

## ***Week one: Mrs. Noah***

That man! That old man, I tell you! Here we are, sitting in a big boat on dry land. Not a river or lake within miles.

I think I need to explain how we got here—with all these animals and all this smell. My husband Noah isn't a young man anymore, but he's got the imagination of a child. ... Well, maybe that's O.K. You see we've been building this boat for a long, long time. Not by ourselves ... our sons and their wives pitched in to help too. But why did we do it, you ask?

I can't remember exactly, but one night we were sleeping soundly. Well *I* was. Noah says I snore. Anyway, right in the middle of the night, Noah shook me and said: "Wake up, wake up! You wouldn't believe the dream I just had. It was so strange but it was so real too. God talked to me. I'm supposed to build a big boat right in our front yard, fill it with animals and wait for a huge flood to come. We will be the only ones on it. God wants to destroy everything else." I laughed and told him it must have been the supper I fed him. ... "Go back to sleep," I said.

I think Noah must have had this same dream for about two weeks and finally I got tired of him waking me up in the middle of the night. So I told him, "Let's build this boat. I don't think God is going to let me sleep until we do." So here we are. ... We call it the ark. It's full of animals of all sizes and shapes—a boy and a girl of each kind. Now we're waiting for the rain to come. I wonder if it will.

*Let the children help complete the story. If you include the part of the story where the dove returns to the ark with the olive branch, you may want to mention that this dove is the symbol for Mennonite Church Canada/USA and reminds us that God is faithful and will bring us safely home when we trust God.*

*Ask the children how God was able to get the message about building the ark to Noah. Tell them that we learn about what God says in the Bible, but we also hear from God in the words and actions of our friends and sometimes in our dreams.*

## ***Week two: Isaiah***

Hello, my name is Isaiah. I lived in Jerusalem many years before Jesus came. I was a prophet. Do you know what a prophet does? (*Listen for some suggestions.*) Those are good ideas. Let me tell you how I understood my job—I was supposed to listen to what God was saying and tell other people what I heard. ... So how do you think I found out what God wanted me to tell the people? Did I make something up? Of course not! So how do you suppose God spoke to me?

What happens to you while you sleep? Do you dream? I think that's how it worked for me. Sometimes, when I woke after sleeping for a while, I would have a very strong sense that I needed to share a message with people. I was afraid to speak out, but every time I had a dream, the same idea kept coming back to me. Finally I realized God was putting that dream in my head and then I shared the message. Here's how it went:

A time is coming when things are going to change for the good. Things that don't normally fit together are going to be arranged in a new and beautiful way. Can you imagine foxes playing with chickens instead of eating them? Or a little lamb lying down beside the big lion to get out of the wind without the lion hurting it? Or green grass growing in the middle of the dry dusty desert? Well, God is promising that this will happen. It is worth waiting for.

I'm sure you know all about waiting. What are some good things you wait for, dreaming of the day when what you're expecting will come true? (*Listen for answers.*) Well, in my dream lots of good things are going to happen because God is sending Jesus to us to show us the way.

You know, I bet you could also listen to what God is telling you in your dreams. ... Maybe you will have a message to share with the adults. ... You know why I think this? Because in my dream God told me "a little child would lead" all of those animals who were getting along with each other.

### ***Week three: Elizabeth and John the Baptist***

*(John the Baptist is silent in this presentation—but looks and acts the part. If it's more convenient, Elizabeth could be holding a drawing of a wildlooking John the Baptist.)*

I am called Elizabeth. It's an old Hebrew name that means "My God is a God of plenty" and it's true. God has given me so much to be thankful for. It wasn't always that way. You see, my husband Zechariah and I waited a long, long time for a child. Zechariah was serving as a priest up at the temple, and he had a vision—kind of like an awake dream. In his vision, an angel appeared beside the altar and told him we were going to have a baby boy—and we were really old! Even though God had helped other really old people have children, like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah wasn't so sure that we would really have a baby. So God told him he wouldn't be able to speak until the baby arrived. And that's exactly what happened.

The angel also gave instructions about raising the baby. His name was to be John, and he was not supposed to drink wine or other strong drinks when he grew up, and most of all, he would be full of the Holy Spirit—even before he was born! Wow ... and I was to be a mother to a person like that! So here he is. I know he looks a bit strange—kind of wild looking isn't he? He lives in the desert and mostly eats what he can find out there. It would be nice if he would come home for dinner sometimes, but he seems to have a lot on his mind. He lives his life with a purpose ... a very important purpose. Let me tell you about that.

You see, John has a cousin who also had a wonderful and mysterious birth. His cousin was born in a manger in Bethlehem. ... Who do you think that is? *(Talk about the birth of Jesus and some of the things that happened there.)*

John's job is to tell people to watch for Jesus and to get them ready for the kingdom of God to start happening. John sounds kind of angry sometimes because he sees how unfair the world is. He knows that Jesus is coming to help make things better. The poor people who don't have much because they have been cheated out of their money and homes love what John has to say. But not the rich people and the tax collectors. They are afraid of him, and sometimes I worry that they're going to hurt him. He tells me that what happens to him isn't so important. The most important thing is to wait for Jesus, because he will lead the way into the kingdom of God.

Everything I'm telling you started when my husband, Zechariah, had a vision in the temple. We had a son, John, who grew up and worked hard to prepare the world for the arrival of Jesus. Visions are kind of like dreams. Sometimes God wants to talk to us this way too.

### ***Week four: Shepherd or shepherdess***

My name is Pastora (*or Pastor*). That's probably not a name you've heard before, but where I live it's what I am called by the Roman soldiers who have taken over my country. It's a Latin name for shepherdess. Do you know what a shepherd or shepherdess does? ... Yes, we watch the sheep for people in the village of Bethlehem. It's pretty hilly around here, and the sheep like to eat the grass up in the hills. Sheep aren't real smart. They tend to get into trouble, and we don't have fences around our farms like they do where you live—if you live in the country. So my friends and I have to spend all of our time watching the sheep so they don't get away or get hurt.

At night we gather them together and put them in a safe place. Then we build a fire and make our evening meal. Perhaps someone will play a flute or sing a song. It's peaceful and quiet out under the stars. But sometimes we hear the sounds of wild animals who want to hurt the sheep, so one of us stays awake all night just in case a fox or wolf or even a lion comes too close. Then the one who's awake wakes everyone else up, and we scare the wild animal away.

Right now I'm here alone. I'm kind of scared, but I'm also very excited. You see, tonight something really strange happened. The sheep were safely sleeping, we had a wonderful stew and pita bread for supper, we sang some of our favorite songs, and one by one we fell asleep. It was my night to keep watch. But I was so sleepy. It was hard staying awake. I think I may have drifted off to sleep for a little bit when I first heard the noise.

It came from across the valley. There was a pale light. I sat up to see what it was. I thought it might be a falling star, but the noise grew louder and louder. Was I dreaming? It was so beautiful. I woke up the other shepherds. We didn't know what to think! Soon the noise was very loud and we saw people in the sky. Then we understood the words. "Glory to God in the heavens. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all people!" They were messengers ... angels. Oh my. We were just astounded. What did it mean?

And then the singing stopped and the messengers just hung there in the sky. One of them spoke. "Don't be afraid," he said. "The Messiah has been born in Bethlehem. Go look for him. He is sleeping in a barn—in a manger all wrapped up in baby blankets." Then the singing began again, and the light was so bright we had to close our eyes.

When we opened our eyes, they were gone. It was very quiet again. We asked ourselves whether we had dreamed it all up, but one of the older shepherds said, "We have to go see what this is all about." And off they went ... all except for me. I had to stay here with the dogs and watch over the sheep. I wonder what they will find. I wonder what a Messiah is. I can't wait to find out.

*(If appropriate, take time to talk about the meaning of Messiah—one of the names we call Jesus.)*

## ***Week five: Joseph***

Yes it's me, Joseph. I'm the quiet one. Sometimes I hear people talking behind my back because my wife had a baby and I'm not the birth father. We're kind of a blended family I guess. But I talk to God a lot ... and God talks back to me—usually in my dreams. So I'm O.K. with all this. Here's what happened.

You see, Mary and I were engaged to be married. When two people are engaged they promise each other that they will not have any other boyfriends or girlfriends. From that point on they begin planning to become husband and wife. And then I had the shock of my life. Mary told me she was going to have a baby. I knew I was not the father. I was very, very sad. I wondered whether Mary had broken her promise to me and found another boyfriend. I was very, very sad because I loved her so much. I was so sad that I just went to my room and fell on my bed and put my head under my pillow ... and then I had a dream.

An angel talked to me. He said he had a message from God. "Don't worry about who the baby's dad is," he said. "God is taking care of all that. But there is an important job for you to do. God wants you to raise that baby and protect him from danger. Treat him like your own son—because his life will change the world." When I woke up I felt lots better. I knew God had spoken to me and I trust God.

But before Mary and I could even get married, something else happened. I learned that I had to go to Bethlehem to pay some taxes. I took Mary with me because she was ready to have the baby and I couldn't leave her alone. You know the story, don't you? We couldn't find any place that would take in an unmarried couple—even though it was obvious Mary was going into labor ... except for one innkeeper. He let us stay behind his place—in a barn. It worked out. Jesus was born. The shepherds you heard about last week came. Later we moved into a room in the inn. We had lots of visitors—including some who had also heard something in a dream. But I'll let them tell you their own story next week.

I wasn't done getting messages in my dreams from God. Just last night, I had another dream. "Get out of Bethlehem—tonight! The king is upset about Jesus and wants to kill him." I know it was a real warning ... same angel, same kind of dream. So, we're packing up and heading over to Egypt. There is a large Jewish community in Alexandria, and I know Jesus will be safe there. We will wait there until it is O.K. to go back to Nazareth, our hometown.

## ***Epiphany: The stargazers***

Have you ever seen the stars at night? In many places in the world today it's hard to see the stars clearly because there is so much light from the cities and towns when all the streetlights and shopping centers and gas stations turn on their lights. (*Shine a flashlight into a brightly lit area of the sanctuary and ask if the children can see the light. Then ask the ushers to turn down the sanctuary lights and ask the children if they can see the light from the flashlight better when the big lights are turned off.*) Sometime when the weather is clear, ask your mom or dad to drive you into the country after it gets dark. The stars and the moon will be much brighter in the dark sky. Try to count the stars. It's impossible. Looking at stars is one way we can know that God has created a huge, wonderful universe and that we are only a little part of it.

A long time ago there were people who spent a lot of time looking at the stars. That's who we are—stargazers. We don't have bright city lights, so we can see thousands and thousands of stars. Where we come from we believe the stars can tell us stories.

One time we saw a movement of the stars that told us something important was happening in Judea, near Jerusalem. A new king was being born among the Jews. So we went to Jerusalem, which was a long trip across a desert, since we lived in Persia. When we got to Jerusalem, we asked about the new king. The old king acted kind of strange and told us to go down to Bethlehem to look for the baby and then come back and tell him where the new baby king was.

So we went to Bethlehem, and sure enough we found the baby. He had been given the name Jesus, which means "the Lord is salvation" in Hebrew. It was obvious there was something special about him. Because we love starlight, we felt Jesus would be like a brightly shining light in a dark, dark world. We gave him a baby shower and left some pretty nice gifts.

That night we all had the same dream. "Don't go back and tell the king where this baby is, because the king wants to kill him." It was a clear warning, so we left early in the morning and didn't go back to Jerusalem because we wanted the baby Jesus to be safe.

Joseph, who was married to Jesus' mother Mary, also had a dream. Do you remember the story from last week? Joseph learned that he should take Jesus to a safe place in Egypt, so Jesus and his family went west into Egypt while we turned east, back to our home in Persia.

It's amazing how many dreams we have discovered this Christmas season, isn't it? God spoke to Noah, to Isaiah, to Elizabeth, to the shepherds, to Joseph, and to us ... the wise men. Sometimes we have heard God in the Scriptures that were read, sometimes we heard God in the dreams and visions that came. We have learned that God uses many ways to speak to us. If we listen, God will speak to us and tell us how much God loves us. Wake up to God's dream!