

Growing Spiritually During Advent and Christmas

Consider this: Advent and Christmas offer extraordinary opportunities for spiritual growth. Question: Will you grow spiritually this year during Advent and Christmas?

The commercial “holiday season” begins in November and, then, comes to a crashing halt on December 25. In contrast, those who keep (observe) Advent and Christmas begin in December and continue through January 6th. This little booklet offers a look at some of the spiritual disciplines that have helped Christians grow in faith and knowledge during this holy time.

About Advent

We *need* Advent. Without it we stop being what we are - a people who are waiting. We need the gospel’s terrifying announcement of the end of time. We need the prophets’ consolations and threats, We learn who we are in the uneasy raving of John the Baptist,, the gentle strength of Mary, and the dreams of Joseph.

And, we *need* Christmastide. We need a festival that runs beyond a single day, beyond a single week. We need time to tell about the journey of the magi, the embrace of old Simeon, about the babbling of the water made wine, and the leaping Jordan and that glorious voice we yearn to hear: “ You are my beloved child!”

In the many days of Christmas, we shout loud and clear that Jesus Christ is born. The reign of God is here among us, in our own flesh and blood. That is why we gather around the star-topped tree of life, and decorate our homes, and spread our tables with the bounty of the harvest. The marvels of Christmas are sign of God’s reign, signs of a life that conquers death, of

“light shining on in darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it.” (John. 1:5).

Of course, Advent cannot exist if we jump the gun on Christmas, And, Christmas cannot exist if we are already tired of it by December 25. These two season require each other. Only after the silence of Advent can the carols of Christmastide spring. only after Advent’s darkness can a single star give so much cheer. Only after Advent’s terror can an angel be heard, once again, telling us to fear not. Year after year, we so genuinely need these seasons as rehearsal for heaven.

Advent and Christmas do so much more than lead us from one year to another. In the power of Christ, Advent and Christmas tide, lead form time into eternity.

Here are some spiritual disciplines associated with keeping Advent and Christmas

- * Advent Table prayers and candle-lighting before supper or bed.
- * Advent Wreath
- * Celebrate the Feast of St. Nicholas
- * Plan for a Simpler Christmas .
- * Keep the Twelve Days of Christmas

Advent Table or Candlelighting Prayers

At supper or before bed, a candle may be lit. An advent wreath may be used.

Leader: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!

All: Maranatha! Come quickly!

Leader:

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation.
in the darkness and in the light.

Blessed are you
in this food and in our sharing.

Blessed are you as we wait in joyful hope
for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

All

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.

An Advent Wreath

An Advent wreath is a simple circle of greenery with four or five candles. Some traditions use purple or dark blue candles. The candle for the third week may be pink if desired. A white candle may be placed and lit in the center of the wreath beginning on Christmas Eve. Some replace the purple candles with white beginning on Christmas Eve and continue celebrating all the way to the Feast of the Epiphany.

We may have daily or weekly Advent worship at home or at church, lighting one candle on the first Sunday of Advent with an additional candle lit each week. You may wish to use a theme for the candles. Some themes utilized in the past have included love, joy, hope, and peace or light, faith, truth, and grace. Another plan might be for the candles to symbolize the prophets, Mary and Joseph, the angels, and the shepherds. Plan worship that will have meaning for the participants. Here is a simple service:

Light the Candle(s)

Gather (all say):

Advent: Our King and Savior draws near: Come let us adore him.

Christmas: Alleluia. To us a child is born: Come let us adore him. Alleluia

Epiphany: The Lord has shown forth his glory: Come let us adore him.

Read Scripture:

First Week in Advent: Isaiah 11:1-10
Second Week in Advent : Isaiah 40:1-11
Third Week in Advent: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7
Fourth Week in Advent: Luke 1:26-35
Christmas Eve and Day: Luke 2:1-120
First Sunday of Christmas: John 1:1-18
Second Sunday of Christmas: Jeremiah 31:7-14
The Epiphany (Jan. 6): Matthew 1:1-12

Pray

The Lord's Prayer
Collect of the Day (Prayer Book 159-162)
Other Prayers if Desired

Conclude (All)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. AMEN.

Celebrate the Feast of St. Nicholas (Dec. 6)

St. Nicholas of Myra was a bishop who lived in the fourth century in what is modern day Turkey. He is the inspiration for the figure we know as Santa Claus. You can hear his name if you think of Santa as a form of the word "Saint" and Claus as a shortened version of Ni-claus or "Nicholas". He was legendary for his love for the poor, for children and for sailors. At our house, we put our shoes by our bedroom doors on the night of Dec. 5th. St. Nicholas often visits and leaves a piece of candy or other small treat. We also talk about giving in the spirit of

St. Nicholas as a way of helping children make the transition between a secular Santa Claus and the genuine article – St. Nicholas. For more information and St. Nicholas customs around the world, visit this website <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/>

Plan for a Simpler Christmas

Our “commercial Christmas” is all about shopping and buying. Wouldn’t it be less anxious and more-Christ-honoring to change our focus from gifts to people? Think about paring down your gift list. If there are people you really want to remember with a gift, then consider an alternative – a gift to their favorite charity or a good cause you know about. If children will be receiving presents, help them make room for their new gifts by clearing out unused, good-quality toys so that they may donate them. Remember the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the sick, and those in prison. On the web, visit simpleliving.org to explore Christ-centered Christmas alternatives. Consider the following:

- * Which receives the most attention in your household at Christmas: the “advent” of Santa Claus or Jesus Christ?
- * Do you feel pressured at Christmas – by the media, friends, relatives – to do things and spend in ways that do not honor the birth of Christ?
- * Are you comfortable with the gift-giving patterns of your family? Does your spending reflect your Christian faith?
- * The Gospels say that Christ’s coming was “good news to the poor”. Are your celebrations of his coming also “good news to the poor”?
- * Santa is supposed to bring gifts to those who are good and not to those who are bad. What do you think this says to children who are too poor to get Christmas presents?

- * Three-fourths of advertising budgets are spent in the last quarter of the year. Does this affect the way you celebrate Christmas?
- * Is the environment better or worse because of the way you celebrate Christmas?
- * When the bills came in last January and February did you wish you had spent less?
- * At the conclusion of last year's celebrations did you wish your Christmas had more in keeping with your faith and values? How can you resist the commercialization of Christmas this year?

Keeping the Twelve Days of Christmas

How strange and hopeful it is to cry NOEL in the heart of the winter darkness. "So we banish the long nights with firelight and candles. We defy the winter by festooning summer's green from our rafters. We spread our tables with the abundance of the harvest, all signs of God's graciousness, signs of the bounty of heaven itself. We gather around the sparkling tree of life and declare this place, no matter how humble, to be paradise. We celebrate a birth, not a birthday. Christmas is not Jesus' birthday, It is not an anniversary of something that happened long ago. Christmas is the celebration of Christ, now, *hodie*, today. The word for "today" is a key for entering into the mystery of Christmastide, for if Christ is born today that mean we can see and touch and hold Christ. It also means we must feed and clothe and protect Christ, now, *hodie*, today. One of the hallmarks of genuine Christian celebration is this combination of tremendous comfort and joy with tremendous challenge. No wonder it takes so many days to keep Christmastide! And no wonder we keep Christmastide by

renewing our efforts to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, and to bring together neighbors and strangers alike to share in the feast of Christ. Today Christ is born. NOEL! *Hodie Christus natus est. Noel!* “

The Twelve Day of Christmas are a great time for continuing the celebration. Try saving some gifts for these days. Keep your decorations up. Play and sing Christmas carols. Invite friends over for Christmas cookies. Be counter-cultural. Celebrate with gusto!

Dec. 26 – St. Stephen, deacon and first martyr. Take food to a shelter. Help the poor in some concrete way today.

Dec. 27 – St. John, apostle and evangelist. Celebrate God’s love. “Love one another” was John’s constant sermon. Toast those named John or Joanna.

Dec. 28- Holy Innocents. Turn off Christmas lights for today and remember Herod’s innocent victims as well as all innocent victims in our own time.

Dec. 29 – The Prince of Peace. Pray for peace today. Mend a quarrel or write a letter to elected officials.

Dec. 30 – Anna and Simeon – These were two senior citizens who welcomed the baby Jesus to the Temple. Visit or phone some older people in your life today.

Dec. 31 – Sylvester, 4th c. saint. New Year’s Eve. Sometimes known as “Father Time”. Have a party, blow horns, tell some favorite stories.

Jan 1. – The Holy Name of Jesus. Eight days after Jesus was born, his parents named him. Meditate today on the many names of Jesus Christ.

Jan.2 – Basil and Gregory – 4th c. bishops and teachers. Remember to move your kings closer today.

Jan. 3 – Praise to God! Listen to Handel’s *Messiah!*

Jan. 4- Elizabeth Ann Seton – was a teacher who started one of the first Sunday School in the US. On this day give thanks for our teachers – past and present.

Jan 5 – God is love! Give hugs to all today!

Jan 6- Epiphany – This word means “to show forth” or revelation. Celebrate the many ways Jesus is revealed – to the Magi, to us. The star is the great symbol of Epiphany so do some star gazing tonight while wearing a crown.

May you all have a blessed Advent and Holy Christmastide!



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