



Advent
unwrapped

Advent Activities
for the Whole People of God



Exploring the Reason for the Season

Advent

Faith deepens in our lives as we practise it. The hope, peace, joy, and love of God provide resilience in our lives when we nurture these gifts in our daily spiritual rituals. What we want our children to know is that God is with them; they are not alone no matter what they face in life. That's the message of the Advent-Christmas season! What a blessed gift to give them this Christmas!

In this season that is really all about faith, many things distract us from nurturing faith within our families. We need to snatch back Advent and Christmas and find the ways that help us, in our families, make the journey to Bethlehem one that nurtures faith in ourselves and in our children.

Keeping the focus on faith within a celebration taken over by secular forces does not have to add stress. The good news is that it is the simple things, the ritual actions that we've done year by year, and the time we take to just be together that help make this truly a celebration of Christ's birth.

Early in the season, take time to reflect as a family about what has been the most meaningful for you in the past years. Add new "traditions" to replace old ones that no longer make sense for you or to address new realities in your family.

ADVENT TRADITION IDEAS

- Why not make each Advent tradition into something that connects with what we believe about God, Jesus, and faith-filled living? The Advent calendar might not only have a treat to discover each day but could also be a reminder to put a food item in a box for the food bank. While watching the Santa Claus parade, look for signs of hope, peace, joy, and love as the floats go by, and talk about that later as a family.
- When you put up your Christmas tree, pause as a family to pray, asking for God's blessing as you celebrate around the tree this year. If it is a real tree, thank God for creating it and ask that the tree remind you that Jesus' love is evergreen (everlasting). If it is an artificial tree, thank God for those who made it and ask that it remind you of the wonder and joy of Jesus' birth.
- Choose one special ornament to be the last one you hang on the tree each year. It might be a bell, a star, an angel, a dove, a baby Jesus, or something significant for your family. Gather together to hang this last ornament. Invite each person to say, out loud or silently, a prayer for others and for our world. Then sing a verse of "Silent Night" or "Away in a Manger."

- Are there loved ones you are missing this year, either because they have died or because they live far away? Choose an ornament (make one by hand or buy one) that represents each person. Then create a ritual of hanging these ornaments on the tree, telling stories about and giving thanks for each person.
- Our society emphasizes creating Christmas wish lists of what we want for Christmas. Take time to create together the list of what you will give to others, in your family and in your community. What is a special way to show what you love about the other people?
- Encourage children to create special gifts or cards for those they love. Younger children

might team with an older sibling or adult. Gift ideas: A card with a special story about the person or a note of thanks. A list of favourite songs or quotes. A photo taken and frame created. A simple gift in your loved one's favourite colour—scarf, mitts, notebook, candy, etc. including a note: “To (name) who loves (colour), with all my love!” A selection of cartoons or photos they would enjoy. A song that has special meaning for the loved one that you will listen to together. A short story or poem that has meaning for them that you read to them.

—Rev. Susan Lukey is minister at High River United Church in High River, AB

Christmas

I happen to love Santa Claus and the whole imaginative world of the North Pole, especially as presented in *The Santa Clause* movies with Tim Allen. I also love telling the story of the first St. Nicholas and his generous heart for helping others. But today, Santa Claus—and the materialism that has been connected with the jolly fellow—often overshadows the deep and wonderful story of our Christian faith.



While Santa and elves suffice for those seeking a happy secular celebration, for those of us

drawn to the Way of Jesus there is a yearning for a faith-filled season that offers a message to the sorrows as well as the joys of our lives. For us, there is no gift greater than the words found in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 1, declaring that Jesus is Emmanuel, meaning “God with us.”

Here are some ideas for creating a Christmas season that embraces the gift of God's presence in Jesus and reminds us of the amazing story of Jesus' birth.



CHRISTMAS TRADITION IDEAS

- Take time with each of your children alone to do something they love to do. Play a board game or watch a TV show they love, go for a hot chocolate together, or play with their favourite toys. Make this one-on-one time with each child something that is special and just for them. This works with adult children, too!

- Try the Joy Jar or Jesus Jar activities (one of the activities in **Advent Spiritual Practices for the Whole Family**).
- As you put up the Nativity scene, retell the story of Jesus' birth. Don't put the baby in the scene until Christmas Eve. You can even make a game of hiding the baby and needing to find him. You might read together



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Unwrapping the Christmas Crèche by Lisa Filinn and Barbara Younger (Abingdon 2005) or *Baby Jesus Is Missing!* by Dixie Phillips (Guardian Angel 2009).

- Create a heart out of fabric or paper that offers a special faith message from your own heart, concluding with “God loves you and so do I!” and tuck it in the toe of each person’s Christmas stocking.
- Talk about those who were there on that first Christmas. Each Advent week, pick one character to discuss at dinnertime. For example: What would the shepherds do each day? What would they pray for each day? Retell their part in the story. How would it have felt to suddenly have dozens of angels appear in the sky? What would the shepherds have talked about on the way home? Do you think they ever met Jesus again?
- On Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, take time to read the Christmas story together either from the Bible or a storybook. Great versions include *Mary’s Treasure Box* by Carolyn Walz Kramlich (Thomas Nelson 1998). You could create a special box containing the items in Mary’s treasure box to use alongside the story; *The Last Straw* by Fredrick H. Thury (Charlesbridge 2009); or *Who Is Coming to Our House?* by Joseph Slate (G.P. Putnam 1988).
- Why not read the story of Jesus’ birth from different books on each of the 12 Days of Christmas (December 25 to January 6)? Light a candle welcoming Jesus, read the story, and then share a prayer of thanks and concerns.



- On Christmas Day, invite your family members one by one to a quiet spot to thank them for who they are in your life. Focus more on their qualities that you cherish than on things they do for you.
- Around the Christmas dinner table, place a candle in front of each person. At the beginning of the meal, light the candles one at a time and have everyone say, “(Name), you are a gift to us!” End by lighting a candle for Jesus, saying, “Jesus, you are a gift to us!”
- Hold your own [Christmas candlelight worship](#). You’ll need seven candles of different colours, a Bible, and a hymnbook or Christmas carol sheet. Sing without accompaniment.
- What are other faiths and cultures celebrating right now? Learn about the Jewish celebration of [Hanukkah](#); the African-American festival of [Kwanzaa](#); [Diwali](#), the Hindu festival of lights; the Muslim celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday known as [Mawlid an-Nabi](#); or the Winter Solstice celebrations in the northern hemisphere and the Summer Solstice celebrations in the southern hemisphere. Learning about the value placed in the celebrations of other cultures and faiths helps us value our own.



—Susan Lukey is minister at High River United Church in High River, AB.

Epiphany

CHALKING THE DOOR

Over 2000 years ago the Magi—Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar—travelled over a great distance. They followed a star the whole way and found baby Jesus. Chalking the door is an Epiphany house blessing ritual, a visible sign of our faith and a welcome to all who come through the door. It helps us to remember God is with us, always.

Mark your door with the initials of the three Magi, and the numerals of the new Year connected by a series of crosses:

20 + C + M + B + 24

The C M B also stands for the Latin prayer request, *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, May Christ bless this house.

Blessing

Loving God, Bless all who come into our home

May all who enter in come in peace

May all who come in this door find welcome and love

May peace and love fill our home and spread out

into the community and the world.

STAR LUMINARIES

Light shines brightest in deep darkness. Create a star luminary that will bring light.

Paper Bag Luminary

Materials:

- paper lunch bag
- pencil
- darning needle
- sand
- LED tealight

Directions:

1. Draw a star onto the paper bag.
2. Use a darning needle to poke holes on outline of the star (and throughout star if you wish).
3. Put approximately 1 cup of sand in bottom of the bag.
4. Place the LED tealight into the center of the sand. Enjoy your luminary!

Tin Can Luminary

Materials:

- tin can
- sharp, narrow nail
- hammer
- marker
- LED tealight

Directions:

5. Ensure the can has been carefully washed and dried before beginning. Remove any paper labels.
6. Draw a star pattern of your choosing onto the can with the marker.
7. Fill the can with water and freeze. This will prevent the can from bending when you hammer into it.
8. Lay the can on its side, and use the nail and hammer to poke holes along the outline of the star. You may need a towel to hold onto it. This part can be tricky!
9. Let the ice melt.
10. Place the tealight in bottom of can. Enjoy your luminary!

First Third Ministries

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Bible Study on Mark 13: 24–31

But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be
shaken.

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in
clouds” with great power and glory. Then he
will send out the angels and gather the elect
from the four winds, from the ends of the earth
to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as
its branch becomes tender and puts forth its
leaves, you know that summer is near. So also,
when you see these things taking place, you
know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly
I tell you, this generation will not pass away
until all these things have taken place. Heaven
and earth will pass away, but my words will
not pass away.

Mark 13: 24–31

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

OVERVIEW OF SESSION

This bible study is intended for an intergenerational (all-ages) group. There are activities that are conducive to sitting in the round, with a low table in the middle, or you can use the open floor. You could have this conversation in a coffee shop, a community space, someone’s living room, or in worship on the first Sunday in Advent. Like most great resources, this is a starting point for your leadership—adapt, change, add to your session as you wish!

Things you will need:

- Your favourite biblical translation (we use the [New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition](#))

- Black markers or pencil crayons (one for each participant)
- Slips of white paper no larger than 4 x 4 inches (one for each participant)
- A Christ candle in the centre of your gathering circle (on a low table or on the floor) with a large yellow, white, gold, glittery piece of fabric underneath (large enough for each person to put their slip of white paper on the fabric and for the fabric to still be seen underneath)
- A way to play “Anthem” by Leonard Cohen so everyone can hear
- A gathering place—the best space would be a circle of chairs with a low worship table in the middle

ANCIENT CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Although Mark 13 describes Jesus in and around the Temple, by the time the Gospel of Mark was written it is quite probable that the Temple had been destroyed for the second time, and fairly recently at that. So, the first Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians and then rebuilt, and now the second Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. What would be rebuilt?

Although this is an apocalyptic speech (having to do with the revelation of things pertaining to the end/transformation of the world), it is also Jesus' last big speech to his closest followers. He is, in part, giving them the tools to go on without him, and trying to instill in them an urgent sense of the necessity to keep going into an uncertain future along an unknown timeline.

It's fair to think of this passage as directed to people living with devastation. So even though the first part of the chapter is full of harbingers of more devastation, this last part is about guiding the faithful who are trying to keep the faith in a context of physical, religious, cultural, and social upheaval—when everything powerful in the known world is telling them to give up and give in. It can offer encouragement along the way of patient

endurance that will ultimately see the Kingdom of God realized—if not in their lifetime, then in the not-too-distant future. The same instructions that were intended to keep those disciples going can help any of us who are living through times when God's ways and promises seem very hard to hang onto.

Searching for signs of new creation—even in the midst of terrifying turmoil—is a key component of being able to sustain an attitude of hope.

It is a call to faithful living and patient endurance in times when uncertainty and anxiety have become persistently ordinary.

LAYOUT OF THE SESSION

- Thank everyone for participating and ensure everyone knows each other names and pronouns (if they wish to share).
- Take a moment to notice the acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which you gather. You may want to also share a bit about the Indigenous peoples in your area.
- If it is your community's practice, share your values about how the group will communicate with one another (respectful communication, deep listening, etc.).