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**Advent
Activities for
Your Family**

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CHAPTER

3

**The Morning
Ritual:
Advent
Calendar**

To do before Christmas:

- Bake cookies
- Put up lights
- Shop for “Giving Tree”
- Office party
- Dance recital
- Piano recital
- Christmas cards
- Holiday bazaar
- Clean guest room
- Buy gifts

(List truncated)



Is it any wonder that the holidays wear people out? In today's world, busy-ness is synonymous with the last part of the calendar year. The list is never-ending, and everything has to get done. So we rush through Advent at a frantic pace, trying to make sure we don't miss out on anything. The trouble is, when there's already so much to do, it's hard to carve out time for spiritual preparation. It's easy for devotions to turn into One More Thing on the to-do list instead of an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The first line of defense against December madness is organization. That's where the Advent calendar comes in. It is the single most important piece of the puzzle, the one that incorporates both spiritual and secular elements. The Advent calendar helps us take back control.

Advent calendars originated in Germany, where families would mark the days leading up to Christmas by lighting a candle, hanging a picture, or drawing chalk lines on the floor. Today, Advent calendars come in many forms. The most common is made of paper, with doors to open each day, revealing a picture, a verse or two of the Nativity story, or a piece of chocolate. Others are made of felt, with pockets containing small ornaments. The most elaborate calendars are made of wood, with cubbies intended to hold gifts and candy for each day of December.

In the Advent Reclamation Project, the calendar is filled not with gifts or candy, but with daily activities. Some of these are things that we're going to do anyway: decorating the house, baking cookies, and so forth. But the calendar also includes activities that nurture the sacred. The activities are chosen and arranged by the parents ahead of time and revealed one day at a time.

Explain to your children:

Every day during Advent, we are going to open one door on the Advent calendar [or tear off one link, or pull out one sheet of paper], to help us count down the days until Christmas. And every day, the calendar will tell us something we are going to do together to help us get ready for Christmas.

You can usually find a basic, relatively inexpensive wooden calendar at a department store during the holidays. The more artful varieties can be found online by searching for “wooden Advent calendar.” Ideally, the Advent calendar should be four weeks long. However, all the ones sold commercially begin on December 1.



If you choose, you can make your own calendar. Instructions for making a homemade felt calendar can be found online. For a simple alternative, decorate a box or canister to hold sheets of paper, one for each day of Advent. Or you can make a paper chain—one loop per day—and tear off a link every morning. The possibilities are endless.

Once you have a calendar, it's time to fill it. Well before Advent begins, make a list of activities for the family. Plan for a few “biggies” involving time, money, and travel, as well as some that are quick and easy to complete at home. Then assign each activity to a particular day. Spread out the big events, then mix in less-demanding projects. Take into account standing appointments, lessons, and obligatory events. The day of the big office party, for instance, is probably not the day to bake cookies!

Assigning each project to a particular day allows us to relax, knowing that everything is going to get done and when. It also helps identify the line where “enough” becomes “too much.” On a purely practical level, this helps ease the frantic pace of the season. On a spiritual level, it frees us from anxiety and gives us time to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Write each activity on a slip of paper and place it in the calendar on the appropriate day. If you're using a box, stack the sheets in order; if you are making a paper chain, be sure to put the date on the outside so it's easy to identify. Keep the complete list in your daily planner so that you can look ahead and be ready with materials and plans. Having the whole list in one place also helps when the inevitable snow day, sick day, or obligatory party pops up, requiring you to rearrange the calendar.

Each day of Advent begins with the opening of the calendar.



Although the parents know what the day holds, the children do not, so this morning ritual makes each day of Advent a unique—even magical—experience that culminates on Christmas morning.

But exactly what goes in it?

Advent calendar activities fit into four categories: service, spiritual growth, “homebody” activities, and pure fun.

1. SERVICE

This is one area in which secular Christmas harmonizes beautifully with Advent. Every year, the Salvation Army rings bells, the Marines collect toys, and communities hold canned food drives to feed the poor. Service is how we live the corporal works of mercy. It is an opportunity to balance the message of consumerism with the Christian vocation.

Service takes many forms. We can serve the Church by putting up Advent or Christmas decorations, or by helping with seasonal cleaning. We can serve our neighbors by helping a harried new mother or by visiting a shut-in. We can serve the poor by volunteering to ring the Salvation Army bell for a few hours, by spending an evening at a soup kitchen, or by delivering a meal to the local homeless shelter. Most churches offer some sort of “Giving Tree” program for needy families. This offers several opportunities for service, from shopping for a family to helping to organize and deliver the packages.

Advent is a great time to reach beyond our comfort zone. It’s fairly easy to drop off a meal at the homeless shelter. It’s a lot harder to stay and eat it with them. Viewing service in this light requires a whole new level of spiritual commitment. Too often, our charity is given from a distance. How much greater would our spiritual growth

be if we actually took a risk and touched the person of Christ in the outcasts of society—the homeless, the mentally ill, the disabled?

2. SPIRITUAL GROWTH

When radio stations fill the December airwaves with songs about Santa and Baby Jesus, it's easy to forget that the first part of Advent is not focused on the Incarnation—the coming of Jesus as a human being—but on his Second Coming at the end of time. A priest once put it this way: “People, it ain’t about the baby. Everybody’s been born. Only one person rose from the dead.” It is Christ, risen and triumphant, whose coming we long for.

This changes the nature of our waiting. If we are looking forward to Christ coming to judge the world with justice, to set right all that is wrong, then we must look to our own weaknesses—because someday we, too, will stand before him. This is why Advent was originally a time of fasting and penitence.

Repentance still has a place in Advent observance. However, it often gets lost in the noise and bustle of December. Advent does not need to become another Lent, but neither should we allow the Nativity to overshadow the greater arrival still to come. During this season, it's important to take time to retreat and “be still,” to examine our conscience and adjust our attitudes that drive our actions. The manger, which we'll cover in Chapter 5, is a great way to help us focus on spiritual growth. But we can also incorporate this idea into the Advent calendar.

Service, as outlined above, is itself a form of spiritual growth. But there are other ways to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. Something as simple as reading inspirational stories can help

us focus on “the reason for the season.” Families with older children might sit down in the evening and read an Advent reflection instead of turning on the TV.

If you’re lucky enough to have a shrine within driving distance, take a day trip there; treat it like a pilgrimage. Many shrines put on beautiful light displays, which is an added bonus. Look for a local church that is hosting a living nativity. Once or twice during the season, attend weekday Mass or Advent vespers as a family. Make the communal penance service an Advent calendar activity.

3. “HOMEBODY”

The third category consists of things that can be done without leaving the house and that can be worked into the family’s everyday schedule. If you’re constantly on the go from December 1st through 24th, no amount of planning is going to help—you’re still going to wear yourself out.

Generally speaking, homebody activities are projects that can be completed in a short amount of time: homemade Christmas cards for grandparents, handmade ornaments and gifts, and so on. Use them to break up the monotony of a snow day or as “rest” days between bigger, more draining activities. Families with a stay-at-home parent can do craft projects with children during the day and show off the results when the working parent comes home. The first year, you can devote days 1 and 2 to making the Jesse tree and manger for use during the season. (See Chapters 4 and 5.)

This category also includes a couple of time-consuming activities: cookie making and decorating the house. A word to the wise: cookie baking is probably a two-day commitment!



4. PURE FUN

Finally, fill in the gaps with pure fun. Allow the family to enjoy the secular celebration. Visit Santa; put a piece of candy in the calendar (particularly on an otherwise hectic day); go to a festival, a concert, or a holiday light display. This also includes going to get the Christmas tree and decorating the house.

Obviously, there's a good deal of overlap among the categories—and that is as it should be. Service and spiritual growth should be reinforced by the things we do at home, and we want to enjoy all our daily activities. Appendix A provides a more in-depth list of ideas, but it is far from exhaustive. Use your imagination. Find ways to transform what has to be done into something everyone can enjoy together.

Having an activity for every day of Advent may seem like a big commitment. But even a ten-minute project helps make each day unique and magical. The mix is entirely up to the individual family. However, it will be most successful if you scatter less-demanding activities among the “biggies,” and if service and spiritual growth have a real place among the lighter categories. With a sprinkling of activities from each area, everything becomes fun.

Sample Advent calendar activities (with categories):

	Activity	Category
1	Make Christmas cards for grandparents	Homebody
2	Make Jesus' manger	Homebody/Spiritual Growth
3	Candy	Pure Fun
4	Shopping for Giving Tree	Service
5	Put up indoor decorations	Homebody
6	Day trip to nearby Christmas festival	Pure fun
7	Make cookies	Homebody
8	Make cookies	Homebody
9	Read a story from a Christmas book	Homebody
10	Write letters to Santa Claus	Homebody/Pure Fun
11	Candy	Pure Fun
12	Make Christmas ornament	Homebody
13	Help sort Giving Tree gifts	Service
14	Candy	Pure Fun
15	Get Christmas tree	Pure Fun
16	Family sing-along	Homebody
17	Wrap gifts for the extended family	Homebody
18	Make a birthday card for Jesus	Homebody/Spiritual Growth
19	Go looking at Christmas lights	Pure Fun
20	Family movie night (with popcorn and cocoa)	Homebody
21	Choir open house and Christmas caroling	Service, Pure fun
22	Decorate church	Service
23	Read a story from a Christmas book	Homebody
24	Jesus goes in the manger!	Homebody/Spiritual Growth

This is the list from my family's first Advent calendar. Our children were three-years-old and under, so service and spiritual growth took a backseat to "homebody" projects. However, the "service" days were some of the most rewarding for our family. It was particularly gratifying to see the excitement our three-year-old felt when he got to help organize presents for children he would never meet. For him, that was just as much fun as decorating the Christmas tree.

Regardless of what activities you choose, the last one (Christmas Eve or Christmas Day) should always be placing the figure of Jesus in the manger. That is, after all, the crowning of the season!