

In Home Faith Ideas for Advent & Christmas

by Olivia Bryan Updegrave



Current studies all show that faith is taught and lived out through what children experience in the home more than any place else. Since many families are not quite sure how to engage in biblical and worshipful ways in the home, I thought Advent would be a good time to give some fun suggestions.

Try the ones you like and explore the different categories below: **Teaching the Biblical Stories, Worship in the Home, Mission and Outreach,** and **Beyond the Holiday Season.**

Teaching the Biblical Stories

Nativity Set

I start with the Nativity Set because it is one of the best tools and one of the most misused. It still amazes me as I walk through stores the many sets that show a beautiful “white” Jesus surrounded by “mostly white” shepherds, magi, and angels. I encourage families to learn the correct story. The magi did not arrive to see Jesus until he was a toddler, and Jesus wasn’t white.

I encourage families to at least talk about the images and if shopping, look for representations that are more accurate or at least open a better conversation. Here are some thoughts:



1. Advent Calendar

As you prepare your 25 day countdown, use one of your nativity sets as part of the countdown. Wrap the different pieces and each day have your child unwrap each piece and talk about how the story came together. If you don’t have 25 pieces, fill in some days with extra parts of the story like John the Baptist and his family.

2. Hide and Seek Jesus

Some people have LOTS of nativity sets. Take the baby Jesus from all the sets and wrap them, or hide them, and then work to make sure Jesus makes it to the manger.

3. Play with the Nativity

Most families have that “sacred” nativity set, but if we want children to feel engaged in the story, then find a set for them to play with throughout the season.

Fisher-Price has a set that is a bunch of kids dressed up as the characters. You can use a set that isn’t as breakable or valuable that is already in your collection, etc. Encourage older kids to set up a nativity in their room so they see it as theirs and important to them.

Check Out: www.worshipwoodworks.com for a wood set under \$35 dollars or a felt set for under \$25.

We are in the season of Advent, not Christmas. Christmas does not start until December 25th. It lasts for 12 days. It goes until Epiphany. Epiphany is when most churches celebrate the coming of the magi. For suggestions of what to do during Christmas with those magi, keep reading to the end of this resource.

Family Tree

The birth of Jesus is not just about Jesus, but also about the people who came before Jesus.

Create a family tree with your kids. This helps them learn about where they come from and what a gift each child can be to the world. Taking time to learn some of the people on Jesus' family tree (Rahab, Ruth, Jesse, David, Elizabeth, etc.) helps us learn more about the Bible and understand more about Jesus.

(Please note that Jesus' family tree is not the same everywhere you look in the Bible. As an adult, please feel free to learn more about this at some point. As a parent with children, I encourage you to just stick to the basics.)

Magna Doodle

Kids love to draw. Use a Magna Doodle, Aqua Doodle, or plain piece of paper, and have them draw the different pictures of the Christmas story. You can also do this with other stories from the Bible throughout the year. If your kid doesn't have a Magna Doodle, there is always sidewalk chalk when it is warm, dry erase boards, Play-Doh, and more! Help your kids engage with the story on multiple levels.

Read the Bible, Watch Videos, and Decorate

Bible: Read it with your kids at bedtime. Suggestions:

- [Baby's Tiny Bible and Prayers: Mini Boxed Set](#) by Sarah Toulmin
- [Children of God Storybook Bible](#) by Archbishop Desmond Tutu
- [Spark Story Bible](#) by Augsburg Fortress Press

If you are looking for a "real" Bible for kids/teens, I like the [Deep Blue Kids Bible](#).

Videos: Watch a Bible Story video each day. We have begun collecting suggestions on our [Bible Stories YouTube Playlist](#). The [Holy Moly](#) curriculum from Spark House is also a great resource for Bible Story videos and includes a unit on [Advent & Christmas](#). If you know of other theologically sound videos of Bible stories, please let us know. Not all resources are perfect, but no matter what I have access to, I do find it important to engage my child in some form of Bible television. If I am spending hours' watching shows about Mickey and Elmo, I want my kid to know about Jesus, too.

Decorate: Find a space in your home to decorate with a special item that represents your faith. Make that item be changeable so that it creates conversation. Maybe you change the Bible verse displayed on your "to-do list." Maybe you set out a more personal item that represents faith to you. Be intentional

about the fact that your child needs to see images as well as hear about his or her faith once the nativity set is gone.

The Twelve Days of Christmas

Christmas actually begins (not ends) on December 25th. I have found that the 12 days of Christmas are much needed time with my family to focus on the Christmas story and spend time really reflecting and enjoying the downtime. I hope you find ways to make the 12 days of Christmas sacred to your family as well.

1. **Hide those Magi.** Christians celebrate the arrival of the magi on Epiphany on January 6th. Some people and congregations like to put the Magi far away from Jesus and move them each day closer and closer.
2. **Read Jesus' birth story.** I read the birth of Jesus story every night to my son during the 12 days of Christmas. We sit together as a family and do this.
3. **Sing!** This is when you are *really* supposed to sing Christmas songs, so play those Christmas hymns in the car loud and proud even after New Year's.
4. **Make way for the Christ child to be in your lives.** Help your kids and family sort through stuff that they do not need anymore, but may help someone else. Remember the time of gift giving is still at hand as we celebrate the three gifts brought by the magi. As your family gained new items, help your family let go of other items.
5. **You can also use some of the Advent suggestions from above during this time in a different way.**

Worship in the Home

Holiday Season: Celebrate Hanukkah

Just in case you missed it, Jesus was Jewish. He studied Jewish laws and ways. He knew the stories found in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the stories that also are part of the Jewish faith such as the Talmud. The Talmud is filled with wisdom from Jewish leaders. To understand Jesus and his faith, we must continue to learn about his faith tradition. (Actually, to be a better person of faith, it is important to try to learn about all faiths, but that is a topic for another day.)



The story of Hanukkah is a part of the Christian tradition. It is part of the stories and celebrations that were part of Jesus' life. Just as we celebrate the light of God in the Advent Wreath, we celebrate the light of God throughout Hanukkah. What is important is taking some time to learn about this powerful story that is still celebrated by those who are Jewish and is still a part of our Christian tradition. You don't need to be an expert. You just need to be willing to learn a little something.

Keep it simple as you start:

1. **If you know nothing about Hanukkah, start at the beginning.** Read about Hanukkah on [Wikipedia](#) or ask someone you know who practices Judaism to help you learn. Each day add a new detail to what you know and share it with your family. The website, [Activity Village](#), is also a good starting point and has activities for your family.
2. **Talk about God's light** and the ways that it shines and lasts.
3. **If you have a good Jewish friend**, ask if they will let your family participate one evening in their traditions or find a time to get together with your whole family and talk about Hanukkah.
4. **Read a children's story about Hanukkah.** Learn along with your kids.
5. **When you say your prayers as a family, continue to lift up that Jesus came for us all to find ways to love one another.** Pray for those in conflict over religion. (Find ways that work for the age of your children and their understanding level.)

Advent Wreath

I love Advent wreaths. My favorites are not the wreaths in church, but the creative ones that are outside of church. There was a home on a hill near where I once lived, and each year as I walked the dogs the large outdoor "candles" would light up each week. The Advent wreath represents hope, peace, joy, love, and Christ.



Place an Advent Wreath in your home. Here are some tips and ideas for choosing and using your Advent wreath:

- Fire is still dangerous for small children, but there are other options: wreaths, coloring activities, or battery operated candles.
- Talk about each of the candles at mealtimes and prayers times. Take time to talk about hope, peace, joy, love, and Jesus Christ.
- Focus on one candle each week and write down your family's thoughts. Use those little pieces of paper and put them in an ornament to hang on the tree. This way your tree represents the faith journey of your family.

Elf on a Shelf

I must admit I continue to struggle with things like "Elf on a Shelf" and even dear old Mr. Claus when it comes to Christmas and faith formation. Just like all pop culture, however, you can either ignore it or embrace it. If you are an "Elf on the Shelf" person, here are some ways to help that elf follow Jesus.

1. **The elf hangs out with different nativity characters.**
2. **The elf has a Bible verse to share each day or has the Bible open to a different verse.**
3. **The elf may be "watching" you for Santa, but loves you no matter what – like God.**
4. **Pray or teach the elf to pray.**

Christmas Card Prayers

When receiving a Christmas card, wait to open it until your family is gathered together. When you open it, your family takes time to pray for those who sent you the card.

What Would Jesus Want for Christmas?

This is a pretty simple idea. Basically, have the kids make a list of what Jesus would want for Christmas. If you are a Santa family, you may want to send it his direction. As your kids make a list, help them talk about ways to help fulfill the list.

Examples:

- (1) Milk – because Jesus is a baby. Buy milk for other babies who may need it.
- (2) Love – because Jesus taught us about love. Give an extra hug to everyone on Christmas.

Prayer Labyrinth (GIFT IDEA!)

I was given a wonderful finger labyrinth in my last church. The *very* basic explanation of a labyrinth is that it is a meditative and movable way to be in God's presence.

The small labyrinth I have is used with my son when we pray together. Sometimes I guide his finger, and sometimes I let him do his own thing. Sometimes we are silent and sometimes we pray for people and give thanksgivings. If you are looking for a way to pray with your child that isn't, "Heads down, hands together," I encourage you to buy one of these. You can also use it on your own. Check it out at [Tomorrows Treasures Specialty Woodworking](#).

Where Did You See God Today?

We ask our kids all kinds of questions, "How was school? Where's your homework? What do you want for dinner?" **One of the most important questions to ask our kids and ourselves is, "Where did you see God today?"** If we really want our kids to live entire lives of faith, then we need to give them the tools to not just seek God when things are bad, but to seek and find God in the everyday.

Go to Church

The concept of going to church makes sense. The ability to find ways to bring what happened in church back into the home seems a lot more difficult in our busy lives. This idea is not just about going to church, but reinforcing what happens during church at home.

1. **Reread the scripture.** You can read it at dinner, bedtime, or have a child read it in the car on the way to school.
2. **Talk about the sermon or children's sermon.**
3. **Find coloring pictures** that go along with this week's message or take home an extra copy of the children's bulletin to do together.
4. **Talk about what happened at church in each family member's separate classes.**

5. **Reread the lyrics** from the songs sung in worship.
6. **Lift up the prayer concerns** that were mentioned or written down at church.

Mission and Outreach

Alternative Advent Calendar with Food



Count the days of Advent by collecting food donations.

This idea could be done a couple different ways. If your kids are older, have them go to the grocery and buy 25 different food items that could be donated to a local food bank. Then have them wrap them, but don't let them know which item is which. (If your kids are younger, buy the food on your own).

When you unwrap them each day, talk about that item, what is healthy about the item, what scripture might go with it, where did the food come from, how did Jesus get food, why some people don't have food, etc.

There are lots of ways to use this act of service, and counting down, to really help kids prepare for Jesus and what his message really meant. This could also be done during Lent when many food banks are struggling more for food than the winter holidays.

Church World Service and Fair Trade Gifts (GIFT IDEA!)

When working in a church the last few years, I gave my youth and kids gifts from [Church World Service](#). Each year I would decorate my office window with the kids' names on whatever item I bought that year from Church World Service. (Examples: trees, bees, chickens, water, and tools)

The reality is that most of the people I know are very privileged. Most of us get our needs met. Many in the world do not. It is important to teach our kids about giving to others. Church World Service is one way to do that. Have your kid look and find some items to share. Buy small toys or gifts to represent those items to your child throughout the year. As a family you may want to buy something together to give. So check it out... www.cwsglobal.org.

If you are looking for gifts and don't know what to buy someone, check out Fair Trade websites and stores. Fair trade gifts help to fairly sustain those in undeveloped countries. [Ten Thousand Villages](#) is one option. Order online or find a store in your area.

Doggie Treats

Instead of making Christmas cookies, make Christmas Dog Cookies. Then take them to your local dog shelter (be prepared for those cute doggies). If you do not have a shelter nearby share them with the pets in your neighborhood.

Thank You Cards

The act of being thankful is important. Many families lift up their “thanks” at Thanksgiving. At the same time, being thankful takes practice. You may not get your kids to write “Thank You” cards for each gift, but you may be able to help them write a card to Jesus, God, or even Santa for the gifts they received. This includes teaching them to give thanks beyond the items that came in boxes or envelopes. Keep these letters and show them to your child when they are older to help them see how they have grown in their faith practice of thankfulness.

Beyond the Holiday Season

These ideas can be done both during the Advent & Christmas season and continued throughout the year.

Bible Verses in Books

Many families spend each evening reading books to their kids before bedtime. Write down a Bible verse that goes with the story, and read the verse each time you read the book. The internet can help you find verses that fit with different books ([Storypath](#) is a great place to start). I suggest using the New Revised Standard Version for most verses.



Upper Room – Pockets and Vibrant Faith (GIFT IDEA!)

I love giving magazines to families and kids. They keep coming all year and can be thrown away (recycled) when no longer needed. Upper Room has a magazine for families called [Pockets](#). It is a great gift idea because it will help your family find ways to engage in faith all year. Even if you don’t need it as a gift, check out the website. There are questions and ideas for each month.

[Vibrant Faith @ Home](#) is another wonderful online site for families and children of faith.

Quality Time (GIFT IDEA!)

Sometimes the best gift you can give at Christmas is *time* beyond Christmas. Sometimes that *time* can be spent as a family, one on one, or even as larger group.

Do you know a child in your church who can’t seem to afford church camp? Do you need to make sure that you have a “girls’ day” with your daughter or date night with your significant other?

Sometimes the best gift a box can hold is a note that offers the gift of time. Give *time* for fellowship, time for worship, time to travel, and time to rest. All of these are important faithful practices and true gifts, and you don’t have to go to the mall to find them.

Dollar Tree Trivia (STOCKING STUFFERS!)

My favorite stores for “Bible stuff” are not the family Christian stores. I LOVE the Dollar Tree, and Parent-Teacher stores. I love the Parent-Teacher stores because they usually offer more theologically sound items without making you feel overwhelmed. They have posters, games, and more that involve Christianity.

The Dollar Tree many times has “Jonah, Go Fish,” “Trivia Cards,” and coloring books – and they are A DOLLAR! These may not always be the most theologically sound images, but I am a sucker for a good deal and place to at least start. The back of the flashcards tell parents the information, so parents can learn with their kids.

Crafts (GIFT IDEA!)

Take time to do crafts with your kids that are from the stories of your faith. (Sometime even the stories of other people’s faith for important learning.) A child does not just do crafts at school or at church. Children love to create at home with their families. It is quality and learning time. Check out our [Pinterest Activities board](#) for some ideas.

BLESSED ADVENT and MERRY CHRISTMAS!

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