

The Lights of Christmas

A Candle Star Christmas Production

by
Shell Isenhoff

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A Note to Directors:

Thank you for choosing to use a Candle Star Christmas Production in your church or school. My purpose in writing each play was to create a pageant that even small groups could produce simply. (They have all been produced in my own church of 200 people.) But stronger still was my desire to immerse viewers in a powerful story that left no question about the true meaning of Christmas. Christ's coming to dwell with man is only part of a whole gospel message, which is clearly presented in each script. My hope is that this play will help you spread that message in your community this holiday season.

Merry Christmas and break a leg! And to Jesus Christ be all the glory.

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Candle Star Christmas Productions
on my website:

www.michelleisenhoff.com

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Plot Summary

A Judean family celebrates Hanukkah during the dangerous days of the first Jewish revolt. Eli, the family patriarch and witness to the death and resurrection of Christ, explains to his grandchildren how the festival points to Messiah, who came not to free Jews from Rome, but to free all men from sin.

Length

Candle Star Christmas Productions are designed to run between 45 minutes to an hour when music is included at scene breaks.

Cast of Characters

Eli—grandfather
Martha—grandmother
Thaddeus—teenage grandson
Benjamin—young grandson
Hannah—young granddaughter
Narrator

Stage Setup

The entire play takes place in Eli and Martha's kitchen. Set stage with a dinner table and five chairs.

Prop List

Table

5 chairs

Table settings for 5

Waiting meal: rolls, kettle, etc. (optional)

A lighter or matches

Hanukkah menorah and candles

Note: In the spirit of simplicity, the play makes use of a modern menorah rather than a time period oil lamp and explains the symbolism behind the *shamash* (pronounced shuh-MOSH) (middle candle) used to light the other candles. Hanukkah menorahs have nine arms instead of the usual seven. Inexpensive menorahs and candles can be purchased online.

Music Recommendations

At the end of most scenes, an option break for music is inserted. This is left wide open on purpose, because the organizations that produce this play will have vastly different musical talents available. They may even choose to skip some or all of these opportunities. However, music offers a great distraction while switching scenes, and it provides a whole additional platform for worship. Here is a list of suggestions to fill these opportunities:

**Songs sung by children's Sunday school classes or school classrooms*

**Vocal solos or groups performed by children or adults*

**Instrumental solos performed by school children or adults*

**Brief piano interludes*

**Congregational singing*

Traditional carols provide simple, recognizable tunes for instrumentals. Vocal arrangements might consist of carols as well, or be drawn from the variety of contemporary music available. Congregational singing provides an opportunity for the audience to become involved.

The following specific suggestions fit well within this play. They can be purchased commercially.

Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel, as performed by Selah. (following Scene 2)

My Deliverer is Coming, by Rich Mullens (following Scene 3)

Let There Be Light, as performed by Point of Grace (after Scene 5)

Hanukkah 101

Hanukkah, the “Festival of Lights” or “Feast of Dedication”, is mentioned in John 10:22 but is not actually one of the holy days prescribed by God in the Old Testament. The events it commemorates are prophesied in the book of Daniel, however (8:21-25). Its origins can be traced to the years between the Old and New Testaments, shortly after Alexander the Great ruled most of the world.

After Alexander’s death, his four generals divided over his empire, and Judea eventually fell under the control of the Syrians (the Seleucid Empire). Official policy dictated that all captured peoples must assimilate, giving up old ways, languages, and religions, but many Jews refused to comply.

To drive home the point, troops were marched into Jerusalem and the Holy Temple was desecrated. Rebellion began in a small Judean town, led by a family of priests (the Maccabees). After seven years, the rebels drove the powerful Syrians out of Jerusalem. The prophecy in Daniel makes it clear that this would be a deliverance orchestrated by God—a miracle that would preserve the Jewish presence for the arrival of the Messiah several generations later.

The temple was cleansed and worship of Yahweh restored. At this time, tradition says a second miracle occurred. When the temple lampstand was restored, only enough oil was found to burn for one day. It would take eight days to produce and consecrate new oil. The menorah was lit anyway and miraculously burned for eight days, until it could be replenished.

The rededication of the temple and the dual miracles are celebrated with the lighting of a special nine-candle menorah. (The temple lamp had 7 branches.) Each night, a blessing is said and candles are lit at dusk; one on the first night, two on the second, and so on to the eighth, to commemorate the eight-day miracle. The central candle, the shamash, or “servant,” is lit first and used to light the others, left to right. To Christians and Messianic Jews, this is the symbol of Messiah in Hanukkah—the servant, the light of the world, the coming deliverer. Other traditional Hanukkah activities include meals of foods cooked in oil, dreidles (toy tops used in a children’s game), the giving of chocolate coins (gelt), singing, and a retelling of the historical story.

Introduction

You may wish to share this brief historical introduction with your audience prior to Scene One:

In 167BC, the Jewish Maccabees gained their freedom from the Seleucid Empire (formed by the splitting of the Greek Empire after the death of Alexander the Great). This victory and the subsequent cleansing of the temple initiated the yearly celebration of Hanukkah. But Jewish independence was short-lived. The long arm of Rome stretched out its hand to take Jerusalem in 63BC.

The Jews, wishing to maintain their own ethnic and religious identity, never accepted Rome's rule. In a bid for independence, the Jews revolted three times. The first of these uprisings began in 66AD, three years before our story begins. It would last for seven years and include the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple. But even war could not distract the faithful from their festivals...

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Scene One

Martha is preparing for dinner around a table set with a Hanukkah menorah with unlit candles.

Eli: (Entering and sniffing appreciatively) The house smells wonderful, Martha.

Martha: Dinner is almost ready. Simon and Abigail sent word. They are not coming. Delilah is ready to give birth, and they cannot afford to lose either cow or calf. But they are sending the children. If you've finished feeding our livestock, help me prepare for the herd of hungry grandchildren that will soon be stampeding through that door.

Eli: (Setting plates on the table) They have turned into quite a herd, haven't they? And they're growing up so quickly. Why, Thaddeus is nearly a man. And the young ones...? We're old, Martha.

Martha: Hush now. I may have gray hair and creaking knees, but I won't be told so in my own house.

Eli: Things have certainly changed since we were children. Our people have long held animosity toward Rome. But for the past three years, this revolution has done away with all pretense of peace. Judea has become a dangerous place. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if my brother—

Martha: Hush, now. What's done is done and can't be changed.

Eli: I know (Sighing) But I miss him, Martha.

Martha: I miss him, too, but we must live in the present. And right now I fear for Thaddeus. He won't be a child much longer, and he wants so badly to join the rebellion. I'm afraid we're going to lose him, too, Eli.

Eli: I fear for all our people. If Jehovah doesn't look down and intervene...
(Shakes his head sadly)

Three children enter, the young ones shouting exuberant greetings.

Martha: No more gloomy talk tonight. We have food enough for a celebration and family to celebrate with. Let's count our blessings.

Optional break for music.

Scene Two

Family is gathered around the table before the meal. Eli presides over the Hanukkah traditions. The menorah should have all nine candles in place and be set in the center of the table. He lights the middle candle.

Eli: Blessed are you, oh Lord our God, king of the universe, who has sanctified us with your commandments and commanded us to kindle the lights of Hanukkah. Blessed are you, oh Lord our God, king of the universe, who performed miracles for our forefathers in those days at this time. Blessed are you, oh Lord our God, king of the universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

Using the middle candle, Eli lights the first candle on the left then replaces the middle one—still lit.

Eli: (Looking around at the children) Who can tell me why we light the lamp on this night?

Benjamin: It is the first night of the Feast of Dedication.

Eli: That is so, Benjamin. And why do we celebrate the Feast of Dedication?

Benjamin: Because long ago Judah Maccabee drove the Greek army out of Palestine and restored our temple.

Children listen to the following story (which can be discretely read) with fascination, except Thaddeus, who is glowering.

Eli: You are right again, my young scholar. The Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanies, decreed that Jews could no longer be Jews. Soldiers overran Jerusalem, slaughtering without restraint. We could not observe the

Sabbath. Circumcision and the possession of scripture were punishable by death. The temple was ransacked and an altar set up to Zeus. We were forbidden to worship Jehovah. Instead, our priests were forced to sacrifice to idols.

But one priest would have none of it. When the Greek soldiers came to the hometown of Mattathias Maccabee, he would not make the sacrifice. When another Jew volunteered to do it, Mattathias slew him. The town rose up and destroyed the detachment of soldiers. And so began a war against the mightiest army on earth.

For seven years our people fought, striking in ambush then vanishing into the hills. When Mattathias died, his son Judah led our forces. And with the help of Almighty Jehovah, our people won their freedom, and our worship of Jehovah was restored to the way He ordained. That is why we celebrate Hanukkah.

Thaddeus: (Bitterly) Does no one else see the irony in celebrating our independence when Judea is once again under the thumb of a foreign oppressor? Where is Jehovah now?

Martha: Thaddeus, this is not the time—

Thaddeus: This *is* the time! While we sit around telling stories, men are sacrificing everything for our freedom. If we want to be rid of Rome, we must fight! And if Jehovah will not help us, we must do it ourselves.

Eli: If the hand of Jehovah is not with us, we will fail.

Thaddeus: I have no use for a God who sometimes aids us and sometimes abandons us. I will not listen to this any longer. (He storms out.)

Martha: Thaddeus!

Eli: (Gravely) Let him go, Martha. He must fight this battle alone. (Turns to the other children and smiles) So, who can tell me why we light candles for eight nights?

Hannah: Because the oil burned for eight days.

Eli: Ah, you also know the story well, my child. After the Greeks were defeated, the temple was cleansed and the furnishings put back. But when the priests went to relight the lampstand, only enough oil was found to burn for one day. And once it's lit, the lamp must never burn out. But the priests lit it anyway. And do you know? Those lamps burned for the entire eight days needed to consecrate new oil.

Hannah: It was a miracle!

Eli: Indeed. But the greater miracle was the deliverance of our people from an army many times our strength. Greece should have wiped our tiny nation off the map. But Jehovah had other plans for us. You see, he still had a promise to keep...

Optional break for music.

Scene Three

Family is still seated around the table and will remain through Scene Five.

Eli: Children, do you remember what the middle candle is called?

Hannah: It is the *shamash*, the servant candle that is used to light all the others.

Eli: (To Martha) I cannot stump these grandchildren of ours. They know their lessons too well. Ah! But now for a more difficult question—one your parents, I fear, have not taught you. Do you know why the celebration requires a servant candle in the menorah? (Silence.) It is because a very special Servant was about to appear in Judea.

You see, children, Jehovah preserved our nation for a reason. Way back in the Garden, when sin first entered our world, he promised he would send a Deliverer. Our people have looked for his coming for thousands of years, and he was about to enter history. Israel *had* to be preserved. The promise had to be kept. The time of Messiah was near.

Benjamin: Thaddeus says Messiah will be a mighty conqueror who will lead us out from under the hand of Rome.

Eli: One day, Messiah will be triumphant. There will be none able to stand against him, be they Rome or any other empire. But first, Messiah came to be a servant. (Lifting out the shamash candle) He came to be a light. He came as a tiny baby...

Optional break for music.

Scene Four

Eli: Caesar Augustus ruled in those days, and he ordered that a census be taken to number his subjects and add to his coffers. It happened before I was born, but my parents remembered it well. It is they who first told me the story, for they came to believe that the man named Jesus was the Promised One sent from God. At that time, everyone went to his own town to register....

The voice of the narrator overlaps Eli's voice as the reading of Luke 2:4-21 begins.

LUKE 2:4-20 (NIV)

And everyone went to his 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 room for them in the inn.

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 of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ 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, and on earth peace to men 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. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Optional break for music.