

Activities for the big surprise

On your marks:

Christmas was God's big surprise. Even though there had been tantalising clues all throughout the Old Testament, no one really expected the miracle of 'God-with-us' in the form of a helpless baby. The Christmas story is about God's surprising gift to us: a gift that not only transforms the way we think about ourselves and our future, but also one that gives us a surprising insight into the very nature of the love of God for us.

Get set:

What follows are some suggestions for activities you could use with your group to open up conversations about the big surprise of Christmas.

You will need the following for some of the activities:

- paper and colouring pens;
- card for making masks;
- a series of seven exclamation marks, each slightly bigger than the other;
- forfeits and surprise gifts for 'pass the parcel'.

Go!

Activity 1

As the members of your group arrive, divide them into twos or threes and give them team names linked to the theme of surprise - for example, the Startled, the Jumps, the Jaw-droppers, the Boggle-eyed, the Amazed, the Gasps, and so on. Challenge each team to create a poster with appropriately bright and startling colours, including some large sound bubbles with explosive words in them - for example, 'bang', 'crash', 'ke-pow', and so on. (NB: a quick glance in any action-hero comic will provide you with some similar words.)

Alternatively, each member of your group could make and colour a mask with 'surprising' designs. Younger children will need ready-made masks but older children could cut out their own. They should be masks that make people jump!

Activity 2

Start your session with some 'surprise aerobics' as a warm-up. Introduce an activity like 'walking on the spot' but then suddenly say 'surprise jump' or 'surprise hop'. Mix up other

similar, simple movements with surprise changes. Link this to the Christmas surprise theme. No one expected God's big surprise at Christmas. It made everyone jump. It made them jump for joy!

Activity 3

Teach a simple chant to use throughout the session - this could be accompanied by marching and clapping:

*We're on a special journey
To find God's big surprise
A baby born on earth for us
God has become our size!*

Activity 4

God's big surprise began with a series of smaller surprises. According to Luke's account of the Christmas story, there were many surprise happenings:

- angel surprise for Zechariah in the Temple;
- angel surprise for Mary at her Nazareth home;
- surprise baby for Elizabeth, who was past the age for motherhood;
- surprise baby for Mary, who of course was not yet married;
- there was the surprise that Joseph had, who presumably had not been planning a cattle shed delivery room for his betrothed;
- there was the surprise for Mary, whose labour seems to have come on prematurely;
- and there was the surprise for the shepherds, who had the surprise of their lives up on the hillside.

Introduce a big picture of an 'exclamation mark' and explain that this is the way we indicate surprise when we are writing something. Now set your group off to find the seven exclamation marks, which should be hidden in envelopes around your meeting area, in as many surprising places as you can find. To add to the fun, tell them that some of the exclamation marks may be hidden on leaders (such as in a back pocket or stuck to the underside of a shoe!).

When the seven exclamation marks have been found, link them to the series of surprises (as outlined above) that happened in the Christmas story.

Activity 5

As a group, play a game of 'pass the parcel' to some Christmas music. For the surprise Christmas gift wrapped up in the middle, use something loosely linked to the story - for example, Jelly Babies, some Angel Delight or some sort of edible sheep. As each layer is removed, there should be a simple forfeit (along with a chocolate coin as compensation) for the person unwrapping the parcel. The forfeit could involve running around the outside of the group dressed in a piece of surprising clothing - for example, an oversized jacket, a huge hat, massive shoes, giant sunglasses and so on.

Activity 6

Play a game of Christmas *Pictionary* using a pre-set series of words that will eventually

connect up to the theme of Christmas. The group should keep a note of the different words, which could be used to create a word 'sounds-like' puzzle for them to sort out. For example, you could use these words in order:

Wheat, Fish, Ewe, Hay, Berry, Crisp, Mast, Hand, Bay, Nappy, Shoe, Year

- Can they guess the hidden message that can be heard by saying these words quickly in succession?
- Can you hear it? (*We wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year*)

Activity 7

Ask for a leader to stand in the middle of the room with his/her arms stretched out. Now invite everyone else in the group to come and link up with that leader: at least three people should hold on to a hand/arm on either side and then others should link up with these six people by arm or hand, and so on, until everyone is linked up around the room. The leader should then start calling out various Christmas words including the word 'surprise'. When the leader says the word 'surprise', everyone should let go quickly and run for the safety of the edge of the room, before the leader can capture them. Try this again with two leaders... or three.

- How many people are captured each time?

Activity 8

Get your group to walk around the room slowly, humming or singing a seasonal song. While they do this, a leader should call out at various points a 'surprise grouping' for them to get into. For example:

- birthday month
- favourite colour
- pet or no pet
- school attended
- brother or sister or none

Everyone will need to call out, for example, the month in which they were born so that others born in the same month can join them.

- Can they get into groups before the leader counts to 10?
- How many surprising subgroups can be made from your one big group?

Activity 9

Try a simple game of 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe' with the whole group together. Designate one end of the room to be the 'yes' end and the other to be the 'no' end. The area inbetween these two ends is for those who aren't sure of the answer. Now ask some questions about Christmas and get everyone to run to the place that designates the answer. For example:

- The first Christmas happened at the North Pole
- The angel in the Christmas story is called Gabriel
- The Bible says that Mary had baby Jesus in Nazareth
- Mary's cousin was called Elizabeth
- Jesus was born in a cattle shed on the hillside

Activity 10

Link any one of the above activities to the surprise theme of Christmas. The Christmas story is about God's amazing gift to the world that took everyone by surprise. As Paul puts it in his letters:

...our Lord Jesus Christ was kind enough to give up all his riches and became poor, so that you could become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9, CEV)

Christ was truly God. But... he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us (Philippians 2:6 - 7)

But when the time was right, God sent his Son, and a woman gave birth to him (Galatians 4:4)

What an amazing story to share with our children!

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