

TTT 391. Engage the Imagination

Teaching Tip 391 | “How to Prepare Christmas Lessons. Part 3 - Engage The Imagination.” | Malcolm Cox

The story of the birth of Jesus is well-known. How do we keep it fresh when we preach and teach about it? That's what this series is all about. Last week, we discussed finding fresh angles. This week we discuss using our imagination to make the familiar story come alive.

Let me offer you three ideas.

Engage the Imagination

1. Use vivid descriptions

Help people imagine the setting—Bethlehem's streets, the shepherds' fields, or the stable.

2. Incorporate visual aids

Classical artworks can be useful. See the list below. Use video. For example, Mary recollects her experience of giving birth here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhJEd2Cit_Y.

3. Highlight emotions

Focus on Mary's amazement, the shepherds' fear, or the magi's curiosity.^[1] Explore what provoked their reactions and how we can enter their experience by contemplating the nativity events. What's going on internally when we are insanely curious? How would that curiosity look today?

Conclusion

Engaging the imagination helps make the nativity story more vivid, relatable, and transformative. By painting scenes with descriptive language, using visual aids to bring depth, and exploring the emotions of those who witnessed the events, we invite others to step into the story. These approaches awaken curiosity and wonder, allowing us to connect with the deeper

truths of God's work in the world and in our lives. In doing so, we move beyond simply recounting the events to experiencing them in a way that stirs faith and inspires reflection.

What is your best tip for helping speakers prepare inspiring lessons around the Christmas story? Please let me know.

Next time, we will explore the balance of tradition and innovation.

Please add your comments on this week's topic. We learn best when we learn in community.

Consider joining us at [AIM](https://aim.moodlecloud.com/) UK & Ireland for faith-building teaching:
<https://aim.moodlecloud.com/>.

Do you have a question about teaching the Bible? Is it theological, technical, or practical? Please send me your questions or suggestions. Here's the email: malcolm@malcolmcox.org.

If you'd like a copy of my free eBook on spiritual disciplines, "How God grows His people", sign up at my website: <http://www.malcolmcox.org>.

Please pass the link on, subscribe, and leave a review.

Keep calm and carry on teaching.

God bless, Malcolm

Here are some classic artworks that powerfully depict the nativity scene, showcasing its spiritual depth and artistic brilliance:

1. *The Nativity* by Giotto di Bondone (1303–1306)

- **Location:** Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy
 - **Why it's powerful:** Giotto's fresco is among the earliest to present the nativity with emotional depth. Mary is shown tenderly gazing at the newborn Jesus, surrounded by angels and shepherds. The luminous colours and naturalistic gestures bring warmth to the divine moment.
-

2. *Adoration of the Shepherds* by Gerard van Honthorst (1622)

- **Location:** Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, Germany

- **Why it's powerful:** Known for his mastery of light, Honthorst creates a dramatic chiaroscuro effect. The baby Jesus is the central source of light, symbolising His role as the light of the world, while the shepherds' expressions of awe add an emotional resonance.
-

3. *The Mystical Nativity* by Sandro Botticelli (1500–1501)

- **Location:** National Gallery, London, UK
 - **Why it's powerful:** Botticelli combines traditional nativity elements with apocalyptic imagery. Angels and humans join in adoration, while a golden dome represents heaven. The vibrant and symbolic scene reflects both the joy of Christ's birth and the spiritual hope He brings.
-

4. *The Nativity* by Federico Barocci (1597)

- **Location:** Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain
 - **Why it's powerful:** Barocci's work captures a tender, intimate moment as Mary and Joseph adore the infant Jesus. The warm palette and soft expressions draw viewers into the sacred family's quiet joy.
-

5. *Adoration of the Magi* by Leonardo da Vinci (1481)

- **Location:** Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy
 - **Why it's powerful:** Though unfinished, this work captures the chaos and reverence surrounding Jesus' birth. The dynamic composition and emotional expressions highlight the humanity of those witnessing the divine.
-

6. *The Adoration of the Shepherds* by El Greco (1612–1614)

- **Location:** Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain
 - **Why it's powerful:** El Greco's elongated figures and swirling forms lend an ethereal quality to the nativity. The vivid colours and upward movement convey the divine mystery and spiritual significance of Christ's birth.
-

7. *Nativity at Night* by Geertgen tot Sint Jans (1490)

- **Location:** Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands
 - **Why it's powerful:** This piece highlights Jesus as the light of the world, illuminating the faces of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. The tranquil setting emphasizes the humility and serenity of the nativity.
-

8. *The Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence* by Caravaggio (1609)

- **Location:** Originally in Palermo, Italy (lost, but known through replicas)
 - **Why it's powerful:** Caravaggio's use of stark contrasts and raw realism emphasises the humanity of the scene. The humble surroundings and down-to-earth portrayal of Mary and Joseph invite viewers into the reality of Christ's incarnation.
-
-

1. **Mary:** Luke 1.29, 34; 2.19. **Shepherds:** Luke 2.9-10. **Magi:** Matthew 2.2, 9-11 ↩