

A DIFFERENT CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR

*Easy Family Worship Activities to
Make the Season More Meaningful*



MARY BERNARD

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Contents

How to Use This Book

The Advent Wreath

Supplies You Will Need

Sample Order of a Family Advent Worship Time

Advent Activities

First Sunday of Advent

Second Sunday of Advent

Third Sunday of Advent

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Christmas Eve: Stories

Christmas Day: Gifts

Wreath

Holly and Berries

Christmas Tree

Aroma and Fragrance

Music

Candlelight

Snowflakes

Ornaments and Decorations

Santa Claus (Father Christmas)

Stars

Additional Resources

About the Author

How to Use This Book

Thanks for downloading this book. My hope is that you will find the ideas helpful in bringing your family closer and **restoring a Christ-focused holiday season** in your home.

First, a special note: Of primary importance to me is glorifying God through theological integrity. I do not intend to “force” Scriptural context upon secular events and icons of Christmas. Instead, I choose to live with a Christian worldview, believing that all good and beautiful things ultimately point to the Creator, who exactly defines *good* and *beautiful*. Therefore, in this guide, I purposely draw parallels between familiar Christmas rituals and biblical truths. My goal is to always emphasize that only *in Jesus* do we possess life and that in all of Creation we can identify the work of God.

In my zeal, however, to make these connections, I will likely get some things “wrong.” I pray you will know it is not my intention to disparage Christ or any of the events surrounding his birth, life, death, and resurrection. I pray for grace and welcome your comments, should any questions arise as you work through this book.

My guidelines here are just that: loose guides for giving you a framework for conducting a time of family worship in your home. Adapt them in any way that fits your family’s preferences and schedule. I suggest printing the entire document, punching it with three holes, and then placing inside a small notebook. Look through the entire book and plan your Advent season accordingly.

At the bare minimum, I suggest your family **adopt the ritual of the Advent wreath**. You can follow my suggestions on those designated pages, as well as work in discussions of other “days,” including candles, light, holly and berries, and so on. The Advent wreath is a favorite perennial reminder of the season and all its abundant riches.

I’d love to hear how you used this resource, what you liked or didn’t like about it, and in what other areas you could use guidance. Email me at <mailto:mary@writingmomof3.com>.

Blessings for a wonderful holiday season,

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The Advent Wreath

To prepare an Advent Wreath for use from now until Christmas, you will need:

Four candles either in a wreath or ring or even four small votives in separate holders will do. If you do want a wreath/ring, buy it now at a Christian bookstore or order online. You can find one for about \$20. (Several years, I said I'd wait until after Christmas to buy one on sale. They never put them on sale. So, buy it now!) Candle colors are usually three purple or blue and one pink. A fifth candle may be added in the center on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day (we usually use a small red candle in a jar) to symbolize Christ.

Supplies You Will Need

To prepare for some of the other activities in this book, you may need:

- Craft supplies, such as glue, glitter, markers, Styrofoam balls, ribbon
- Oranges, whole cloves, cinnamon sticks, powdered cinnamon
- Young Living essential oils* (Frankincense, Myrrh, Cinnamon Bark, Orange, Clove, Thieves blend, Christmas Spirit blend, Citrus Fresh blend, Cedarwood, Pine, Evergreen Essence). You can order essential oils with a wholesale or retail membership through my link here — WritingMomOf3.com/Advent-Oils.

You should also designate a “family devotion” spot where your family will gather for a worship time together. In this place, make convenient your Advent wreath, lighter or matches, Bible, and children’s Bible. We usually gather around our coffee table in our living room.

***A note about essential oils:** I only use and recommend Young Living essential oils. They are of the highest quality and purity, so I trust they are safe for my family. Please do not purchase essential oils from the health food store or from a cheap online supplier. All brands are NOT the same!!!

Please use caution when using essential oils with your family, especially young children. When applying oils to a child’s skin — especially for children under age ten — dilute the oils heavily, using one drop oil per 1 teaspoon coconut or olive oil. For the activities in this book, I generally recommend simply diffusing or sniffing the suggested oils, which should both serve the purpose for the activity, as well as give all family members a wellness benefit.

Advent Activities

First Sunday of Advent: The Prophets

Gather around the Advent wreath. Briefly explain that a prophet is one that God gave a special message to tell others. Emphasize that many thousand of years before Jesus was even born, prophets were telling others that he would come! All of those prophecies came true.

Why do the Old Testament prophecies (which are ultimately fulfilled by Christ) give us hope?

Advent Sunday #1: Candle of Hope

Read Micah 5:2 and light the first purple candle: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

Second Sunday of Advent: The Angels

Gather around the Advent wreath. Explain that the term "host" in verse 13 is a military term, referring to an army of sorts. Verse 13 describes the announcement as being delivered by a "heavenly host." Discuss for a moment what images come to mind when we think of the military or army. Next, ask the family to talk about the significance that an "army" would deliver news of peace and joy.

Why does the Angels' announcement give us peace?

Advent Sunday #2: Candle of Peace

Read Luke 2:8-13 and light the first and second purple candles: "And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" (Luke 2:10-11 ESV)

Third Sunday of Advent: The Shepherds

Gather around the Advent wreath. Briefly explain how shepherds were regarded in Jesus' day: People didn't like shepherds very much. They thought they were dirty and lowly. They considered their job kind of gross: they were in fields for a long time with smelly sheep. But God chose to reveal Christ's birth to the shepherds first! He didn't go to the Kings and Queens or even the church leaders. He chose ordinary people to receive the news.

Why is it significant that God chose to reveal Christ's birth to the shepherds first? Why should that give us joy?

Advent Sunday #3: Candle of Joy

Read Luke 2:14-17 and light the first and second purple candles and the pink candle:
“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:15-16 ESV)

Fourth Sunday of Advent: The Wise Men

Gather around the Advent wreath. Briefly explain the wise men from the east were believers. They had heard the news of Christ's birth and they were coming to worship him. They sought him out, they traveled to see him, and they brought him—a baby—great gifts. The wise men, who were not Jews, fulfilled Old Testament prophecies which spoke of Gentiles' bringing their wealth to Israel's king:

They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.
(Isaiah 60:6 ESV)

Why is it considered an act of love that the wise men brought Christ their wealth and their worship? How can you show your love to Christ?

Advent Sunday #4: Candle of Love

If you have Frankincense and/or Myrrh essential oils, use them now. You may diffuse them or simply pass the bottles for the family to smell. (Use the oils with caution for all children! Dilute one drop oil per teaspoon of coconut or olive oil if applying to the skin.) Explain that these oils were used for all types of purposes during Jesus' time and were considered quite precious and very expensive. Today, we still use these oils to support our skin and immune systems, just as Jesus' family would have done.

Read Matthew 2:1-12 and light all the candles:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler

who will shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

(Matthew 2:1-12 ESV)

Wreath

The wreath’s shape is circular. Certainly, there’s no better time than Christmas to see the beauty of the circle.

Gather circular objects and look at them with the children: a hula-hoop and rings, for example. Ask, “Where is the circle’s beginning? Where is the circle’s end?”

Explain to the kids that the wreath reminds us that our God has no beginning and has no end. That’s hard for us to imagine because we are accustomed to things beginning and ending, like a TV show or mealtime. But this is terrific news! God has always been and will always be! When our life here on Earth “ends,” we know that we will not really come to an end because we are in Christ, the one who has no end.

Scripture: “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Revelation 1:8 ESV)

Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
(Psalm 90:2 ESV)

Westminster Shorter Catechism Question #4: What is God?

Answer: God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Holly and Berries

The holly and berries point us significantly to Christ. Holly is an evergreen, as the Word of God is everlasting and always living. The edges are prickly to remind us of Christ's crown of thorns, while the berries point to Christ's drops of blood shed on our behalf.

Cut branches of holly (or another evergreen tree) and berries for examples. Allow the children to hold them (no eating!) or use artificial versions. Talk about the differences between evergreens and other plants that grow for a time then die. Compare the aspects of evergreens to everlasting life offered by faith in Christ. Next, contrast this example with the temporary nature of this life.

Scripture: The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.
(Isaiah 40:8 ESV)

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." ... And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:42, 44 ESV).

Christmas Tree

Though the Christmas tree is perhaps the primary symbol of all that means *materialism* at Christmas, let us focus our families on other aspects of trees.

If weather permits, take a walk through a wooded area. Note aspects of the trees. Most trees grow strong and mighty with dense root systems. They are unmovable. They provide beauty. They offer protection of shade from the sun. Their wood can be used for heat and housing. The tree offers us many benefits.

Point out to the children that Jesus died on a wooden cross—a tree, in fact. Looking upon Christmas trees should always remind us that Jesus is our strong anchor, our provider, and our protector. And on a tree, Jesus paid the greatest price to redeem us to himself forever.

If you stay indoors, diffuse Evergreen Essence essential oil blend or Pine or Cedarwood essential oils. Turn on the diffuser as you decorate your tree (especially if you use an artificial one).

Scripture: "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Psalm 1:3 ESV).

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13 ESV).

St. Nicholas (Santa Claus)

The tradition of “Santa Claus’s” visit on Christmas Eve has become so exploited by modern-day retailers that most, if not all, of the truth of his Christian origin has been lost.

Whether your family observes a traditional “Santa Claus visit” or not, it’s important to know that our “Santa Claus” stems from stories surrounding an ancient saint. It’s possible (and even desirable!) to celebrate a modern-day Santa using a historical twist.

St. Nicholas of Myra was a pastor in the fourth century and is known for his love and care of children. One legend tells of his throwing a bag of money through the window of a house so that the daughter in the family could be married with a proper dowry and escape prostitution. Another tells of Nicholas rescuing several children from death by pulling them from a deep vat of vinegar brine. Christians remembered this event by giving large, crisp pickles to one another. Both of these events happened on the Feast of the Nativity.

Customs have morphed over the years to become what we know today as Santa Claus. In like manner of Nicholas’ gift giving, the Dutch began leaving little gifts and treats in children’s shoes or stockings drying along the hearthside on the Feast Day of St. Nicholas, December 6.

Explain to the children the sacrificial acts of the real Santa Claus—St. Nicholas. Connect for them the reason we offer gifts to others so that in our tradition of Santa Claus, we will, ultimately, be drawn closer to God. Read this quotation to the children:

“The giver of every good and perfect gift has called upon us to mimic his giving, by grace, through faith, and this not of ourselves.”

—Nicholas of Myra (c. 288–354)

Give each child a pickle Christmas tree ornament to hang on the tree, or you may choose to make pickle ornaments. Open a jar of pickles and have a pickle snack (or a taste if you have finicky eaters). Use the opportunity to talk about the bitter nature of the pickle brine to remind the children that the little baby in the manger would one day grow up to endure death on a cross. He would ask for a drink and be offered vinegar instead. Tell the children that on this Feast Day of St. Nicholas (if you are observing on December 6), we see that in his acts of mercy and love, he points us to the ultimate act of mercy and love in Christ Jesus.

Scripture: For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV)

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28-30 NIV)

Music

Some people start playing Christmas music well before Thanksgiving. Music ministers to us in a special way. Not only do familiar Christmas tunes make us hum along, but beautifully crafted lyrics also proclaim the Gospel news over department store loudspeakers and televised holiday specials.

Pick a favorite Christmas hymn. Ask your kids to write down some of their favorite words that speak of Christ in the hymn. Decorate the words with glitter or stickers. Cut them out, punch a hole in the top and tie a ribbon. Hang the meaningful words on your Christmas tree to remind all of Christ.

Scripture: “ ... Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart ...” (Ephesians 5:18b-19 ESV).

Candlelight

Turn out all the lights. Give each family member a candle. Light one of the candles and talk about how that tiny spark of fire lights up the entire room. Though the light is faint, you can still discern outlines of objects.

Light the other family members’ candles one at a time, noticing how important each one is to the overall light in the room.

Ask, “What does light do for us? How can you offer the light of Christ to others?”

Talk about how light leads us, exposes the truth, dispels darkness, gives warmth, and gives energy.

Scripture: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16 ESV)

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” (Genesis 1:3-5 ESV)

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105 ESV)

Snowflakes

Cut paper snowflakes (search the Internet for simple cutting instructions) and then use them to decorate the tree, windows, or walls. Talk about the unique nature of each cut on the paper snowflakes, which beautifully illustrates the unique nature of real snowflakes. Talk about our individuality and uniqueness. Talk about God’s creative power and how that creativity is imaged in us.

Ask the children to picture a filthy, dirty sock (or show one, if you have one). Tell them the dirt on the sock is like what sin does to us. It makes us ugly and imperfect. Now talk about or show a bright, white new sock. Tell them that when we love Jesus and believe in him for eternal life, we become clean and white. Ask the children to name some things they can think of that are bright, clean, and white. God sees us as clean because of Christ.

Christ washes us white as snow. Christ loves each of us as he made us. In living out our uniqueness, we showcase his creative power.

Scripture: Urge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. (Psalm 51:7 ESV)

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (Isaiah 1:18 ESV)

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Psalm 139:13-14 ESV)

Ornaments and Decorations

We don't leave our trees and homes bare at Christmastime, do we? No. We adorn them with ornaments and decorations. How are we to live? Plainly? No. The Bible says we are to live adorned with the love of Christ. We are to be beautiful and colorful and attractive so that others will come to know him. We are to be dressed in the attributes of Christ.

Gather some wardrobe accessories and explain to the children that as we put on a hat, a necklace, or a scarf, we are to also "put on" Christ. We can only do this because the Lord enables us to do so. And as we grow in our love and knowledge of what he has done for us, will we more desire to please him.

Pajama Parade!

Shortly after the children are ready for bed, announce that you're going for a "Pajama Parade"! The family piles in the car—in their pajamas—to tour local Christmas light displays. Make sure you have planned your route before you leave. You may want to pack a snack basket and/or hot cocoa in a Thermos for the ride.

The Pajama Parade is the perfect opportunity to talk about the beauty of the lighted and colorful decorations.

Scripture: Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:12-16 ESV)

Aroma and Fragrance

Few things make it "feel like Christmas" more than familiar scents of the season. Fill your home with these ideas:

"Christmasy" Essential Oils

Diffuse Christmas Spirit, which is a lovely blend of Orange, Cinnamon Bark, and Spruce essential oils. It may also be applied to Christmas tree branches, potpourri, or logs to burn in the fireplace.

If you'd like to experiment and make your own Christmas essential oils blends, try mixing Cinnamon Bark with your favorite citrus oils. Thieves essential oil blend also reminds one of Christmastime.

Simmering Homemade Potpourri

Combine the peels of 2 oranges, 3 cinnamon sticks, 12 whole cloves, and 2 ½ cups hot water. Simmer on low heat.

Pomander Balls

Use toothpicks to prick small holes into fresh oranges. Push whole cloves into the holes, covering the orange. Shake the studded oranges in bags filled with powdered cinnamon. Tie with ribbons to hang or display them together in a bowl.

As you enjoy the scents of the season, tell the children to picture their lives—their actions—as aroma reaching all those around them and up to God himself. Ask, “What is your primary ‘scent’?”

Contrast the sweet fragrance of Christ with the worst odor you can think of: a skunk, a smelly gym bag, a rotten piece of fruit, and so on.

Scripture: For we are the aroma of Christ to God (2 Corinthians 2:15 ESV).

Stars

Take a night hike on a clear night, so that many stars are visible to the naked eye. If you have a telescope, use it to look at the stars. While the family is stargazing, read aloud the Scripture passage.

Talk about the importance of stars. Explain to the kids that Christ was one of “Abraham’s stars” and you and they are “Abraham’s stars,” too. (Explain God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 15.)

Once you’re back inside and looking at the twinkle lights on your tree, remind the children of Abraham’s stars.

Hang glow-in-the-dark stars or a strand of twinkle lights in the kids’ bedrooms (year-round) to remind them they are “Abraham’s stars.”

Scripture: And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:5-6 ESV)

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.
(Matthew 1:1 ESV)

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.
(Galatians 3:29 ESV)

(Christmas Eve): Stories

God revealed himself in his Word through stories. Jesus taught us using parables, which are stories. We continue to learn and grow in our relationship with God by retelling and relating to stories.

The greatest story ever known has to be the one of Jesus' birth from Luke 2. Read this passage aloud in the King James version (printed below). Emphasize that this story is true! This story is the very Word of God.

If possible, attend a Christmas Eve church service. Thank God for his gift of revealing himself to us through words.

Scripture:

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.”

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5 ESV)

(Christmas Day): Gifts

Today is the culmination of all your Advent preparation. Approach Christmas Day as you would prepare for the coming of an earthly King. Anticipate his arrival. Plan your day's activities. Feast and celebrate with the best foods, finest china, and most joyful music.

During your family devotion time or at your Christmas dinner, light all the candles in your Advent wreath, including the Christ candle—a special candle—in the center of the wreath.

SAMPLE MENU FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

Standing Rib Roast (Prime Rib)
Cheesy Potato Casserole *
Gingered Carrots *
Tossed Green Salad
Rolls
Coconut Cake
Japanese Fruit Pie *
Wine, Tea, Coffee

*Recipes on page 21.

Scripture: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5 ESV)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. (James 1:17 ESV)

Additional Resources

Reference Books

Bless This Food (<http://amzn.to/2gop7sR>, 1996, Cumberland House Publishing)

Julia M. Pitkin, Karen B. Grant, and George Grant

Christmas Spirit (2001, Gramercy Books; out of print but a great book if you happen to find it)

Gregory Wilbur and George Grant

Disciplines of a Godly Family (<http://amzn.to/2fwfIyE>, 2004, Crossway Books)

Kent and Barbara Hughes

Treasuring God in Our Traditions (<http://amzn.to/2fgDXWt>, 2003, Crossway Books)

Noel Piper

The Christian Almanac (<http://amzn.to/2fZY22u>, 2000, Cumberland House Publishing)

George Grant and Gregory Wilbur

The Family Worship Book: A Resource Book for Family Devotions (<http://amzn.to/2fz8xsS>, 2009, Christian Focus)

Terry L. Johnson

The Jesus Storybook Bible (<http://amzn.to/2gpnoaB>, 2007, Zonderkidz)

Sally Lloyd-Jones

(Note: These links are Amazon Affiliate links, and I will receive a small commission if you use my link to make a purchase.)

Recipes

Cheesy Potato Casserole

Ingredients:

1 large bag of frozen shredded hash brown potatoes
2 c. shredded cheddar cheese plus 1 cup
6 T. butter, divided
2 c. sour cream
½ c. chopped onions
1 t. salt
¼ t. pepper
Paprika

Preheat oven to 350 degrees and grease a 9x13 casserole dish. Allow frozen potatoes to thaw a bit before beginning to mix. Melt 4 T. of butter. Combine cheese, melted butter, sour cream, onion, salt and pepper. Add half cheese mixture to half of the thawed potatoes and stir well. Combine remaining cheese mixture and remaining potatoes. Pour into greased casserole. Dot with remaining butter and 1 cup shredded cheese. Sprinkle top with paprika. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes (cover top with foil if cheese on top browns too quickly). Serves 6-8.

Gingered Carrots

(adapted from *Bless This Food*)

Ingredients:

1½ lb. baby carrots
1/3 c. orange juice
¼ c. honey
2 T. butter
1 T. orange zest
1-2 T. ground ginger (or to taste)
Salt and pepper (to taste)

Combine all ingredients in a saucepan and add enough water to cover the carrots. Bring to a boil, cover, and simmer about 10 minutes until the carrots are tender. Uncover and allow liquids to cook down to a glaze. Serves 6.

Japanese Fruit Pie

Ingredients:

1 - 9 inch unbaked pie shell

2 eggs, beaten

1/3 c. melted butter

1 c. white sugar

1 t. vanilla extract

1 T. distilled white vinegar

½ c. chopped pecans

½ c. shredded coconut

½ c. raisins

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine eggs, butter, sugar, vanilla, and vinegar. Beat until smooth. Stir in pecans, coconut, and raisins. Pour into pie shell. Bake for 40 minutes.

Serves 8.

20 More Ideas for Fun and Unique Ways to Celebrate Advent With Your Family

1. Pack a shoebox (or several) with your kids for Operation Christmas Child (note: the deadline for this activity is usually mid-November, so plan early). See <http://samaritanspurse.org>.
2. As you set up your nativity set, don't place all the figurines all at once. Add them weekly as you talk about them during Advent, placing baby Jesus in the manger on Christmas Day.
3. Make each Friday night during Advent Christmas movie night. Choose the black and white classics. Discuss with the kids Christian themes (or lack thereof) in the movies.
4. Use fabric paints or markers to decorate pillowcases for Christmas. Each year, begin using the pillowcases on December 1.
5. Begin a new Christmas tradition. Each year, purchase one or two favorite Christmas-themed books for each child. Store them with your Christmas decorations and enjoy them together annually during Advent.
6. Make a Jesse Tree with the kids. The Internet abounds with instructions for this activity that takes the family through Jesus' ancestry (see Isaiah 11:1-9). This is a wonderful way to teach children about the shadows of Christ throughout the Old Testament.
7. Play "Secret Santa." Choose a few recipients (neighbors, fellow church members, etc.) and do something nice and helpful for them in secret. Maybe it's leaving an anonymous gift in their mailbox or sending an encouraging note. Look for ways you can love people.
8. Have a birthday party for Jesus. Bake a cake, send invitations, and decorate with red and green streamers.
9. Each Christmas Eve, read aloud the Christmas story from Luke 2:1-20 in the King James version. Work together to memorize the passage during Advent.
10. Do an Internet study of Christmas around the world. Pick a few different countries to celebrate and devote a day to their customs in your home.
11. Make an Advent coloring book using pages at this site: <http://dltk-bible.com/advent/index.htm>. Have the kids color the pages throughout Advent, then bind them for Christmas story books you can use each year in family worship.

12. Buy a set of inexpensive Christmas dishes and/or glasses and use them each year beginning on December 1.
13. Check your local newspapers and/or parenting magazine for free or inexpensive events that are age-appropriate for your kids. Some may include visiting a “living Nativity” scene, watching Christmas parades, or attending plays or musicals.
14. Play Christmas music throughout your home, in your car, and at family worship time.
15. Go Christmas caroling through your neighborhood. Gather your family and friends to walk door-to-door singing seasonal hymns and carols. Pray for your neighborhood and the families there as you walk and sing.
16. Attend a Lessons and Carols church service.
17. Have the kids decorate Christmas cards and wrapping paper with stamps or drawings.
18. Each year, purchase (or make) one ornament for each child. When the children leave home, they will take their ornaments with them for their own trees.
19. Collect all of the Christmas cards you received in one basket. Place the basket near your family worship space. During Advent, pray for one family each night. Keep the cards out and pray for the senders throughout the year.
20. On Christmas Eve, go to a church service. Depending on the time and the age of your children, attend a candlelight service.

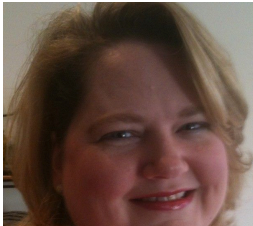
Sample Calendar for Activity Planning
November - December (begins with first Sunday of Advent)

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
First Sunday of Advent 27	Wreath 28	29	Holly and Berries 30	1	2	Christmas Tree 3
Second Sunday of Advent 4	5	Aroma and Fragrance 6	7	Music 8	9	Candlelight 10
Third Sunday of Advent 11	12	13	Snowflakes 14	15	16	Ornaments and Decorations Jammie Ride! 17
Fourth Sunday of Advent 18	19	Santa Claus (Father Christmas) 20	21	Stars 22	23	Christmas Eve 24
Christmas Day 25	26	27	28	29	30	31

Sample Order of a Family Advent Worship Time

1. Light the candle(s). We allow our kids to do this (when age-appropriate).
2. Sing a song.
3. Read the Bible verse/Bible story.
4. Ask the kids questions to engage them in the learning.
5. Sing a song.
6. Take prayer requests.
7. Close in prayer.

About the Author



Mary Bernard has been working vocationally and voluntarily in Christian education for more than twenty-five years. Much of her professional career has been spent writing and editing youth curriculum for Abingdon Press. Mary holds a master of education degree in curriculum and instruction and has also worked for many years as a marketing copywriter.

A busy mom of a teenaged girl and twin preteen boys, Mary currently writes content for some of the largest corporations in the world. In this role, she works with a Nashville-based company dedicated to helping businesses grow their franchise operations.

She's also a passionate advocate of natural solutions for families and in her role as a Young Living distributor, has helped hundreds of people discover the incredible benefits of God's precious gift of essential oils. Mary and her family live in a Nashville suburb with a dog and a cat. When she's not writing or oiling, she's probably at a band concert, at the soccer field, or trying to get caught up with the laundry.