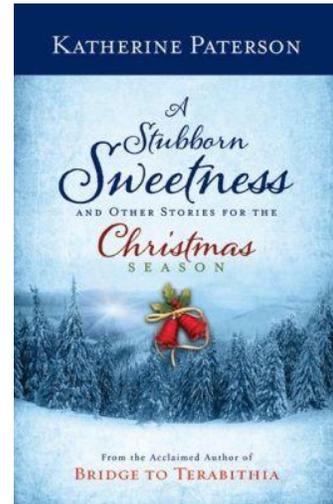


READERS THEATER

The Handmaid of the Lord by Katherine Paterson

“The Handmaid of the Lord” is one of many short stories in Katherine Paterson’s *A Stubborn Sweetness and Other Stories for the Christmas Season*. This Readers Theater script of “The Handmaid of the Lord” was written by Katherine Paterson for the Children’s Literary Lights Readers Theater performance at the 2013 Library of Congress National Book Festival in Washington, D.C. The performance was created and presented by The National Children’s Book and Literacy Alliance (NCBLA), in partnership with the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress.



Readers: Nine readers. Fewer readers can be used by sharing roles.

Length: Approximately 10 minutes.

Roles: Voice 1, Voice 2, Voice 3, Voice 4, Voice 5,
Mrs. MacLaughlin, Rachel Thompson, Carrie Wilson,
Mrs. Wilson.

Notes: This script has been double-spaced and formatted in a larger size font to facilitate easy reading when printed.

For additional Readers Theater scripts, visit: thencbla.org and click on Readers Theater in the EDUCATION menu.

To learn more about the NCBLA, visit their website: thencbla.org

To learn more about the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, visit their website: Read.gov

[VOICE 1] People think when your father is the minister that you get special favors, like you were God’s pet or something. Rachel, for one, knew absolutely, positively that it was not true. God didn’t love her better than Jason McMillan, who was getting an entire set of Mighty Morphin Power Rangers for Christmas. God didn’t love her better than that Carrie Wilson, who was getting a new Barbie dollhouse with two new dolls, outfits included. Not that Rachel really wanted a Barbie dollhouse, or Power Rangers either, for that matter, but it was the principle of the thing. Carrie and Jason were getting what they asked Santa Claus for.

[VOICE 2] Ministers’ kids never got really good presents at Christmas. She should know that by now. It didn’t count if you were naughty or nice. Gregory Austin had pulled the fire alarm last Sunday and made the fire trucks come in the middle of church service, but he was getting his own personal computer. His daddy had said so. Her daddy told everybody they were supposed to be God’s servants. Like Jesus was. He didn’t even mention presents.

[VOICE 1] So—no good presents. Rachel had given up on that. But a big role in the primary classes’ Christmas play—that shouldn’t be too much to ask for. She was by far the best actress in the second grade.

[VOICE 4] When she was five, she had been part of the heavenly host of angels. It was a terrible part. The costumes were made of a stiff gauzy stuff that itched something awful. Afterward Mrs. MacLaughlin, who ran the pageant, yelled at her right in front of everybody.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Rachel Thompson! Angels are spiritual beings! They do not scratch themselves while they sing! You had the congregation laughing at the heavenly host. I was mortified.

[VOICE 3] Last year Mrs. MacLaughlin had taken a rest from directing, and Ms. Westford had run the pageant. Ms. Westford believed in equal opportunity, so for the first time in the history of First Presbyterian Church, girls had been shepherds and wise men. That was okay with the girls, but the boys were mad. They didn’t like the itchy angel costumes at all. And a *lot* of the fathers complained.

[VOICE 2] But Rachel had been a much better shepherd than those stupid boys. She didn’t care what anyone had said afterward. She knew what the Bible meant when it said the shepherds were “sore afraid.” When Mr. Nelson shined the spotlight at them to show that the angel of the Lord was about to come upon them, Rachel had shown everyone in the church what it meant to be “sore afraid.”

[RACHEL] Help! Help! Don’t let it get me!

[VOICE 1] The congregation laughed. So did Gabriel and all the shepherds and the entire heavenly host. Mary laughed so hard she started choking, and Joseph had to whack her on the back.

[VOICE 2] Her father said later that it had been “a brand-new insight on the Christmas story,” and her mother said, “Never mind, dear, they weren’t laughing at you.” But she knew better. No one in the whole church understood what the story was really about. When the Bible said “sore afraid,” you were supposed to be scared. Rachel had been trembly all over.

[VOICE 4] She knew in her heart that she was the only kid in the pageant who felt that way. Not even the second- and third-graders who got all the big parts did them right. If you couldn’t have a scratching angel, you sure shouldn’t have a Joseph yawning so wide you could drive a tractor trailer straight down to his tonsils.

[VOICE 5] It had been a hard year. Her mother had been tired and pregnant for most of it, and then when David finally was born she’d gotten tired and busy. Now at the end of the worst year of her entire life, Christmas wasn’t going to be any better. Even the carols were against her. All those songs about the City of David.

[VOICE 4] “Couldn’t we make up a Christmas song about the City of Rachel?”

[VOICE 2] But her mother just smiled and kept on singing about David.

[VOICE 1] It made her more determined than ever to have a good part in the play, one in which she would not scratch or yell or wail. Mary. She would be Mary. She was old enough this year. She was the best actress in the second grade. Surely, even if she was the minister’s daughter, Mrs. MacLaughlin would pick her. She’d be so good in class that Mrs. MacLaughlin would just see that nobody deserved to be Mary more than Rachel did.

[VOICE 3] Besides, her little brother had already been chosen to be Baby Jesus. She ought to be Mary. Jesus shouldn’t have a stranger be his mother. It might scare him.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] This is our first practice. I’m glad to see so many of you here because we have a lot of parts in this play.

[RACHEL] Mrs. MacLaughlin?

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] (*impatiently*) What is it, Rachel?

[RACHEL] I know I’m the minister’s kid and that when I was little, sometimes—”

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Yes, Rachel—

[RACHEL] Well, I’ve studied the part really hard, and since my brother is the Baby Jesus, I thought, well, it would probably mean a lot to *him* if—well, if his big sister could be Mary.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Unfortunately, your sister is too old to be in the primary grades pageant.

[RACHEL] I don’t mean Elizabeth, Mrs. MacLaughlin. I mean, well, what’s the matter with me?”

[VOICE 1] There was a burst of laughter in the room. Everyone was laughing at her! Rachel’s face went scarlet.

[RACHEL] Shut up! I’m serious. I know the story better than anybody here, and it’s my brother!

[VOICE 5] Everyone laughed harder. Even the little ones who were going to be itchy angels were giggling.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Rachel—dear. Of course you know the Christmas story—after all, your father is our minister—but—but Mary is a very difficult role.

[RACHEL] I could do it.

[VOICE 1] But she knew it was no use. People weren’t supposed to laugh at Mary. And everybody laughed at her—when they paid her any attention at all.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Carrie, how would you like to be our Mary this year?

[VOICE 5] Carrie Wilson? She had blue eyes and blond curls all they way down her back and didn’t look at all like Mary. And that fake smile. It made Rachel sick to her stomach. Mary was the handmaid of the Lord, for heaven’s sake, not some Barbie doll.

[VOICE 2] Rachel could hardly listen as Mrs. MacLaughlin went down the list telling everyone what they were supposed to be. She knew now she wouldn't even get a speaking part. Mrs. MacLaughlin didn't like her. Nobody liked her. Not even God. Finally, Mrs. MacLaughlin stopped.

[VOICE 1] Rachel looked up. She hadn't heard her name. She didn't want to say anything because maybe her name had been called when she wasn't listening and then Mrs. MacLaughlin would have something else to fuss about. But she couldn't stand it. She raised her hand.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Yes, Rachel?

[RACHEL] About my part—”

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Yes, Rachel. This year you have a very important part.

[RACHEL] I do?

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Yes. You will be our understudy.

[RACHEL] Our what?

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Since you know the story *so* well, you will be prepared to *substitute* in case any of our actors become ill or unable to perform.

[RACHEL] Substitute? You mean I don't have a part of my own?

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] You have *all* the parts—in case—Why suppose, for example, Gabriel should lose her voice? You would step in and be our Gabriel. Or if our Mary were to suddenly have to visit her grandmother in Ohio, you would have to step in and be our Mary.

[CARRIE] My grandmother’s coming *here* for Christmas, Mrs. MacLaughlin,

[VOICE 1] Rachel wasn’t stupid. She knew what Mrs. MacLaughlin was doing. She wasn’t keeping Rachel from having a big part. She was making sure that Rachel wouldn’t have any part at all.

She told her mother that she was never going back to Sunday school again in her whole entire life. But, of course, she went back. Ministers’ children have to go to Sunday school. It’s the law or something.

[VOICE 5] And then, a miracle happened.

[VOICE 2] One week before Christmas, Carrie Wilson, who wore the world’s prissiest little blue leather boots, slipped on the ice in the mall parking lot and broke both her arms.

[VOICE 4] *Both* her arms.

[VOICE 1] Rachel was overcome with exceeding great joy. God did love her. He did! One arm might count as an accident, but two arms were a miracle. God meant business. No matter how determined Mrs. MacLaughlin was to keep her out of the play, God was going to make sure not only that she got in but that she got the most important part in the whole shebang. She was going to be Mary, the handmaid of the Lord.

[VOICE 3] She went early to the dress rehearsal so Mrs. McLaughlin could try the costume on her. It fit perfectly. Well, it would have fit practically anybody. Those robe things weren't exactly any size, but Rachel took it as a good sign when Mrs. MacLaughlin sighed and admitted that, yes, it did fit.

[RACHEL] Don't you worry, Mrs. MacLaughlin, I'm the understudy. I know the part perfectly.

[VOICE 1] Which was a little silly since Mary didn't say a word, just looked lovingly into the manger while everyone else sang and carried on.

[RACHEL] I know you worry, Mrs. MacLaughlin, but nobody is going to laugh at me this year, I promise.

[VOICE 3] She was so happy, the glorias just burst from her. But she had to get them all out before seven o'clock. She couldn't let a stray gloria pass her lips when she was behind that manger. God might understand, but Mrs. MacLaughlin sure wouldn't.

[VOICE 5] She was all dressed in the sky-blue robe, sitting quietly, looking down into the empty manger. Mrs. MacLaughlin, hoarse from yelling at the heavenly hosts, was giving last minute directions to the wise men when suddenly the back door of the sanctuary opened.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Why, Mrs. Wilson. Carrie—

[VOICE 1] Rachel jerked up in alarm. It *was* Carrie, standing in the darkened sanctuary, her fake-fur-trimmed coat hanging off her shoulders, both arms bound to the front of her body.

[MRS. WILSON] My brave little girl insisted, ‘The show must go on.’ I talked to Dr. Franklin, and he said it would be the best thing in the world for her. She was so distressed about letting everyone down that it was having a negative effect on the healing process—

[VOICE 1] Two mothers yanked the beautiful blue robe off Rachel and draped it over Carrie’s head.

[MRS. WILSON] See. It was meant to be. It totally hides the casts.

[VOICE 3] Rachel slunk off the platform and slumped down in the first pew. No one noticed. All the adults were oohing and ahing about how brave Carrie was to come and save the play.

[MRS. WILSON] Oh, yes, she’s in terrible pain. But she couldn’t bear to disappoint you all.

[VOICE 4] No one cared that Rachel was disappointed. Not even God. Of course, God had known all along that Carrie would show up at the last minute and steal back the part. God knew everything, and he had let Rachel sing and rejoice and think for a few days that he was on her side, that he had chosen her, like Mary, to be his handmaid. But it was just a big joke. A big, mean joke. She kicked the red carpet at her feet.

[MRS. MACLAUGHLIN] Off stage, off stage, everyone. Time to line up in your places.

[VOICE 1] Where did you go when there wasn't any place for you? She looked around. People were beginning to arrive for the service. She slipped farther down in the pew. She didn't want her family to see her. They'd find out soon enough that God had fired her.

[VOICE 5] She saw her mother carry David up the far aisle. The baby was sucking happily on his pacifier.

[VOICE4] David will be a good Jesus. Everyone will say so.

[VOICE 5] Mrs. MacLaughlin was waiting at the door to the hall. She took David and said something to Mom, who cocked her head in a doubtful manner. Was she telling Mom that Rachel wasn't going to be Mary after all? If she did, maybe Mom would come over and take her on her lap and tell her she was sorry. No, Mom didn't even look her way.

[VOICE 2] The play went well. None of the angels cried or scratched. Gabriel knew all her lines and said them loud enough to be heard almost to the back row. The wise men remembered to carry in their gifts and nobody's crown rolled off. Joseph did not yawn, and Mary gazed sweetly into the manger. It was all perfect. Perfect without her. Rachel felt like weeping and wailing like the Rachel in the Bible.

[VOICE 5] And then, suddenly, a miracle occurred.

[VOICE 1] Baby Jesus began to cry. Not just cry, *scream*. Yell his little lungs out. Carrie Wilson forgot about being Mary. She turned absolutely white, and her eyes went huge, like she was about to panic. She would have probably got up and run, but with her arms bound under her robe she couldn't move. She looked at Joseph.

[CARRIE] Do something!

[VOICE 3] Joseph's face went bright red but he didn't move a muscle.

[VOICE 5] It was all up to Rachel. She jumped from her pew and dashed up the chancel steps. She was still panting when she got to the manger. Rachel poked around under the baby until she located the pacifier and jammed it into David's open mouth. He clamped down on it at once.

[VOICE 3] The big church went silent except for his noisy sucking. Rachel smiled down at him. He was a lovely Jesus.

[CARRIE] Who do you think you are?

[VOICE 1] Carrie Wilson was hissing through her teeth, but the whisper was almost loud enough to be heard in the back row.

[VOICE 5] Rachel could hear a snicker from somewhere out in the darkened sanctuary. She straightened up and stared sternly in the direction of the offender, and when she spoke, there was no doubt that the people in the last pew could hear her.

[RACHEL] Behold! I am the handmaid of the Lord! And I say unto you, glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill to men, women, and children.

[VOICE 3] Nobody laughed.

[VOICE 1] They didn't dare.

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