

THE JOY OF ADVENT



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FAMILY CELEBRATIONS FOR ADVENT
& THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS



Rebecca Grabill and Stephen Grabill, PhD

Illustrated by Clare Therese Gray



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TO OUR CHILDREN

Nicholas, Sebastian, Magdalene, Penelope, Kilian, and Emeric

You all are children of promise and you've been tightly wound
in the scarlet cord of God's redemptive Love.

R . G . & S . G .



FOR

Liz, Liz, Liza, and their families

With our love x

C . T . G .

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INTRODUCTION

It was December 3rd, and I had yet to pull the Christmas bin from the basement closet. Inside languished our wooden Advent calendar, a festive red and white box with twenty-four numbered doors just the right size to stock wrapped holiday candies. We would be three doors behind *if* I pulled it out today.

Every year I enter the holiday season with grand intentions: I will teach every Christmas carol to the children! We'll bake cookies every day (and won't gain an ounce)! We'll read from a Jesse Tree devotional over a home-cooked dinner each and every night! We'll watch all the Christmas movies, and celebrate St. Nicholas Day, and . . .

The days in December fly by in a blur of parties, events, obligations, and more opportunities for activities than we could possibly attend or accomplish. All good things, true. *But each year I wish I'd given my children a more substantive understanding of the true meaning of Christmas.* I long for them to understand how Christmas has been celebrated in the past and what the traditions they know so well—like stockings and twinkling lights—*actually mean.* Every year I have ideas, links to recipes, crafts, movies, books, and songs I know the children would love, but the busyness of daily life pushes them to every *tomorrow's* to-do list.

Which leads me here. We began assembling this book years ago for ourselves and for our own family. We wanted to live each day of the Advent season with intentionality: to preserve our traditions, develop new ones, and provide our children (and ourselves) with meaningful holiday memories. We wanted to extend Christmas through Epiphany as did the early church. And we wanted our children to grow up knowing—and *understanding*—why we celebrate Christmas at all.

Now Stephen and I are absolutely delighted, in the true spirit of the holiday, to share our family's celebration with you. I pray that you will be blessed as you join our family in celebrating the rich and meaningful holiday seasons of Advent and Christmas.

—Rebecca Grabill

Rebecca Grabill

www.joyofadvent.com



When Does Advent Begin?

Advent officially begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. Since Christmas Day falls on different days of the week in different years, the first day of Advent likewise can fall anywhere from late November to early December. Since the start day varies, the actual length of Advent also varies. Because of Advent's variability and the constraints of a printed book (and busy families!), *The Joy of Advent* begins daily Celebrations on December 1st. The first Sunday of Advent may fall a few days after you've begun daily readings or a few days prior. Each year, check your calendar for that first Sunday or sign up for our emails online, and we'll send you a Sunday Supplement for each Sunday in the Advent season.

On each Sunday during Advent, one candle is lit, the wreath growing in brightness as Jesus's birth nears. The first Sunday we light the Prophet's Candle. This purple candle represents the HOPE of the prophets who foretold the birth of Jesus.

The second Sunday we light the Bethlehem Candle. This purple candle represents the coming PEACE as Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem.

The third Sunday, called Gaudete Sunday, we light the Shepherd's Candle. This pink candle represents the JOY of the Shepherds upon hearing of Jesus's birth!

The fourth Sunday we light the Angel's Candle. This purple candle represents God's endless LOVE in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

On Christmas Eve and throughout Christmastide we light the Christ Candle. This white candle represents the purity of Christ, our sinless and loving Savior.





*Girolamo Genga (1467–1551), A Jesse Tree (ca. 1535),
National Gallery, London*

A Jesse Tree by Girolamo Genga depicts the genealogical lineage of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. The central figure is Jesse, father of King David, from whom Matthew recounts Jesus's descent. Around Jesse, various other biblical figures are portrayed, including David, Solomon, and other ancestors leading up to the Virgin Mary and ultimately Jesus Christ. The composition visually traces the ancestry of Christ, symbolizing the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the New Testament.

About the Jesse Tree

The Joy of Advent: Family Celebrations for Advent and the Twelve Days of Christmas is structured around an ancient tradition based in Scripture.

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit* (Isa. 11:1).

The first dated illustration of the Tree of Jesse is found in an illustrated manuscript, *Vyšebrad Codex* of Bohemia from the year 1086. It inspired countless illustrations and depictions in every artistic medium from stained glass and floor mosaics to reliefs, paintings, and more. It retold the story of God's plan for salvation to the ordinary people, many of whom could not read or write.

Originally the Jesse Tree depicted only persons in the family tree of Jesus, those people directly mentioned in the genealogies in Matthew and Luke, but over time it broadened to include stories and people who point the way to Jesus even if they're not directly in Jesus's lineage.

While most of the stories we've chosen for *The Joy of Advent* involve characters in Jesus's lineage, we, like more recent traditions, include some from outside his genealogy. All the events and figures were carefully selected because they or their stories point the way to Jesus with such beauty and power, we can't *not* share them.

Since our celebration continues throughout the Twelve Days of Christmas, rather than go back into history, we move forward to events and people important in Christ's early life. This structure is biblical and meaningful, and it provides a concrete way for even young children to discover God's plan for themselves and the world as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

A Jesse Tree Display allows the family to track the progression of Advent and Christmas so everyone can revisit the stories as new layers of meaning come throughout the season. Over the years, we've created ornaments with a symbol representing each day's figure. Our early Jesse Tree Display was a small faux Christmas tree and handmade ornaments. In recent years we've used a wire tree with lighted cherry blossoms. A Jesse Tree Display need not involve a tree at all. The printable ornaments available at our website could be part of a Jesse Tree Display that is hung with small clips on a cord over a window or doorway like a garland, or, a favorite for toddlers, attached to an empty wall with tape or putty. The one common element in all these display ideas is access—it's available for the whole family to enjoy, study, and remember.



How to Use This Book

This book is designed to help you celebrate the seasons of Advent and Christmas. On the ancient church calendar, Advent was a four-week season of preparation, and Christmas was twelve days of celebration (because Christ's birth is far too important for a single day). The traditions you introduce with the help of this book will create memories for you and your family that you will all treasure for years to come.

Each day from December 1st through Epiphany (on January 6th) you will find the same pattern repeated: *A Personal Reflection* based on Scripture will prepare your own heart, and *Celebration* will walk you through sharing important truths with your household. You will also have the option to add any of the special holidays within the seasons (St. Nicholas Day, for example) to your *Celebration* to build even more memories and excitement.

Depending on your individual family, you may not use every section within *Celebration*. For example, *Celebration* begins with a short description of the day's *Jesse Tree Symbol* followed by a longer *Family Reflection* and a recommended song chosen specifically to accent the day's topics. If your children are very young, the *Jesse Tree Symbol & Description* and *Song* will be more than enough. You can then add content as your children grow older. If your children are older, you can feel free to skip elements for younger children and jump directly into the deeper material. *Together Time* offers discussion questions that can alternately be used as journal prompts.

The added features for special days (usually called *Feast Days* in the early church and liturgical traditions) include fascinating historical retellings and recipes, crafts, or games. There's no need to do everything. Glance through the book, noting the days you most want to celebrate with your family. As you use this book in future years, you will never run out of ideas.

As you prepare for Advent, consider how you will share the Jesse Tree symbols. For our own family, after years of using card stock cut-outs, we made miniature ornaments. It took some time, but we saw it as an investment that would serve us for years to come. And so far it has—even if our ram is missing a horn and Jonah has only one arm. There are so many ways to follow along with the Jesse Tree—to visually celebrate each story—even a non-crafty person can do it. To make things as simple as possible, there are printables available on our website and a Pinterest board stocked with inspiration.



How to Start The Season

We'll describe our typical Advent Celebration to help you imagine how you might use this resource with your family. We do our *Celebration* in the evening, beginning by lighting the day's candle(s) in our Advent wreath. This is not at all necessary, but we find that gentle candlelight adds an air of reverence and stills restless bodies.

Often we will read part of the Bible selection (or summarize it for the younger children), and introduce the *Jesse Tree Symbol* for the day, paired with hanging our matching ornament. The youngest children then color or nibble a snack while we read the *Family Reflection* with their school-aged siblings. After some discussion, we pull up a video of the day's song online to watch together. We pray and then extinguish our candle(s). If our young adults are home, we might also read the *Personal Reflection* together after the littles have left the table.

Our entire *Celebration* takes less than 30 minutes, even with battles over who gets to hang the day's ornament or snuff the candles. And while we do our *Celebration* in the evening, there's no right or wrong time of day. Your family *Celebration* might be best at breakfast before everyone heads off for the day, or you may find time in those still moments right before bed. Whenever you schedule your *Celebration*, it will leave a mark on your Advent and Christmas seasons. When our older children reflect on their favorite holiday memories, "Doing Advent" is always at the top of the list.

Finally, enrich your experience of The Joy of Advent with our online content. One of my family's absolute favorite parts of the season of Advent is the music. We cannot urge you strongly enough to visit the website and sign up for our daily emails. A curated selection of hand-picked music videos, art, and resource links will be delivered directly to your inbox every day throughout the season.

Now, take a slow, deep breath, imagine the scents of Christmas cookies and fir trees, and gift yourself a few moments to reflect on what is most important for you and your family during these upcoming Advent and Christmas seasons. Prepare to have a beautiful and memorable holiday!



THE JOY OF ADVENT



DECEMBER 1
IN THE BEGINNING



Prepare Your Heart
(Teens & Adults)

Scripture: Genesis 1:1–10 & John 1:1–4

3



Personal Reflection: The artist sits before his canvas. He closes his eyes and imagines: a stream, a mountain, sunlight filtering through golden maples. He opens his eyes and . . .

What happens when we experience beauty? The photographer reaches for her camera, the artist picks up his brush, the family gathers on a winter walk. Beauty in their hearts creates memories of togetherness.

Creation, in a sense, is God’s heart overflowing into the world. His goodness, his truth, his beauty, is so great, so full, it overflows and is part of everything. Because God created *ex nihilo*—from nothing—he bestowed his goodness onto every living thing. From nothing came everything.

In the beginning, “God said, ‘Let there be light.’” He spoke the world into being. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1). Before the creation of the world, Christ was. He dwelled with the Father and the Holy Spirit in perfect unity, in an intimacy so close it transcended any human relationship. Yet it is this intimacy that models God’s plan for all of us.

Advent is a season of preparation—and not just preparing gifts and festive dinners. Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for Jesus’s birth and return. By preparing, we’re creating habits that will yield rich memories and a deepened faith for us and our families. Let’s take time to consider what our focus will be this Advent season. Relationships, faith, creativity, or something else? What is our intention, and why is that focus important?

Today consider setting up a Jesse Tree Display. See page xi.

Celebration!

(Families)

Focus Passage: *(Read aloud)* Genesis 1:1–2

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

4



Jesse Tree Symbol & Description: What do you think of when you think of Jesus? You might think of Jesus as a baby in a manger. On Christmas Day we celebrate his birthday. But did you know Jesus was with God even when the world was created? Jesus *is* God, who came to earth as a tiny baby for a very important reason. That is why our first Jesse Tree symbol is God's beautiful world!

Today's Song: *Angels from the Realms of Glory*, by Scottish poet James Montgomery, was first published in 1816. Let us reflect on how the same angels who “sang creation’s story” are joined by all creation in praising God the “Father, Spirit, Son.”

Family Reflection: Imagine nothing.

No earth, no sky.

No sound, no air.

No day. No night.

It’s hard to imagine nothing, isn’t it? Even if we close our eyes, we still see something—shadows or swirls of light, or darkness.

But in the beginning, there was absolutely nothing, not even darkness. There was only God who was full of beauty, goodness, and love. He was like an artist with an idea in his mind of something beautiful—his masterwork.

But how would he make it? He had no paints, no clay. He had only himself—his goodness, his beauty, his love.

And his word.

So he spoke, “Let there be light!”

And his words became light!

Day after day, God spoke: Light, darkness, day, night. He spoke and made sky and earth, water and dry land. He spoke and formed the shining sun and moon and every twinkling star. He spoke and brought the swimming things forth from the water, sent flying things to the skies, and with his words, creeping crawling things filled his beautiful, green earth.

Finally, he made man and woman and filled them with his very own breath.

He looked at all he had made and saw that it was good.

Together Time: *(Discuss the following questions)*

- ☞ What is your favorite part of God’s creation?
- ☞ Why do you think God created the world? *(Answers will vary, but discussion could lead to God’s creativity and his love for all he has made.)*
- ☞ What is most important to *you* as we begin this Advent journey? Why?





P R A Y E R



We praise you, our Good Lord God.
We praise you for the sun and moon,
for earth who brings us fruits and vegetables,
for flowers that reflect your beauty.
Teach us to honor you by taking care of your creation. Amen.

6



—Adapted from *The Canticle of Creation*,
St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226)

DECEMBER 2
THE PERFECT COUPLE



Prepare Your Heart
(Teens & Adults)

Scripture: Genesis 3:1–7, 11–24 & Matthew 4:1–4

7



Personal Reflection: Oh, that crafty serpent who preyed on Eve’s innocence! He earned the curse of crawling on his belly and eating the dust of the earth.

We often focus on Eve’s fateful bite, but instead let’s shift our vision to another young woman, generations after Eve, and to an infant cradled in Mary’s arms.

Like Adam, the *first man*, her baby was First of his kind. The Only, in fact. This baby boy was God in human form.

Many consider God a distant force, untouched by emotion, hardship, temptation. And yet because Christ was born into *full* humanity, he knows hunger and deprivation, humiliation, and depression. He knows the temptation of sweetly whispered words. When we suffer, God not only knows, but *he knows*. Our grief, our shame, our desires.

He knows us fully because he became one of us.

Jesus faced the same temptations as the first man and woman. But unlike Eve, Jesus did not bite.

He obeyed, as did the young woman who bore him.

Theologians call Jesus the *Second Adam*, or the second First Man.

As Eve’s rebellion, expressed in a shared bite of fruit, brought the curse of sin *into* the world, Mary, through the “fruit of her womb” (Lk. 1:42) shares the very One to free us from the curse.

Yes, the first couple—Adam and Eve—condemned us, but Jesus, the *Second Adam*, born of Mary, frees us.

And so, through Christ we can be grafted onto his family tree with the sweet sap of his body and blood.

Consider preparing Moravian Spritz cookie dough. See page 41.

Celebration!

(Families)

Focus Passage: *(Read aloud)* Genesis 3:14a, 15 (NIV)

*So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,
“Cursed are you . . .*

And I will put enmity

between you and the woman,

and between your offspring and hers;

he will crush your head,

and you will strike his heel.”

8



Jesse Tree Symbol & Description: Have you ever been hungry or cold? Have you ever been sick with a stuffy nose and sore throat? Adam and Eve never got sick, or felt hungry or cold, not until after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Because they listened to the serpent, which was Satan’s voice, and disobeyed God, many things changed. Illness, hunger, sadness, and suffering came into God’s perfect world. When Jesus was born, because he was human, he may have felt cold and hungry, too. God wanted everything in the world he created to be perfect, and through Jesus, he will make it perfect again.

Today's Song: *In the Bleak Midwinter* was first a poem written in 1872 by Christina Rossetti. The bleakness of the world outside the Garden of Eden must have felt “hard as iron” to Adam and Eve. Meditate on the wonder of Jesus, God in flesh, who willingly entered our bleak world.

Family Reflection: So often we focus on Adam and Eve. We imagine the sweet syrup of disobedience dripping down Eve's chin as she handed the forbidden fruit to Adam.

Let's instead look at the serpent.

He was not a cursed creature, not yet, so Eve had no reason to fear him. In fact, he was likely beautiful. Lucifer (Satan's name before he rebelled against God) was an angel of light. His evil, both then and now, wears a mask of beauty.

When Satan whispered, “Did God really say . . .,” Eve looked again at the tree. She saw that the fruit was beautiful and good for food.

Satan's words were like honey, but from a tongue tipped with poison.

Eve knew nothing of poison, of course.

So she and Adam took a bite. They broke God's trust and his heart.

When sin came into the world, pain and sorrow and death came with it.

The serpent was also cursed, but even in God's punishment, there is promise!

Eve's offspring—someone who would be born many generations later—will battle the serpent, God said, and will crush his head. Satan never expected a baby laid in a manger would one day conquer him.

Together Time: *(Discuss the following questions)*

Satan is a very good liar. Do you ever find it hard to know what is true or false?

- ☛ Look at Genesis 3:15. What does *enmity* mean? *(Having an enemy or being enemies.)*
- ☛ Who is the woman mentioned? *(Eve.)*
- ☛ Who is Eve's offspring? *(Offspring means children or descendants, so all people are Eve's offspring.)*
- ☛ How will Jesus “crush the head” (v. 15, NIV) of Satan? *(Even though it may seem like Satan wins when Jesus dies on the cross, Jesus is resurrected and defeats Satan!)*





P R A Y E R



10



Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

—*The Confession of Sin,*
from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer
(Renewed Ancient Text)