

Christmas: Expect the Unexpected *All-age service*



An all-age church service designed to work alongside the **SGM Lifewords** resource *Christmas: Expect the Unexpected*.

If possible, begin the service in a way that the congregation won't be expecting.

We've listed a few possibilities below – if you can think of something that might work better in your context, give that a go instead.

- If the church is usually set up to face in one direction, set it up in the opposite direction. Begin speaking from the back of the church.
- Turn up wearing your dressing gown.
- Ask one of the younger members of the congregation to welcome everybody – with no prompting from you.
- Begin with the blessing

Welcome

Explain that in the Christmas story, (as at the start of the service!) plenty of things happened that people weren't ready for, and weren't expecting. Explain that you're going to take a look at some of those things together, to find out why the story of Jesus' birth is so unusual.

Song

Storytime!

Tell the congregation that you are going to tell them a favourite fairy story. Encourage them to join in if they'd like to. Tell the story as normal, but radically change the ending – there's an example below you can use ...

"Once upon a time, there was a beautiful girl called Cinderella. She lived with her stepmother and two ugly stepsisters. The stepmother hated Cinderella and did everything she could to make her life miserable: forcing her to cook beautiful meals she wasn't allowed to eat, and making her wear rags, instead of the beautiful gowns she gave to her daughters.

One day, someone came to the house with a message. The Prince was to hold a birthday celebration – a ball – and he was on the lookout for a wife!

Cinderella was very excited, and begged to be allowed to go, but her wicked stepmother wouldn't let her. She wanted one of her daughters to marry the Prince instead. So on the day of the ball, she made Cinderella help her

stepsisters get ready, then locked her in the cellar so that she had no way of getting to the ball.

But of course, we all know how the story ends. Fortunately for Cinderella, seven dwarves lived just around the corner in a little cottage which they shared with Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother. They had bought some magic beans from a boy named Jack, and had become very rich by climbing a beanstalk and plundering a giant's castle. So they rescued Cinderella, used some of their fortune to buy her a beautiful gown, and took her to meet the Prince.

Unfortunately, they were too late. He had already met another beauty called Snow White, and they had held a whirlwind wedding ceremony at the palace. All was not lost though, because the Prince's long lost brother, who had been invited to the wedding, fell in love with Cinderella at first sight, and they all lived happily ever after."

When we've heard a story loads and loads of times, we can stop listening. We're no longer surprised by it. We know what to expect. Or at least, we think we do! The Christmas story can be a bit like that. Explain that you're going to reread it together, and have a think about some of the surprises God had in store.

Song

Christmas Unwrapped

Read a version of the Christmas story from a children's Bible. (*The Lion Storyteller Bible* is a good version to use, and it is written specifically for reading aloud). Ask the congregation to listen out for anything unusual in the story ... and then talk through some of the surprise moments.

Wrap up a pile of presents for some of the children to unwrap, each containing one of the story's unexpected moments: a baby doll, a copy of *Heat* magazine, a toy stable from a child's nativity set, and some aftershave.

Gift One – a baby doll

God chose to be *born as a baby*. On the face of it, this seems like a crazy idea, doesn't it? See whether any of the children can remember a younger brother or sister being born. What was that like? Could the baby manage to do anything for itself? What does a newborn baby need help with? Explain that God chose to be born as a helpless baby, because he wanted to be able to identify fully with what it meant to be human. He was a baby who cried and relied totally on his parents for food, shelter and care – just like we did. It's probably not how you'd have chosen to plan it, if you were God ... is it? It's a bit of a risky strategy!

Gift Two – a copy of Heat magazine (or similar)

You might have thought God would have chosen someone famous or special to be his parents. But instead, he chooses an ordinary teenager. Mary would probably only have been 12 or 13 when she found out she was going to have a baby: not much older than some of the children you might be talking to. How would they feel about becoming parents? She wasn't married, which would have meant people treated her unkindly when they found out she was pregnant. She was an ordinary girl, not rich and powerful. And she wouldn't have had a clue how to look after a baby. But God chooses ordinary people, even when we might think there's someone better for the job.

Gift Three – a toy stable from a child's nativity set (or, in the absence of one of those, a cuddly farm animal!)

Jesus was born in *a stable*: God could have chosen anywhere on the planet to be born. A stable probably wouldn't have been our first choice. It was probably noisy, smelly, and not very private. It's unlikely to have been particularly comfy for Mary and Joseph: and being put in a manger instead of a cot probably wasn't all that comfy for the baby either ... When wise men came to look for the baby (they appear later in the story), they knew they were looking for a king, so they headed straight for the palace, only to find no sign of a newborn and an irritated King Herod who didn't like the idea of another king appearing from nowhere to threaten him. Once again, God chose to act in a way that no one could have or would have expected!

Gift Four – some aftershave (a strange smelling spice)!

The wise men gave a tiny baby gold, frankincense and myrrh. Ask the children whether they think *any* of these presents would have been useful. What might they have taken instead? Explain that the wise men gave the baby these presents because they each said something about who Jesus was: the gold symbolised that he was a king; the frankincense was a perfume used by God's people when they worshipped him, and symbolised that Jesus would help people to get to know God better; and the myrrh (probably the strangest gift of all!) was used when people died to stop the body from smelling, symbolising Jesus' eventual death on the cross.

Song

Spam Spam Spam

Before the service, set up a Christmas dinnertable for one at the front of the church, complete with tablecloth, serviettes, crackers, etc.

Ask some of the children if they would like to take part in a Christmas dinner. The only condition is that they have to eat anything that is offered to them ... even sprouts!

Once you have a willing volunteer, produce their 'dinner.' This should be a can of something obviously unattractive: Spam would work well here. Before the service, replace the contents of the can with something good ... some chocolates / cake / sweets, so that they get something completely different from what they were expecting.

Explain that the things God had planned at Christmas weren't what anybody was expecting – they were even better. By being born as a baby, God showed us how much he loved us. That's why we're celebrating on 25th December.

Song

End the service by giving each child a copy of *Christmas: Expect the Unexpected*. Encourage them to do something 'unexpected' themselves this Christmas. Some ideas might be: buy a surprise present for someone in their class they wouldn't normally speak to; put a version of the Christmas story in every present you wrap this year; bake some mince pies and take them round to an elderly neighbour; with your parents, invite someone over for Christmas dinner who otherwise would be on their own; use some of your Christmas money to bless somebody else; eat something you wouldn't normally include as part of your Christmas lunch to help you remember the unexpected Christmas story; open your presents on Boxing Day (if they can wait that long!), or on Christmas Eve.