Spending time with Christ: A family guide to the Nativity

The history of the Nativity scene

St. Francis of Assisi established the first Nativity scene in 1223 in Grecio, a small town in Italy. As he was preparing for Christmas Eve Mass, St. Francis was trying to think of a way to remind people that Jesus came not as a wealthy king but as a poor child born among animals. So he wrote to Pope Honorius III and obtained permission to create a living Nativity scene.

In a cave near town, Francis set up an altar. He brought in a manger filled with hay as well as a live ox and a donkey. He invited the townspeople to come, and he preached about the humble beginnings of the Christ Child.

The idea of re-creating Jesus' birth was very popular. Churches in Italy created displays made out of terra cotta. In the middle of the 1500s, families began to put up Nativity scenes in their homes. And living Nativity scenes like the one that St. Francis started centuries ago remain popular to this day.

Who was there?

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' birth. Mary, Jesus' mother, and Joseph came to Bethlehem together with their donkey right before Jesus was born. When there was no room at any of the inns for them to stay, they ended up in a stable where animals were kept. So the Nativity scene includes Mary, Joseph, Jesus and the animals in a stable, as well as a manger, or trough, where Baby Jesus slept.

In Luke, we learn about the angel who brought the shepherds "good news of great joy" (Lk 2:10, NRSV) when Jesus was born, so we include the shepherds and the angel in our Nativity

scene.

And in Matthew, Chapter 2, we read about the Wise Men, or Magi, who came to visit Jesus, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. So we add the Wise Men to our Nativity scene as well.

Celebrating the Nativity around the world

In Latin countries such as Mexico and Guatemala, families remember the Nativity story with a celebration called Las Posadas. It takes place over the nine nights before Christmas, representing the nine months when Mary was expecting Baby Jesus. The festivities include prayer, Christmas carols and re-enactments of Mary and Joseph's search for a *posada* — a hotel or inn.

Before the 1600s in England, families baked a mince pie in the shape of a manger, and Baby Jesus was placed on the pie until dinnertime. This is why mincemeat pies are often a part of Christmas celebrations today.

After the French Revolution ended in 1799, the creators of Nativity sets in France began to add ordinary people to the scenes, including bakers, farmers and carpenters. They wanted to help everyone picture themselves receiving the Christ Child.

Manger moments

When Advent begins, set up your family's Nativity scene. As you place each piece in the crèche, talk about what that person or animal might have been thinking or experiencing on that holy night when Jesus was born.

- You could follow the German tradition of waiting to put Baby Jesus in the manger until Christmas Eve. Until that time, kids can help create a soft bed for Jesus by putting a piece of hay or golden yarn in the manger each time they do a good deed. Talk about those good deeds

each night at dinner.

- You can set up the shepherds a bit away from the crèche, since they were taking care of their sheep until the angel came and told them the good news. Allow your children to move the shepherds around each day, just as the shepherds would have moved in the fields. You can even put the three Wise Men further still and allow your children to move them a bit closer to the Nativity scene every day until Christmas. Ask your children to describe what the shepherds and Magi are doing each day.

- With your children, write a greeting to Baby Jesus from each person in the Nativity scene. Share them aloud on Christmas Eve.

- Let your children become the Wise Men. Help them choose simple new baby items at the store and, amid the gift-opening frenzy of Christmas Day, have your kids place the items at the manger. Afterward, donate the items to a women's shelter or children's shelter in your area.