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Countdown to Christmas
with
Timothy Bear

**24 five-minute read-aloud bedtime stories
for Advent**



Brian Sears

Preface: The world of Timothy Bear

Timothy Bear's world consists mainly of his home, his school and his church. Mr and Mrs Bear are loving parents who seek the very best for Timothy and his sister Teresa. Teresa is generally most helpful to her brother but on occasions she can be a pain, as he can be to her. Grandma and Grandpa are very important figures in Timothy's and Teresa's lives. It's probably true to say that Grandpa is the last person on earth that Timothy would want to upset.

Timothy Bear attends the local primary school that takes children and bears from nursery until it's time to move on to secondary school. To begin with, Timothy was in Mrs Fletcher's class (where Teresa now is) but has now progressed to Miss Read's. Miss Read is a big influence and she's a good teacher. Miss Bridge is the head teacher. If Timothy has a best friend—he tries to be friendly with most—it's Claude. They can clash at times but they never fall out for long.

Timothy's family attend their local church and Timothy enjoys his time there. He learns about a God who is interested in everything about him; he learns about Jesus, who shows us what God is like; and he learns about the Bible, which is a book full of wonderful stories. Gradually the happenings in his life are helping him to understand where this all fits in, not only at church times but also at school, at home and in the whole of Timothy Bear's world.

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— Introduction —

The Christmas story

Luke's Gospel

About that time Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people to be listed in record books. These first records were made when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Everyone had to go to their own home town to be listed. So Joseph had to leave Nazareth in Galilee and go to Bethlehem in Judea. Long ago Bethlehem had been King David's home town, and Joseph went there because he was from David's family.

Mary was engaged to Joseph and travelled with him to Bethlehem. She was soon going to have a baby, and while they were there, she gave birth to her firstborn son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.

That night in the fields near Bethlehem some shepherds were guarding their sheep. All at once an angel came down to them from the Lord, and the brightness of the Lord's glory flashed around them. The shepherds were frightened. But the angel said, 'Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. This very day in King David's home town a Saviour was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. You will know who he is, because you will find him dressed in baby clothes and lying on a bed of hay.'

Suddenly many other angels came down from heaven and joined in praising God. They said: 'Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God.' After the angels had left and

gone back to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see what the Lord has told us about.' They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and they saw the baby lying on a bed of hay.

When the shepherds saw Jesus, they told his parents what the angel had said about him. Everyone listened and was surprised. But Mary kept thinking about all this and wondering what it meant.

As the shepherds returned to their sheep, they were praising God and saying wonderful things about him. Everything they had seen and heard was just as the angel had said.

LUKE 2:1-20

Matthew's Gospel

This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David's family. But before they were married, she learnt that she was going to have a baby by God's Holy Spirit. Joseph was a good man and did not want to embarrass Mary in front of everyone. So he decided to call off the wedding quietly.

While Joseph was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, 'Joseph, the baby that Mary will have is from the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and marry her. Then after her baby is born, name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

So the Lord's promise came true, just as the prophet had said, 'A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel,' which means 'God is with us.' After Joseph woke up, he and Mary were soon married, just as the Lord's angel had told him to do. But they did not sleep together before her baby was born. Then Joseph named him Jesus.

When Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem in Judea, Herod was king. During this time some wise men from the east

came to Jerusalem and said, ‘Where is the child born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’

When King Herod heard about this, he was worried, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, ‘Where will the Messiah be born?’

They told him, ‘He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet wrote, “Bethlehem in the land of Judea, you are very important among the towns of Judea. From your town will come a leader, who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel.”’ Herod secretly called in the wise men and asked them when they had first seen the star. He told them, ‘Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too.’

The wise men listened to what the king said and then left. And the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were thrilled and excited to see the star.

When the men went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down and worshipped him. They took out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and gave them to him. Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went back home by another road.

MATTHEW 1:18—2:12

The wonder of Christmas

Our imaginations are a wonderful gift from God, and this book encourages us to use our imaginations as we count down through the days of Advent and think about the story of the first Christmas. The stories make ideal bedtime reading during Advent, either as a shared read-aloud experience or for older children to read for themselves. Each story is accompanied by a thought-provoking

Advent activity, designed to tease out the theme of the story, and a simple bedtime prayer.

The Christmas story is given to us quite briefly in the pages of the Bible. It is set out in just four chapters: the first two chapters of Luke and the first two chapters of Matthew. It is a story full of wonder, to set our imaginations working overtime.

Imagine Mary meeting the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26–38). We are not told what she was actually doing just before the angel arrived. In Timothy Bear's nativity play we imagine Mary sweeping her floor. She drops her broom in surprise. What else could she have been doing? Feeding chickens? Daydreaming? The conversation with Gabriel is set down clearly for us but the surrounding circumstances are left for us to wonder about.

Timothy Bear appears to have a very strong imagination. In five stories he wonders so hard that he goes on fantastic journeys back to the first Christmas. Four times he ends up inside the stable at Bethlehem. First of all, he goes directly to the stable and meets the innkeeper's boy. That meeting comes to its end when Timothy hears the sound of the approaching donkey. All we are told in Luke 2:5 is that Mary travelled with Joseph to Bethlehem. No donkey is mentioned. Luke 2:7 tells us that Mary dressed Jesus in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay because there was no room for them in the inn. There's no direct mention of an innkeeper and certainly nothing about the innkeeper's boy.

Timothy often wonders about the involvement of animals in the Christmas story. He knows that the shepherds had sheep to look after (Luke 2:8–20). He imagines other animals in the stable and he imagines the wise men travelling by camel. A careful reading, however, of Matthew 2:1–12 does not mention a single camel, and certainly not the 'smallest camel' on the Christmas card that the Bear family received.

Our imaginations are not given to us just for our own enjoyment. Especially at Christmas time we should consider our giving as well as our receiving. Timothy Bear is often prompted to think of others and

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to share. He gives away the chocolates from his Advent calendar; he tidies up his messy bedroom; he widens his circle of friendships and is generous to his best friend, Claude; he helps his neighbour, Mrs Centurion, to be reunited with her cat, Marmalade. These are just a few of the ways Timothy helps others as they approach Christmas. There are many such opportunities for all of us.

Advent, leading up to Christmas, is truly a wonderful time. It's a time to exercise our imaginations, using the Bible story of the first Christmas as our launching pad. This book tries to do just that. Now it's over to you. I wonder...



— Day 1 —

Gruel and chocolate

... in which Timothy Bear learns a little about a boy called Oliver and what he had to eat. Timothy makes an Advent resolution to fight his flab and is tempted to break it the very next morning.



It was getting to the end of November. Timothy already knew that Christmas comes in December. The adverts on television had been talking about Christmas for some time and the decorations were already up in the shopping centre. Mrs Bear was even working on her Christmas card list. Christmas had just been mentioned at school when Miss Read started to talk to Timothy's class about putting on a special play for Christmas. First of all, however, the older children in the school were performing a play about a boy called Oliver.

'Today is the day we see the Oliver play,' announced Timothy Bear at breakfast. He was learning to remember things, especially things that sounded exciting.

'That's good,' said Dad. 'A treat for the end of November and then tomorrow starts December.'

Timothy knew bits about Oliver already. Miss Read had told her class that the boy's full name was Oliver Twist and he was an orphan. He had to live with other children who had no one to look after them, in an orphanage.

'Look out,' said Miss Read, 'for the bossy head of the orphanage, and look out for the main food served to the children. It's a weak mixture of porridge that looks a bit like pale gravy and is called gruel.' Some of the class giggled and some just shivered at the thought of it. Miss Read was setting the scene for the beginning of the play.

The play started in the orphanage with the children queuing up for their dinner. Dinner was a bowl full of that gruel. 'What a word!' thought Timothy. 'Cruel, gruel; cruel gruel.' Timothy enjoys the sounds of words but he didn't think he would enjoy the taste of gruel.

The Key Stage Two choir beautifully sang a song called 'Food, glorious food'. It was a song that imagined lots of tasty foods to compare with the gruel on offer in the orphanage. Timothy Bear's imagination ran riot with the song. 'Cold jelly and custard...' and Mrs Bear's honey crumble and ice cream. 'Pease pudding and saveloys'—Timothy had his doubts about those from the song but not about his mum's roast turkey and stuffing. 'Just picture a great big steak; just picture some Christmas cake...' He could dream about all the Christmas treats that awaited him, dreams that would become real. Mrs Bear is a good cook all year long but she excels herself at Christmas.

Timothy rubbed his tummy in anticipation—a tummy that bulged a bit too much already. Mum had already

mentioned that he shouldn't become too tubby.

By this time, the gruel meal was almost over in the orphanage. The time had come for Oliver to stand up and move forward towards the Year 6 boy playing the part of the large man who was in charge.

'Please, sir,' asked Oliver most politely, 'I want some more.'

How hungry he must be to want more of that gruel—more of that slimy mush!

'More?!' exploded the large man.

Timothy Bear was left wondering if some people were still around who existed on drab food like gruel. He certainly didn't, and he thought again about his tubby tummy and his need to do something about it. Then it suddenly hit him. To get ready for the delights of Christmas, he would give up sweets and honey until Christmas came. He really would.

Having made his resolution, Timothy enjoyed the rest of the Oliver play. He could understand about Oliver becoming a pickpocket. He wasn't sure what to make of the old man called Fagin, though. He preferred his grandpa! It was a great story and so well performed. He was full of it at home that evening. Mrs Bear, too, had something to tell him.

'Have you remembered, Timothy, that December starts tomorrow? We have something for you—one for you and one for Teresa.'

Timothy had completely forgotten that it was time for Advent calendars.

'These were the only ones left in the shop,' confessed Mrs Bear. 'They have a wrapped chocolate surprise behind each picture.'

‘Oh no!’ sighed Timothy, paw going to his mouth. ‘I’ve given up sweets till Christmas.’ He explained what he had decided during the play at school.

‘Good,’ said Mrs Bear. You can keep the chocolates in Grandma’s tin until you decide what to do with them.’

What a good idea! But it was hard when Timothy got up the next morning and opened the first window of the calendar.

‘Mine’s a donkey,’ he said, very pleased. The chocolate was in his paw.

‘Mine’s a star,’ said his sister, unwrapping the chocolate and popping it in her mouth. She was lucky to have no worries about her weight.

It was very hard for Timothy not to unwrap his chocolate. Mum produced Grandma’s tin and smiled encouragement as Timothy popped the chocolate in the tin instead of his mouth. He’d already had his favourite cereal for breakfast and didn’t feel hungry at all.

‘How things have changed since the days of Oliver Twist,’ thought Timothy to himself.

Advent activity

Resolutions are usually made at the start of a new year, but is there an Advent resolution for you to make in the countdown to Christmas?

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, Advent is all about getting ready for your coming into the world. Help us to celebrate the joy of your birth each day this Advent. Amen



— Day 2 —

Timothy Bear and the innkeeper's boy

... in which Timothy Bear goes on an amazing journey and meets a boy who is getting ready for the first Christmas. Timothy makes up his mind to prepare properly for this Christmas.



Timothy Bear usually gets excited about Christmas so early that it makes him careless, and this year was no exception.

‘Your bedroom’s a mess,’ said Mrs Bear. ‘Yesterday I tripped on a marble and had to put your toys away again.’

Timothy was forgetting his pleases and thank-yous as well. At school, it was his paw-writing and his colouring that were going wrong.

‘It’s all so messy,’ sighed Miss Read.

In fact, it was his carelessness that found Timothy in the school hall all on his own. He’d taken a photograph to show in assembly and had left it on the floor. Miss Read had said he could go and fetch it.

Timothy was surprised at how dark it was in the hall, but then he remembered that the curtains were drawn so that they could start rehearsing this year's nativity play later in the day. Already the stage blocks were out and a roll of corrugated paper was showing the walls of a stable. The door that swung on hinges had been much admired in assembly. Miss Read and the other teachers were good at this kind of thing.

Miss Read was promising to give out the parts for the play that morning. Timothy had been a shepherd in last year's play. As he thought about it, somehow he felt drawn to the stable and sat for a moment on the stage block by the door. Whether it was the darkness or the empty hall, Timothy didn't know, but suddenly he seemed to be floating through time and space—spinning but never dizzy, speeding but never frightened—and he landed with the slightest bump.

Timothy was still in a stable, but a real stable—a real stable with a real smell, and in the darkness he could make out the shape of a boy. The boy was wearing a short-sleeved robe and was working hard. He was working around Timothy Bear, sweeping, putting things straight and tidying. Timothy coughed nervously. The boy turned and smiled as if he expected to see him.

'Hello, Tubby!'

'Well!' thought Timothy, but he said, 'Good morning. Who are you?'

'My dad's the innkeeper and I'm doing some tidying up.'

'You're doing it very well,' said Timothy. 'I'm not very tidy,' he added.

'No, I'm not really,' went on the boy, 'but there's a feeling

of something special in the air. I'm sure something special is going to happen, and I want to be ready for it.'

'Where are we?' Timothy wanted to know.

'This is Bethlehem,' said the boy. 'It's not an important place, but crowds of people are coming to fill in their census forms. The stars seem so bright and this stable of ours seems so still, as if it's waiting for something to happen.'

Timothy nodded. He was beginning to understand, but the boy was speaking again.

'It's not like me, but I want to be ready. I want it to look nice, smell nice. I've blocked up some of the draughts and I've tried to mend the door. I'm really pleased.'

Timothy opened his mouth but nothing came out. He wanted to say, 'Yes, you're right. Something special is about to happen.' But he only nodded.

Again the boy was talking. 'I feel so much better. I haven't enjoyed tidying up before, but this is different.'

Again Timothy's words wouldn't come out. He wanted to say, 'You're getting ready for a very special baby. He'll make all the difference in the world.' Instead, the boy said, 'What's that noise?'

This time Timothy did speak. 'It sounds like a donkey.'

Timothy was feeling that strange sensation again of floating through time and space—spinning but never dizzy, speeding but never frightened—and he landed with the slightest bump. He was on the stage block in his school hall. He picked up the photograph and returned to his classroom.

The innkeeper's boy was on his mind. Yes, Timothy decided, he would really get ready for Christmas as well this

year. He'd get ready carefully and tidily. If the innkeeper's boy could do it, so could he.

Advent activity

Think of a place that is yours to tidy up. Ask if you are allowed to do it.

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, help us to be ready in every way we can when Christmas comes. Amen