

THE CHRISTMAS TELLING

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For many, the original Christian meaning of Christmas has been lost among the tinsel, revelry and mammon overkill. What still remains can be tinged by nostalgic ritual or even over-familiarity. Where is the birth of our Messiah among this? Where is the clear image of the miracle of the Incarnation? Is there a way to reclaim the core events and understanding among the noise that surrounds it? Or should we just wipe our hands of it and concede defeat to our secular society, which has hijacked it and converted it into a festival of over-indulgence?

There is an important verse, in the Book of Deuteronomy that speaks of the need to tell things of God to future generations:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

In Jewish tradition this has been the basis of the Passover *seder night* celebrations, where families and friends gather around a dining table to hear the story of the Exodus. It is a hugely effective tool to pass down the story from generation to generation because not only is the celebration centred on a meal, but that all five senses are engaged in the story-telling.

So what about the story of the Nativity? Is there a way we can learn from this Jewish tradition and provide a framework for families and friends to gather around a dining table and hear the story of the Birth of Jesus, using all five senses?

The *Christmas Telling* is such an attempt, in fact it takes its name from the *haggadah* (“the telling”), the traditional handbook for the Jewish *seder night*. It should last no longer than thirty minutes, perhaps longer if someone wishes to give a short message. It is suitable for both children and adults, with fun elements and serious elements and plenty of interactivity.

Preparation

Although the optimum number would be around 6-8 people, in order to involve everyone, there is no reason why this can't happen in a hall, with a number of trestle tables. It is best to have the ceremony at the beginning of proceedings, followed by a Christmas lunch, but there is no reason why it can't be followed by a more traditional Christmas party or knees-up. It is, after all, a time of celebration and joy.

The following items will need to be supplied:

Wine (or fruit juice), with a glass for everyone

Three candles (in single candlesticks), placed along the centre of the table in three places (and box of matches, of course)

Loaf of bread (rustic, not sliced)

Bowl of salt water

Bowl of olive oil ("virgin" olive oil would have extra significance)

Music (live or recorded – suggested themes in script)

Bag of chocolate gold coins

Incense (joss stick)

Bowl of mild spice mix (sweet chilli or salsa dip perhaps)

(Optional) An envelope for each participant containing a pre-selected Bible verse.

Making a Christmas meal is a complicated business (I'm told). In order for everyone (including the cooks) to be involved in this service it is advised that the cooking is timed to be completed just after the service. The plating up of the food would perhaps be a good time for a bout of carol singing!

Apart from setting the table with the items listed above, the chocolate coins should be hidden around the room beforehand. Ideally all celebrants should have a copy of the schedule, though one person should be nominated as the leader, to guide everyone through it.

The service starts.

(Everything in *italics* is read out, either by the leader or a nominated person)

1. The first cup



This is the first of four cups. Of course wine is to be preferred but there is no specific requirement, so grape juice would do if necessary. Charge all of the glasses

Welcome to our Christmas telling. We kick things off with the drinking of the first cup. This is to sanctify the service, to offer it to God as an act of worship. In Hebrew, it is called the "Kiddush". This is also the "cup of blessing". It is customary to begin with a prayer. Here it is in English:

Blessed is the Lord God, King of the Universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.

And, in Hebrew, if you accept the challenge:

Baruch atah Adonai elohaynu melech ha-olam borai peree hagofen

Drink from the cup.

2. The first candle



The leader lights the first candle, then reads the Scripture:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned (Isaiah 9:2 NIV)

EVERYONE SAYS: *This is the light of promise*

3. The sharing of bread



Everyone tears off a small piece of bread (don't eat it yet).

The light was promised to arrive at a specific place. This place is to be Beit Lechem, the House of Bread, also known as Bethlehem.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2 NIV)

We share this bread to remember this fact

The prayer before eating

Blessed is the Lord God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

Baruch atah Adonai elohaynu melech ha-olam hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz

Eat the bread.

4. The salt water



The light was going to be a man of sorrows:

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:2-5 NIV)

We commemorate this through the tears represented by the salt water. Let us all take some more bread and dip it in the salt water.

Eat the bread.

5. The olive oil



The light was going to be born from a virgin, a lady of purity:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (Isaiah 53:2-5 NIV)

Immanuel – God with us – the Messiah was to be born of a virgin. We commemorate this through the purity of the oil. Let us all take some more bread and dip it in the oil.

Eat the bread.

6. The second candle



The second candle is lit:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5 NIV)

This is the light of the annunciation, the announcing of the coming of the Messiah.

EVERYONE SAYS: *Light is coming into the world*

7. The first question



At this point you can involve the youngest person sitting at the table. This is a question to be asked:

How did the story of Jesus begin? Please tell us.

A volunteer reads from Scripture:

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people

from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1: 18-25)

8. Song



This could be a good point to sing an appropriate Christmas carol. Here are some suggestions: Silent Night, O Little Town of Bethlehem

9. The third candle



The third candle is lit:

EVERYONE SAYS: *Light has come into the world*

A volunteer reads from Scripture:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:1-20 NIV)

10. The second cup



Charge all of the glasses.

This is the “cup of life”. Let us celebrate the birth of Jesus with the traditional blessing for the birth of a boy.

Blessed is the Lord God, King of the Universe, Who is good and brings us good.

Baruch atah Adonai elohaynu melech ha-tov ve hameiteev

EVERYONE SAYS: *Light has come into the world. Le Chayim! To Life!*

Drink from the cup.

11. The second question



This is another question to be asked (from the young person):

What happened next? Please tell us.

A volunteer reads from Scripture:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel”” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-11 NIV)

12. The gold coins



It is time for the youngsters to search the room for the hidden coins (but not to eat their booty until after lunch, of course!) When they have settled down ...

The gift of gold tells us that Jesus is born to be King

13. The incense



Now light the incense (the joss stick) – you may wish to blow it out before it dominates the atmosphere.

The gift of frankincense tells us that Jesus is born to be righteous and holy and to offer himself as a sacrifice for us

14. The spices



The gift of myrrh speaks of bitterness, suffering and affliction. It tells us that Jesus was born to die. Let us all take some more bread and dip it in the spices.

Then add the following ...

But others were going to die, too. We continue the story of Jesus

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:12-18 NIV)

15. The third cup



Charge all of the glasses.

This is the “cup of sorrow”. As we drink it let us remember the sacrifice that Jesus was to make for us on the cross. Let us also remember the slaughter of those innocent children killed at the order of King Herod. (Perhaps we can also remember those family and friends who are no longer with us)

Blessed is the Lord God, King of the Universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.

Baruch atah Adonai elohaynu melech ha-olam borai peree hagofen

Drink from the cup.

16. Song / talk



This could be a good point to sing an uplifting Christmas carol. Here are some suggestions:
Come All Ye Faithful, We Three Kings

Alternatively (or in addition) perhaps there can be an appropriate short talk by the leader.

17. The fourth cup



Charge all of the glasses.

This is the “cup of celebration”. We rejoice that the Saviour is in the World.

Blessed is the Lord God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Your Holy Spirit and has given us Jesus the Messiah, to be the Light of the World.

Baruch atah adonai elohaynu melech ha-olam asher kidishanu b'ruach ha-kodesh v'natan lanu et yeshua ha maschiach, l'hiyot orolam

Drink from the cup.

And what better way to celebrate the coming of the Messiah ... Let's Eat!

(If you have done so, this would be a good time to ask participants to open their envelopes and read their gift of a specific Bible verse).