

Lectionary-Based Gospel Dramas for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

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Icons by Vicki Shuck

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We dedicate this book to our daughters, Shana O’Connell Christman and Claire Therese Nichols, who are the incentive, inspiration, and catalyst for all our work. It is our lifelong commitment to share with them our most precious treasure—the gift of faith in Jesus and his mother. We also want to instill in them our belief that they—like all the children of the earth—are cherished by God.

Authors’ Acknowledgments

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In particular we would like to thank the youth of our parish who have sacrificed themselves to be our “test case” every Tuesday afternoon for the last two years. Early versions of this work were improved and clarified by their challenging comments. And much of our content has been developed in consideration of their questions and touching spiritual insights.

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Introduction

Our Goal

Faith development and the conversion process have at their source our human hunger to know God and to discover what it means to be fully human. Catholic Tradition celebrates our profound relationship with Christ, who is truly God and truly human. In *Lectionary-Based Gospel Dramas* our goal as authors is to employ all our skills, talents, and passion to explore and communicate this mystery of the Incarnation to young people through the medium of drama.

The Power of Drama

One of the most powerful tools we have found for teaching, evangelizing, healing emotional wounds, inspiring changes of heart, and developing or enriching faith is the art of drama. We have experienced this firsthand through the strong, positive reactions to our two musical plays: *Herstory: The Mother’s Tale*, which tells the story of Jesus through the memories of his mother and the other disciples, and *Back to Eden*, which spotlights the first man and woman, the glories of Creation, and God’s unending love for us. As writers, we have been awed by the ability of drama to bring these stories to life.

His holiness Pope John Paul II spent many years as a playwright, theater critic, and actor. In his various writings on the theater, he professes the highest regard for drama’s potential as a force for good. He observes that theater gives us insights that we cannot grasp in everyday life. Theater, he reflects, appeals not only to the mind but also to the senses and the heart, helping us to understand what it means to be fully human (Boleslaw Taborski, trans., *Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987]).

Each drama in this book is meant to “break open” a Gospel passage and bring it to life, especially when the reading is dramatized during the week before it will be read from the pulpit at Sunday Mass. For example, the drama “A Trip to Cousin Betty’s House”—in which young Mary confides her secret to her cousin Elizabeth, and the two women find comfort and love in a heart-to-heart conversation about their unexpected pregnancies—is played or read during the week preceding the fourth Sunday of Advent. Then when the liturgy of the word is read on that Sunday, it will be more personal, meaningful, or understandable because of the experience of that drama.

Another example is the drama “Ponder in Your Heart,” in which Mary and Joseph reminisce with their neighbors about the frightening time when Jesus was missing for three days. The parental emotions and family issues in that drama can lead to new insights about the liturgy of the word for the first Sunday after the Nativity.

In the drama “I Give You My Word,” a convert in the early church is guilt ridden for having paid homage to Caesar. The Apostle Peter shares about the time he denied Christ three times, and Christ still forgave him. Peter, as the rock of the church, forgives and embraces the new Christian. The enactment of this drama can heighten awareness and interest in the Sunday readings on the octave of Christmas.

In like fashion, the rest of the twelve dramas can make the Gospel teachings “take flesh” and pass into people’s hearts.

Special Features

Learning Style

Youth are the future of the church. They will hand on the flame of faith to succeeding generations. The teen and young adult years extend a magnificent challenge to those of us who are called to minister to youth as pastors, youth ministers, spiritual guides, mentors, teachers, parents, and guardians. In the prophetic text we know as *The Documents of Vatican II*, the “Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity” calls us not only to minister to young people but also to enable them to minister to one another:

Young persons exert very substantial influence on modern society. There has been a complete change in the circumstances of their lives, their mental attitudes, and their relationships with their own families. . . . As they become more conscious of their own personality, they are impelled by a zest for life and abounding energies to assume their own responsibility, and they yearn to *play their part* in social and cultural life. . . . *They themselves ought to become the prime and direct apostles of youth*, exercising the apostolate among themselves and through themselves and reckoning with the social environment in which they live. (No. 12; italics added)

Lectionary-Based Gospel Dramas uses the medium of drama to empower young people and adults to embrace their baptismal privilege to be catechists of one another and of themselves. To accomplish this goal, the leader’s role in the presentation of the drama is purposefully minimal. Rather than lecturing, the leader simply provides the environment for learning.

The participants in the dramas function as catechist, lector, Gospel players, improv artists, small-group leaders, and audience. In these roles, the participants come in contact with a variety of images, emotions, moral dilemmas, and social settings, through which they meet flesh-and-blood persons and communities—imagined and historical—who encountered Jesus and the early church. Our intent is not only to teach the message of Jesus but also to weave within the icons, catechist sections, and role-

playing, a sense of how the early community evangelized, articulated the roots of our sacramental celebrations, and developed the Gospels.

In combining use of the fine arts, the theater arts, and the arts of oral interpretation, speech, and improvisation with elements of cooperative learning, the participants share faith and teach one another about the liturgy and the Scriptures.

Leader’s Tasks

General directions for the leader’s tasks are provided on a resource located at the end of this introduction. Directions and information that are unique to each drama are located within the respective dramas. Of special note is the preparation of a costume trunk that contains clothing and props. The list of items needed are included at the beginning of each drama.

Icons

The icon for each drama is included not only for aesthetic value but also as an essential component of the learning experience. Although it is beneficial simply to experience and appreciate good art, as a learning tool an icon allows participants who are primarily visual learners to have the opportunity to receive the information through a creative visual image. We intentionally used icons because they serve as an entry point to the sacred rather than as mere decoration for the page. We hope also that the use of icon art will encourage any developing artists in your midst to embrace their own vocation of celebrating spirituality through the arts.

The weekly icons were created with a scratchboard technique. To use this technique, the artist begins with a black board. And like spiritual self-direction, in which a person consciously removes the darkness of resistance to the light of God’s love, the artist slowly scratches off layer after layer of the black surface until the sacred image emerges.

Directions for using the icons with the participants are given on the leader’s tasks resource at the end of this introduction.

The artist’s caption for each icon and the Scripture citation(s) on which the icon is based are located on the same page as the icon.

Scheduling the Dramas

If you are a youth group leader or a catechist in a parish religious education program, *Lectionary-Based Gospel Dramas* can serve as a complete set of lessons to carry you from the first Sunday of Advent through early spring. As you meet with your group each week, drama after drama will draw your participants into the Gospel reading that awaits them in the upcoming Sunday Mass. Usually youth groups and parish classes take a holiday break, just as schools do. If you do not have enough sessions in which to cover all ten dramas, one option is to select certain dramas and save others for the following Advent. Another option is to incorporate elements from the dramas into special liturgies attended by your youth group or parishioners.

You might even make certain dramas available for people to take home for personal reflection, as an extension of your work together as a group.

If you are a schoolteacher, using the dramas once a week—especially on Fridays, when people are often tired—offers the students a solid yet fun entry into the world of the sacred Scriptures celebrated in the liturgies of the seasons. However, Christmas vacations break into that neat format. Thus, the Christmas midnight and dawn drama could be performed during the week preceding the break, becoming a five-day celebration of the Advent-Christmas readings. And five complete lessons will be ready for you after the break. We also suggest that you adapt the dramas for use in any special liturgies and prayer services that you coordinate for the season.

Our Gift and Our Hope

The icons and dramas in this book are the fruit of our study, meditation, and prayer. Using the personal reflections of our life journeys, as well as our experience in the classroom and parish ministry, we believe we have developed a teaching tool that will sustain, strengthen, and support you in your critical vocation of proclaiming the Gospel. Our belief is that the Gospel of Jesus has the power to transform lives. Our hope and prayer is that you find *Lectionary-Based Gospel Dramas* to be the gift that it has been to our teaching mission.

Resource Intro–A

Leader's Tasks

Preparation for the Drama

1. Photocopy the script and distribute a copy to each participant.
2. Begin the session by inviting the participants to take a few minutes of silence to view and reflect on the icon.
3. Briefly explain the nature of icons and then lead a reflection and discussion using the following, or similar, words:

An icon is an image that invites us to see and enter into the realm of the Spirit. This icon is the artist's expression of the readings we celebrate today. As you gaze at the icon, what feelings, thoughts, ideas, or issues come to mind? How does the art make you feel? Would anyone like to share any of the thoughts or feelings that the icon inspires in them?

As part of the reflection and discussion, or as closure to the discussion, you might want to read the artist's icon caption on the bottom of the page.

4. After the group discussion subsides, ask participants to volunteer for the roles in the Gospel drama. The roles are listed with each drama. If your group is small, some volunteers may have to assume more than one role.
5. Direct the volunteers to search through the costume trunk for articles of clothing and props that will embellish their portrayal of the drama.



Presentation of the Drama

Distribute the script to the participants. Explain to them that throughout the drama, the catechist will stand before the group as narrator of the scene and minister of hospitality, who welcomes the audience, introduces the lector, and cues the players and the audience.

Follow-up After the Drama

1. At the conclusion of the drama, ask the audience for a round of applause for the catechist, the lector, and the Gospel players.
2. Thank everyone, and invite the catechist to lead a discussion of the reflection questions. Assist the catechist by facilitating the group discussion when necessary and by adding your own comments. Reflection questions are provided for each drama.

Improv

If time permits, direct the Gospel players to take ten minutes or so by themselves to prepare an improv that portrays, in a contemporary fashion, the teachings and main points of the day's discussion. When the Gospel players are ready, have them perform the improvised skit.

Closure

1. Invite the participants' questions or comments prompted by the icon, the drama, the discussion, and the improvisational skit.
2. Offer any closing comments or announcements. If the drama has taken place prior to the Sunday liturgy in which the dramatized Gospel passages will be read, remind the participants to be attentive to the readings during the Sunday celebration. If you are planning another Gospel drama for the next session, give the participants the Scripture readings for that drama so that they can read the passages in preparation for the next session.
3. Close the session by inviting the participants to offer a traditional or spontaneous closing prayer.



Illustration by Vicki Shuck

First Sunday of Advent Icon

Until the coming of Jesus, we witness the continual unfolding of the Reign of God as we live out our love for one another and for all of creation.

Gospels. A: Matthew 24:37–44; B: Mark 13:33–37; C: Luke 21:25–36

First Sunday of Advent

Gospel Readings and Themes

Cycle A. Matthew 24:37–44. Stay awake for the coming of the Son of God.

Cycle B. Mark 13:33–37. Watch for the coming of the Lord.

Cycle C. Luke 21:25–36. Be on guard, for there will be signs in the heavens.

Preparation for the Drama

(See resource intro–A, “Leader’s Tasks.”)

Roles

Catechist, who coordinates the drama

Lector, who leads the opening prayer and proclaims the sacred Scriptures

Gospel players, who en flesh the roles in the scriptural drama

- Judas
- passersby (up to five)
- Peter
- Martha
- Mary Magdalene
- John the Evangelist

Costume Trunk Items

Veils, headdresses, robes, coins, and a collection basket



Presentation of the Drama

(See resource intro-A, “Leader’s Tasks.”)

Script for the Background Reading

Catechist. The Hebrew people—as they wrote in the Book of Genesis—believed that when the world was created it was good, ordered, and free from evil. But sinfulness in both the human family and the angelic world caused the relationship among God, humanity, and all of creation to be wounded. The first humans were seduced into an idolatrous relationship with the serpent, who stole their hearts from the one true God, the God of life. The gift of Creation was marred by this abuse.

As the humans felt the shame of their sin, they hid among the trees of the Garden of Eden. But the Lord God looked for the man and woman, crying out, “Adamah, human ones, where are you?” In that first moment of exile, God called out, beckoning the humans to return home. And God continues to reach across time and space to touch the hearts of all people, who were created in the divine image.

God condemned the actions of the angelic being who fell to the status of the serpent: “I will place hostility between you and the woman, between her children and yours.” But from the earliest memories of the story of salvation, the coming of the Savior was proclaimed.

The ancient promise that God would send a messiah has been passed down through the ages by Hebrew, Christian, and Muslim peoples. They hold that God exists outside of time as well as within it, and that no creature’s actions can change God’s will to offer salvation. The will of God will reign on the earth. The free choice of man, woman, and the serpent to leave God’s love will not prevail! God’s love is eternal and irresistible. And in time, the Day of the Lord will come.

Ancient Middle Eastern peoples believed that there would be signs in the heavens of the coming of the Day of the Lord. The end time would be initiated by the coming of the *Bar Nasa*, the Son of man, a primordial divine human who would return to the earth in the last days to bring on the Reign of God. If we weave the ancient stories together, we find that this human would be the divine warrior who would lead the cosmic battle to conquer death, defeat the ancient dragon, end the chaos, and heal all of creation.

The Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Scriptures was written by a people in great pain. The tyrant Antiochus—a Syrian warlord of 175–164 B.C.E.—persecuted the Jews. Like Hitler in the twentieth century, Antiochus planned to destroy the Jewish people. His tortures and atrocities gained him the title Abomination of Desolation.

Daniel’s visions reflected a world of slavery and injustice under the bondage of cruel, callous, horrible empires he called Beasts. These worldly powers slayed humanity with horror and fear. In Daniel 7:9–14, God, the Ancient One, calls as warrior the Son of man and directs him to lead the people to victory and to re-establish the Reign of God. The Son of man was given dominion, glory, and kingship so that all peoples, nations, and languages would serve him. God’s Reign will be without

end. This is the scriptural basis for the title Son of man that Jesus used to describe himself and his mission, as recorded in the Gospels more than eighty times.

In Jesus’ day the Romans had conquered vast territories, including Judea. They were cruel warlords, exacting high taxes and demeaning human life. This Sunday’s Gospel readings show us how Jesus comforted the fears of those who gathered to hear his teachings. The people, who were in bondage to Rome, felt that surely things couldn’t get any worse. They asked Jesus to tell them about the end time. Jesus’ proclamation of the end time is a proclamation of hope. God hears the people’s cry and responds with divine justice.

Script for the Gospel Reading

[The lector leads everyone in prayer while holding up a lectionary or Bible for all to see.]

Lector. Come, Holy Spirit. Gather us to hear your Word. Give us open hearts and minds. Help us to hear your will for our lives.

[The lector proclaims the Gospel reading for the current cycle of the lectionary. Upon finishing, the lector leads the group in response to the Gospel, again holding up the Bible or lectionary for all to see.]

Lector. The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Group. Thanks be to God.

Script for the Gospel Drama

[The catechist announces to the group the title of the Gospel scene to be dramatized.]

Catechist. “Don’t Buy Any Long-Playing CDs”

[The catechist describes the Gospel scene to the group.]

Catechist. A group of spectators has gathered on the streets of Jerusalem. Judas the Betrayer is trying to profit from their insecurity and curiosity by twisting the words of the Scriptures. *[Judas carries a collection basket.]* Some of Jesus’ loyal followers try to correct Judas’s cruel manipulations.

Judas. You better be ready. ‘Cause it’s over. The beast is among us, and the time is here. Sell everything that you have. Give all your money to me . . . and wait for the Reign of God to come down on your heads! *[A woman passes by and drops a coin into Judas’s basket.]* Thank you, ma’am. Look around, you people. Could things ever be worse? I’ve had visions of the end. And Sweetheart, it’s bad.

[Each time Judas rants and raves, the passersby toss more money into his basket.]

Passerby. Oh!

Judas. Flood!

Passerby. Oh no!

Judas. Earthquake!

Passerby. Oh my!

Judas. Typhoons!

Passerby. Oh no! My, oh my!

Judas. Wars and more wars. Pay up! And follow me. We'll hide in the mountains until it's over! Prepare for Armageddon!

Passerby. Oh no! My, oh my! Take our money please!

Peter. Judas! Why are you trying to scare everybody? That's not what Jesus wants. You are abusing these people by playing on their fear.

Martha. Jesus is teaching us to work for the Gospel of love and justice . . . to the ends of the earth . . . until the end of time.

Judas. You were there yesterday. You heard him. Jesus said the time is at hand. . . . Behold the sign of the times. It is all over.

Mary Magdalene. I remember very clearly that Jesus said that only God the Father knows the time of the coming of the Lord.

John the Evangelist. Do you know more than Christ himself? Are *you* the Messiah?

Peter. Are you the Son of man? Why should we believe you, Judas? We have heard the word of Jesus.

Judas. Look around you! It's the sign of the times, my naive ones. Can't you see what's going on in the world? I don't think you understand the *meaning* of what Jesus teaches. At the end of this century, it's all over.

Catechist. It seems that everywhere you go today, people are concerned about the end of the world. Some spend countless hours trying to interpret the Bible so that they will know the exact day and hour when it will be all over. People were the same in Jesus' day. They wanted to know, too. You see, we human beings are very concerned with time.

The earth celebrates the cycles of the seasons. The sun goes down, the moon comes up. . . . At least that's how we see it on the earth. And everything—the trees, the grasses and flowers, the animals, and each of us—is constantly changing. We are born, we grow, and eventually our physical bodies will die. Life itself is a constant cycle of birth and death. With some good advice from Jesus, today's Gospel reading addresses the reality that all flesh will pass away. There is a saying, "We don't know what the future holds, but we know *who* holds the future."

[As Peter preaches the truth, the passersby gather around to hear.]

Peter. Yes, Judas, we see what's going on, but we see it through the eyes of Jesus. He asks his disciples to recognize that we are but pilgrims on this earth. One day each of us will face our Creator. The question is, are we ready? Do we live in the presence of God?

John. Jesus has said: "Be awake! Be watchful! Be ready for the coming of the Lord, for we don't know the hour." Jesus has compared the last days to a woman in labor. Yes, there will be pain and travail. But Judas, the Lord was speaking of new birth . . . of new life.

Peter. He has also warned us about false prophets who would come in his name. Judas, are you with him or against him?

Judas. You people have bags over your heads; you see nothing.

Martha. I'm aware of the problems in the world around us. But Jesus teaches us to have courage, to be prophets of hope. He promised us that the gates of hell will not prevail against us. And I believe him.

Mary. It's true. Sometimes the world looks like it is falling apart. But that's because of human behavior, not because of the divine plan.

Martha. God calls us to preach the Good News, to *work* for justice, not to hide like frightened animals.

Judas. Don't speak to me, woman! I don't need you to explain his words to me. I was there. *[To the crowd]* People, you want proof? There's proof! A woman with her mouth open! I tell you, the beast is among us. I see darkness and destruction on the horizon. I've read the Scriptures. I understand what all the symbols mean, and I'm here to tell you that next January, boom! It's over, people. Sell what you have and follow me.

Passersby. What shall we do?

Judas. We will stockpile weapons, store food, and start a new world order in the desert, where they can't find us. We will be ready for the coming of the Lord, 'cause he's coming and he's mad.

Peter. Judas, you're bending Jesus' words. He challenges us to be awake, to be watchful, to see the signs of God's presence in creation and to live our lives intentionally aware of our mortality and the seriousness of our mission. But Jesus never tells us to preach disaster.

John. Why did he bother to come if the story's already over? Judas, it's only just begun.

Judas. *[Preaching to the crowd]* Heaven and earth will pass away. Read the stars for the hour and the day. Armageddon is on the horizon. The time is at hand.

Peter. Judas, Armageddon is always on the horizon because of human sinfulness.

Martha. Christians are called to *work* for peace, not to preach doom.

Peter. It's true that everything created, even the earth, will one day pass away. But neither you nor anyone else knows the time. Didn't you listen to Mary? Jesus himself didn't say when. He said that no one knows the day and hour, not the angels, not himself, but only God.

Mary. The Reign of God is at hand. It's the Reign of God that's coming. How can that be frightening? Are you afraid of God, Judas?

Martha. God loves us! Only the wicked need fear justice.

Mary. Judas, you were there that day when Jesus taught these things. Didn't you hear?

Judas. *[To the women]* Yeah, yeah, I was there. But what do you women know? Shut up and go home where you belong. How dare you quote Jesus to me.

Peter. Every follower of Jesus is called by baptism to know and teach the words of Christ. Judas, you have no right to speak to disciples of our Lord in that demeaning manner.

Judas. Yeah, yeah, pardon me! I'll try to behave myself. Look, Peter, Jesus wants you to be the leader of this group. Why? I can't imagine! But if you're in charge, start thinking money! Support! Moola! Get it? People need a little incentive if they're going to take this Reign of God thing seriously. If the end is upon us, there's reason! Good reason to pay up on your fire insurance. Do you get my drift?

[To the crowd] I am an Apostle of this Jesus of Nazareth. I have been given the secrets of God's Reign! There isn't much time! The end is near. The fig tree blooms again! Jesus will come again at the end of time to put everyone who doesn't follow God's Word in the everlasting fires of hell. Burn, baby, burn! It's as difficult for the rich man to enter heaven as it is for a camel to enter the eye of a needle! *[Singling out a particular man in the crowd, Judas shakes his basket.]* Now . . . dear sir, you look like you might have a hard time getting through the needle's eye. Give your money to me, and you'll be counted among the elect.

Mary. *[To Peter]* We have to stop this "end of the world" teaching, this "mad Jesus" stuff. I want the people to know the joy I felt when Jesus said that the Son of man would come with all the angels of heaven to usher in the Reign of God, the time when all suffering and death will be conquered and all of creation will praise our God. This is the Good News.

John. *[To Judas]* Jesus has come to save the world from fear and despair. Judas, your teaching is an abuse of Jesus' words. I want to celebrate that someday Rome will fall, the persecutions will end. People will hunger for justice and treat one another as Jesus teaches us—all people are children of God.

Mary. Peter, Judas teaches despair. And worse, he teaches in the name of Jesus.

Martha. Jesus has told us that false prophets would come. I never dreamed that it would be one of us! Look at how many Judas leads astray.

Peter. We have to remember that Jesus has said that no matter what happens, that even in the face of the heavens falling from the sky, that his words of love, justice, forgiveness, and hope will never pass away. When the Son of man comes again, he will bring unity to all people, and his Reign will be without end. We can't stop Judas from spreading fear, but our God is a God of freedom.

John. I will proclaim Jesus' healing words all the more powerfully. The people will recognize the truth, and the truth will set them free.

Catechist. We are in a covenant relationship with God our Creator. God is a keeper of promises. This relationship is eternal and unchangeable. What is truly frightening is the reality that we humans, by our own free will, can turn our heart from the love of God. But God never rejects us. God has sent us Jesus, the prophets, and the Holy Spirit to be with us. Jesus told us that when we become anxious about the things of the earth . . . when we see some of the fearful things that were mentioned today . . . that we are to know that the Reign of God is near . . . at the very gates of our cities. This is Good News, not an oracle for disaster! The Reign of God will heal all that is wrong. We are called to be part of the healing, not the fear.

Follow-up After the Drama

(See resource intro-A, "Leader's Tasks.")

Reflection Questions

- Name a few signs and symbols that some people say mean that the end of the world is upon us.
- What does Jesus promise to those who love him even in the face of conflict and turmoil?
- What are some signs of hope that you see God offering to us, even in the midst of the confusion of our modern world?
- What are your fears concerning the end of the world? What will the end of the world look like?

Improv

(See resource intro-A, "Leader's Tasks.")

Closure

(See resource intro-A, "Leader's Tasks.")