

Your Best Ideas for Celebrating Advent

In the weeks leading up to Advent, we asked readers to submit their best ideas and practices for Advent...and as always, you responded generously! We've collected them here, along with photos (check out the gallery at the end of the article). Enjoy...and have a blessed Advent!

Prepare for Baby Jesus with Acts of Love

Many of our readers mark waiting for the birth of Jesus with service and acts of love and charity.

The Advent Conspiracy

We regularly recommends the [Advent Conspiracy](#), a nondenominational Christian movement to celebrate Advent fully, spend less, give more, and radically love others as Jesus did. They have a cute video and a book of stories of how the movement has had an impact.

Sparkle Box

Anna Scoglietti Schwindenhammer: "We use the book "[Sparkle Box](#)" to add good deeds throughout Advent to give to Jesus Christmas morning."

Works of Mercy Countdown Chain

Martianne Stanger and her family do a Works of Mercy Countdown Chain...basically, a paper chain where each link contains an idea for living the Works of Mercy:

Martianne Stanger from [Training Happy Hearts](#): “We make a ‘Christmas Countdown’ or ‘Works of Mercy’ chain to help us count the days of Advent. The children brainstorm acts of kindness and I type them out. Then, the week before Advent or the week of Advent, the kids use the list as copywork, creating the strips for our countdown chain. Once Advent begins, the kids take turns taking the links down and we act on them.”

Sacrifices as Yarn for Jesus’ Manger

Tiffany Ghigliotti has a crib that is lined piece-by-piece with straw (yarn). Her children “earn a piece of straw for each good deed or random act of kindness they do during Advent.”

Sara Estabrooks from [To Jesus, Sincerely](#) and her family also make sacrifices for baby Jesus. “We have a baby Jesus who stays in storage until Christmas and a wooden crib filled with straw that gets put out at the beginning of Advent. When the kids make a sacrifice, they get to put a nice soft piece of yarn in baby Jesus’ crib. Their sacrifices help make the crib comfy for baby Jesus because that will make him so happy when he’s born on Christmas! By the time Advent is over, the crib is usually piled high with their good deeds and sacrifices. ... Also, we make a game of looking for Christmas lights when we drive anywhere at night. We talk about how Jesus is the light of the world, and how the star lit the way for the wise men. We talk about how the lights bring joy and hope into the night, just like Jesus brought joy and hope into the world on Christmas!”

□ **Laura Sassaman Peratt**: “We light the week’s Advent candle(s) every night at dinner and say the verse that goes with it. We put up a few decorations every week, starting with stockings for St. Nicholas’ day and the Nativity scene (minus Jesus),

and ending with the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. We also give pieces of yellow yarn to the kids for doing their chores, helping each other, practicing good manners, being kind, etc., which they put in a manger. The idea is to fill the manger with as much straw as possible to make a soft bed for Baby Jesus, just as practicing virtues like kindness and obedience makes a place for Jesus in our hearts. On Christmas Eve after the kids have gone to bed, a doll representing Jesus is placed in the manger and the manger and Jesus are placed under the Christmas tree with the gifts, as a reminder that he is the greatest gift."

Writing Letters to Jesus

□**Kelly Whitman**□ and her children write letters to Jesus. "At the beginning of Advent we write letters to Jesus what we will gift him this year and focus on them all Advent, then on Christmas we reopen the letters and recall how we did and offer a birthday prayer up." For more information about this idea, click on the [Detail-Oriented DIVA](#).

Bake for Others

Heather Ercolani Hampton makes cinnamon rolls for friends and family who blessed them throughout the year.

Twists on Traditional Advent Wreaths and Calendars

Many of our contest participants use traditional symbols of Advent to help their families prepare for Christmas. And several added interactive elements to engage their children in service and anticipation.

Advent Angel



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Kelly Whitman replaces the Elf on a Shelf with an **Advent Angel**: “Our Advent Angel delivers mail each day with a message for the kids (family). Some days it is something to help them observe something like St Nicholas Day, Our Lady of Guadalupe, St Lucy, etc. Or something to do for others focusing on the Works of Mercy, or a way to reflect as a family like reading a Bible story or printing out song lyrics to a Christmas song as a quiet prayer time around candlelight before bed. It is a beautiful and creative way to incorporate many Advent traditions without it feeling overwhelming because it is all orchestrated by the Advent Angel, so it feels consistent to the kids. Last year one of the favorite activities was when the Advent Angel left little paper books for each of the kids to write kind notes to each sibling to give as gifts on Christmas. On Christmas day the Advent Angel will gift something special to help extend Christmas through to Epiphany, last year was this book and a statue of the baby Jesus ” Kelly gets ideas for the Advent Angel to suggest [here](#) and [here](#).

Tori King does something similar: “One of my friends started doing Kindness Elves as an alternative to Elf on the Shelf (the elves leave an idea of something kind to do for someone else and the materials needed to do it each morning), and I

adapted this idea to use as our Advent calendar, incorporating feast days. For St. Nicholas' Day, each child is asked to find three old toys in good condition to give away for children in need. On other days, we will take treats to community helpers (library, police and fire departments, parish office, doctor's office) and school supplies to schools."

Advent Countdown Chain

Lisa Neumeyer: "After Thanksgiving dinner, we create an Advent chain. We remove one link each day, do the kindness /prayerful activity until Christmas Eve when the final link reminds us to sing Happy Birthday to Baby Jesus. (I prepare all the links ahead of time and pack enough materials to create the individual chains into a gallon zip lock bag.) Depending on the age of the children participating, we have had very simple tasks: Listen to a Christmas Story, watch a holiday movie with your sibling. Or, find Jerusalem on the map, name 3 animals in the stable where Jesus was born. This has been a huge hit ever since my son created the first one in PSR more than 20 years ago."

Advent Spiral

Crystal Gordon: We do a Jesse Tree and the Giving Manger and an Advent spiral instead of a wreath. I made the Mary out of salt dough and she travels the spiral.

Advent Calendars

Brian Smith: "We bought [this Advent calendar](#) a couple years ago. The kids love seeing the Nativity scene develop a bit more each day." Each day our girls get a piece of the manger to add on. And with it, they get a slip of paper with a

project for them to complete. The projects are typically focused on works of mercy. For example:

- Make a card for someone in the children's hospital
- Bring flowers to a nursing home and say hello to someone
- Clean up trash in your neighborhood
- Learn a new prayer
- Say 'thank you' to people in your community (pastoral staff, librarians, mail carrier, etc. We usually make a treat for them too)
- Bring food to the food pantry (bring them to the store to pick stuff out)
- Buy presents for someone in need (Toys for Tots, Salvation Army)

... We started doing this when our oldest was almost 4. You can tone it down to the specific age. Last year our 1 year old put stickers on cards, for example."

Michelle Cochran: "Last year we used this black and white Advent calendar. Each day the kids took turns filling in a space and saying who they'd like to pray for that day, then we all prayed for those people together."

Advent Wreath Prayer Service

Heather Turner and **Jeanie Egolf** among others said their families read the Bible and said special prayers and readings with their families each day near a lit Advent wreath. When **Angela Snyder** and her family light their Advent candles, they sing their favorite seasonal hymns.

Kelly Whitman shared with us a fabric [Advent wreath that is safe for small children!](#)

Jesse Tree

Gretchen Wagner Miller shared this Jesse tree magnet set; her kids loved putting up a new magnet every day, then hearing the story that goes with it.

Laura Theresa: “We do the Jesse tree. Holy Heroes has a DVD, and online videos, to make it super easy. I also bought ornaments from [Jesse Tree Treasures](#), which are beautiful and came with a matching book. Sure, you can make them, but crafts and I are not friends, and this was easy. It takes us maybe two minutes to read the page each evening, and the kids love it. ... Typically, if we get the tree up early, we’ll only put the Jesse tree ornaments on, and wait to decorate it with the other ornaments later. Also, a friend just gave me the idea of using purple and pink ribbon to decorate the tree for Advent, switching to the ornaments on Christmas Eve.”

□**Sara Estabrooks:**□ “We love our Jesse tree! You put one ornament on the tree each day from Dec. 1 until Christmas. My oldest knows how to read, so he can read the daily prayers and reflections to the rest of the family. It’s been one of my favorite traditions since as long as I can remember! Now I’m excited to share it with my kids, who love it with all the enthusiasm.” You can purchase a tree from [Sara Estabrooks on Etsy](#).

Hold off on the Silver and Gold, and decorate for Advent with Purples and more



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Several of our readers, including **Kelly Whitman** and **Tracy Bua Smith** of [A Slice of Smith Life](#), decorate their homes and Christmas trees in shades of purple. Readers also wait to decorate their Christmas tree until Christmas Eve to give the season of Advent its own time to shine. Many, including **Melissa Koempel**, **Stacy Pfeifer**, **Martianne Stanger**, **Sara Estabrooks** and **Laura Theresa** decorate their Jesse trees.

Keeping Decorations Low Key

Carol Smith: “We decorate slowly around the house. We don’t turn the lights on our tree and outside of our house until St. Lucy’s feast day. Also on that day we get hot chocolate and drive around looking at Christmas lights.”

Kelly Whitman: “We put up a skinny ‘pencil’ tree in our dining room and as part of our dinner time prayer we incorporate our Jesse tree reading/ornament. In our family room, we light a tree through Advent and only add Christmas ornaments after we have gone to Christmas Mass.”

Jaime Lynn: “Last year we started the full-size Advent tree complete with purple tree skirt/ornaments (changes to pink on third week). And we add our Jesse tree ornaments each day. On Christmas Eve it transforms to our traditional Christmas tree and decor. Love this new tradition (and very low cost!).”



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Heidi Indahl extends the “mellow Advent” concept to holiday baking: “My go to Advent tradition is slow prep: We only choose 4 treats/year. Each Sunday of Advent gets one baking project which we do as a family and then we eat just a small sample each and the rest go in the freezer bagged up with “events” such as Christmas Eve after mass or Indahl Family Christmas party. When it’s time for those events I have a ready-made treat tray in the freezer.”

Heather Turner: “We decorate our tree with plain lights, purple ribbon and the star during Advent, and switch it to (its) Christmas finest on Christmas Day.”

Jeanie Egolf makes sure her family wears purple or rose on the appropriate Sundays of Advent.

Liz Lang Boring: “We came up with a plan to stagger the decorating of our tree. On the first Sunday of Advent, we go out as a family and cut down our tree. On the second Sunday of Advent, we put the tree up in the house and bless it as a family. On the feast of St. Lucy (which usually falls between the second and third Sundays), we put the lights on the tree (Lucia means light!). On the third Sunday of Advent, we put the star on the tree. On the fourth Sunday of Advent, we decorate the tree. This creates a sense of anticipation, building to the joy of Christmas. It helps to keep our hearts and home in a state of preparation until the time for celebration!”

Kim Priaulx: “To promote the waiting in anticipation during Advent, each week I add some new decorations to the house. I might have the Christmas tree in the living room one week, then add lights, next ornaments, etc, so the excitement builds until Christmas. This can be done with any decorations you have around the house. I also gather up as many Christmas children’s books as I can, and either wrap them, or place them in a basket under the tree, to read a new one each day with the kids.”

Lori Ann Bulleigh: “We have both purple and white lights on our Christmas tree. We have just the purple ones on until Christmas Eve, and then turn on just the white lights for the 12 days of Christmas.”

Set up the Nativity Set ... Slowly



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Hannah Yount Swoboda: “We take out our Nativity and put out just the stable and animals. The children earn straw for Jesus’ bed with sacrifices (cut up yarn) throughout Advent. Christmas Eve, Joseph and Mary show up with the manger. Jesus shows up after Christmas Eve Mass with shepherds/angels. Wise Men come on their day.”

Martianne Stanger: “Our Wise Men figurines combine with picture books and works of mercy for a daily dose of together

time reading, service and fun. ... Throughout the rest of Advent, my children discovered our works of mercy Wise Men in different vignettes, and, then, after reading whatever book the Wise Men were on or near, they 'chatted' with the Wise Men about suggestions for a work of mercy (or simple kindness) we could offer."

Stacy Pfeifer uses the "[Christmas Star From Afar](#)." "The three Wise Men follow the star around your house, and there is a book and Nativity scene with it!"

Books and Movies

Many of our readers' contributions focused on their favorite Advent and Christmas books. Here are their ideas.

Angela Snyder: "Stories, stories, stories...in Advent we do extra lap reading with the kids and recall all sorts of preparation stories and especially, our story from Scripture, all the promises and covenants and moments leading up to the fullness of time, when God sent his Son."

A Book a Day

Tori King "We have "25 days of books." I wrap up 24 old books (some borrowed from the library and in a distinctive wrap that reminds me to open them first) and 1 new book of a variety of themes including religious Christmas, secular Christmas, and winter." The books get unwrapped throughout Advent.

Liz Lang Boring: "I try to come up with a theme for each week of Advent, as well as choosing books for specific feast days in Advent. Each year the books are different! Our weekly themes for this year are St. Nicholas, Sweets and Treats, and Christmas Legends. Here's my book plan for this Advent: I started wrapping this week and have my list for the ones we need to get from the library. Doing Advent books this way builds anticipation throughout the season. The kids eagerly

await the chance to unwrap a book, hoping it's one of their favorites or maybe even a brand new story."

Sara Weiskopf: "The kids get a book each morning of Advent to open and we read them together. I have purchased several over the years, but also check out several from the library. They are mostly about the true meaning of Christmas, but I do occasionally include a few 'just for fun' books. I got this idea from a FB post a few years back. We all enjoy it!"

Tracy Bua Smith has an [Advent book review and daily read-alouds](#) that she shares on A Slice of Smith Life.

Recommendations

Carol Smith recommends a book called "[Welcome Baby Jesus: Advent and Christmas Reflections for Families](#)" by Sarah Reinhard (Ligouri).

Kelly Whitman re-watches [this video by Busted Halo](#) and subscribes to the [Best Advent Ever from Dynamic Catholic](#). And **Angela Snyder** might print [some of these books](#) for her older children.

Martianne Stanger and her family read "[Jotham's Journey](#)." Here is a list from Training Happy Hears of her [top 10 book-inspired activities for Advent](#).

Theresa PM of [My Catholic Kids](#) said: "Our son was born on the first Sunday of Advent, so my husband and I wrote a book 'Bible Characters for Advent!' Our book is written for young children, and has an imprimatur so it is authentically Catholic! It works perfect for a Jesse tree! This year we created a [magnetic Jesse tree set](#)."

☐**Kelly Whitman**☐ offered several of her favorites:

- ["24 Christmas Stories for Little Ones"](#)

- [“Prayers Around the Crib”](#)
- [“What Is Christmas?”](#)
- [“The Story of Christmas”](#)
- [“Christmas Blessings”](#)
- [“My Merry Christmas and the Real Reason for Christmas Joy”](#)
- [“Merry Christmas”](#)
- [“A Walk One Winter Night: A Christmas Story”](#)

Kelly Whitman also does [Advent Adventure](#) from Holy Heroes: “We usually bring a laptop to the breakfast table and let the day open with Advent Reflections. Easy to do, and a positive start to the day before rushing to the bus.”

Heather Ercolani Hampton reads [“Bambinelli Sunday,”](#) a book about a little boy and his grandfather and the ceremony of blessing baby Jesus figurines, on Gaudete Sunday.

Celebrate the Feast Days of Advent

Advent is full of feasts days to help celebrate the season. Nov. 30 is the feast of St. Andrew (which sometimes falls in Advent, but this year does not), Dec. 6 is the feast of St. Nicholas, Dec. 8 is the Immaculate Conception, Dec. 12 is Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Dec. 13 is the feast of St. Lucy.

Gabriel Dentler and **Heather Ercolani Hampton** pray the [0 Antiphons](#).

Gabriel Dentler said, “My children and I observe the Golden Nights and make pictures of the days 0 Antiphon that we post on the wall!”

Nicole Love: “St. Nicholas is a favorite. The kids get a new book to help wait for Christmas and three gold dollars, have a hot cocoa treat, and choose our “secret Santas” for that

Christmas. The idea is to do secret good deeds for the person they get, and then we exchange small gifts Christmas Eve to reveal who had who. My kids love it.”

Kelly Whitman: “Christmas is Jesus’ birthday only in our home, no Santa, but we celebrate [St. Nicholas’ day instead.](#)”

Tiffany Ghigliotti: “We make a huge special dinner on the feast day of St. Nicholas and invite company over with us to share in the joy of preparing for Christ.”

Amy Lynn Loomis puts out her children’s shoes to be filled with treats for the feast of St. Nicholas, and she lights voice candles in her windows for the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

Martianne Stanger: “Ever since the year we had a St. Nicholas playdate, we’ve dropped St Nicholas baskets at neighbor’s homes secretly.”

Crystal Gordon recommends praying the [St. Andrew novena](#).

Heather Ercolani Hampton: “Leaving our shoes out for St. Nicholas. He fills them with fruit, chocolate coins and a special book. He brings us full-sized fruit for our large family to enjoy on Dec. 6.” She also celebrates the feast of St. Lucy with pretty-dressed dolls, books and cinnamon rolls, and prays the St. Andrew Novena.

Tracy Bua Smith and **Linda Hoffman Hoepfner** drive around looking at Christmas lights on the feast of St. Lucy. Her name, of course, means light!