well. St. Joseph is nearby because he is their protector and guide. They teach us to always be mindful of Jesus.

You may wonder why animals are present? You’ll notice an ox and donkey. I’m sure they helped keep him warm, with their large bodies and steamy breath, but I think they were there to teach us something too. In the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 1, we read: “Listen, you heavens, earth attend, for Yahweh is speaking, ‘I reared sons, I brought them up. But they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey it’s master’s crib. Israel knows nothing, my people understands nothing.’” It seems that even God’s dumbest creatures recognized their God, even when the most intelligent of His creatures did not. Remember the story of the St. Anthony and the Donkey? [If you forgot, this is the true story about the hungry donkey who chose to bow before the Eucharist instead of eating his oats, while his master was too proud to believe.]

Who are the other characters at a distance? Can you see them? There is an Angel, there are beggars, shepherds and good people, young and old. “The humble shall see God.” (Mt. 5:5). God calls everyone, no matter who we are—it doesn’t matter—each of us must humble ourselves before Him. Notice how the baby Jesus has his arms opened wide waiting to be picked up and held close to our hearts. He is asking us to follow hold Him, but we must become humble first.

There was no room for him at the hotel, but that's okay, Jesus didn't want anything fancy. He didn't need much; He only needed people around Him who loved Him. The Bible says that they found room in a stable or a cave. What does that tell us? This is important. He was born in a cave on this earth and He Resurrected from a cave when after three-days in the tomb.

I encourage you to make your own little Christmas Nativity scene at home. It can be as simple or fancy as you'd like, it doesn't matter; whatever will help you come to better understand that first Christmas.

I'm awfully sorry we couldn't go to Bethlehem. I think it would've been too long of a trip anyway, but I hope the nativity scene makes you feel like you're there. I'll let you know of a little secret: If you really want to experience Bethlehem, all you have to do is go to Mass. This is where He becomes present once again in the Eucharist! The Angels are there too as well as people from all walks of life, especially the humble. Hopefully, you can be there too.

Merry Christmas!

Quiz: Test your knowledge:

1. Where is Bethlehem?
2. What does the name Bethlehem mean?
3. Who was King David?
 - a. A shepherd
 - b. A soldier
 - c. A sinner
 - d. A King
 - e. All of the above
3. What was present at the first nativity?
 - a. An ox and donkey
 - b. A shepherd from a distance
 - c. Pope Francis
 - d. All of the above
4. Give one other name for the nativity scene?
5. Why was Jesus laid in a manger?
6. What's the secret to seeing God?
 - a. Intelligence
 - b. Strength
 - c. Status (for example, being powerful)
 - d. Humility
7. How can we go to Bethlehem even now?
8. True or False:
 1. God became a baby who cried. T/F
 2. Some nativity scenes are big. T/F
 3. Some nativity scenes are small. T/F
 4. St. Francis organized the first nativity scene. T/F

Bonus:

Word Scramble: **dan mBeletheh ese mCoe ot**