

2019 Family Advent Devotionals

What follows is a collection of short Family Advent devotionals. It is my prayer that you will use this devotional guide in any way that best encourages you to spend time with your family in family worship this Advent.

Many of the stories/vignettes are pulled from various folk legends throughout history. You may consider talking to your children about “folklore” or “legends” or “stories”, explaining that while they are often not historically accurate, they can still teach principles, and/or provoke thoughtful discussions.

Enjoy these reflections with your family, and may they cultivate a longing for Christ’s coming!

In Christ,
Pastor John Sackett

Activity Ideas for Families

- Make an Advent Link – take the Christmas story (Mathew or Luke) and put one verse (or simply the reference) of the story on a strip of colored paper leading up to Jesus’ Birth. Write out 24 of these colored strips then glue (tape/staple) one into a ring. Connect the rings to make an Advent Link chain. Then each day at breakfast you can pull off a link and read a little bit further in the Christmas story.
- Invite neighbors over for an informal gathering and Christmas party. Most people (even if they don’t ever go to church) are willing to be a “little religious” around Christmas. Do a simple reading of the Christmas story, share family Christmas traditions, and possibly even sing a few Christmas songs.
- Consider inviting your neighbors (or other friends) to the Christmas Vespers service on 8 December, or to one of the Candlelight services on Christmas Eve.
- Read the Christmas story on Christmas Eve as a Family or Christmas morning.
- If you celebrate Christmas with gifts to each other consider starting a tradition, where each person of the family reaches selects one gift and reads who it is from and who it is to, then they deliver the gift and everyone watches them open it. Then the next family member picks a gift. This method can teach serving one another and develop a heart for giving because much of the focus now goes to the person who selects a gift to give instead of simply the one who receives.

1st Week of Advent – The Tradition of the Christmas Tree

December 2, 2019

In this first week of advent, we will look at a few different “folk” traditions of the Christmas tree and see how Christians of all ages have used this symbol to remind them of God's glory revealed in Christ Jesus, our Savior. Each day a different tradition surrounding the tree will be provided, along with a Scripture passage and some questions for reflection. Being reformed, let's start with a tradition that attributes the Christmas tree to Martin Luther:

The custom of including an evergreen tree in the Christmas celebration dates back to the 16th century. Martin Luther was said to be strolling through the forest one Christmas Eve when he became awestruck by the splendor of the stars twinkling through the snowy tree branches. To him, the sight suggested the majesty and mystery of the starlit sky as it must have appeared that first Christmas in Bethlehem. Luther so wanted to share the experience with his children that he chopped down a snowy fir tree, carried it home, and decorated it with candles--the next best thing to starlight.

Scripture: Luke 2: 8-20

Family Time Suggestion:

Go outside and look at the stars. (too cloudy? Use your imagination) Have your kids try to count them all. Talk about the majesty of God the Creator, the One who fashioned the heavens. Reflect on the Scripture passage – what would it have been like to have been one of the shepherds?

Song: *Silent Night, Holy Night (v. 1) – (#210 - Trinity Hymnal)*

Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Prayer:

O Sovereign God, please renew our appreciation for your majesty, your works in creation and the love You displayed toward us by sending Your Son. We give You thanks, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

December 3, 2019

Today, we look at a tradition that attributes the origin of the Christmas tree to St. Boniface:

Saint Boniface, an English missionary, known as the "Apostle of Germany", in 722 came upon some men about to cut a huge oak tree as a stake (Oak of Thor) for a human sacrifice to their pagan god. With one mighty blow, Saint Boniface felled the massive oak and as the tree split, a beautiful young fir tree sprang from its center. Saint Boniface told the people that this lovely evergreen, with its branches pointing to heaven, was indeed a holy tree, the tree of the Christ Child, a symbol of His promise of eternal life. He instructed them henceforth to carry the evergreen from the wilderness into their homes and to surround it with gifts, symbols of love and kindness. (Saint Boniface was martyred at the age of 75.)

Scripture: John 14:1-6

Questions:

What does Christ promise His disciples in this passage?
Are there many ways to God?
For what purpose does Jesus make this promise (see v.1)?

We have full assurance of our salvation in Christ – as we look at our Christmas trees, let us remember Christ's promise of eternal life for those who believe in Him, for those He has called by His grace.

Song: *Good Christian Men, Rejoice (v.3) – #207*

Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice;
Now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all to gain His everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we praise you that while we were your enemies, dead in our trespasses and sins, Christ died for us and gave us life eternal. Through His work, we gain the everlasting hall! Glory be to You. Amen.

December 4, 2019

Today, we look at a tradition that attributes the origin of the Christmas tree to the German mystery play:

In the Middle Ages, about the 11th century, “religious theater” was started. One of the most popular plays, the German mystery play, concerned Adam and Eve, their fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden (i.e., Paradise). The Garden of Eden was represented by a fir tree hung with apples. It represented both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Discernment of Good and Evil which stood in the center of Paradise. The play ended with the prophecy of a coming Savior, and for this reason, this particular play was often enacted during Advent. The one piece of scenery - the "Paradeisbaum" (the Paradise Tree) became a popular object, and was often set up in churches, and eventually in private homes as well. It became a symbol of the Savior.

Scripture: I Corinthians 15:20-28

Family Discussion:

What does it mean that “in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive”? Review the story of Adam and Eve. Reflect together as a family on our sins and our need for forgiveness. Spend time in confession of sin (the Husband/Father, if present could lead in this time of prayer). End with a time of thanks that God’s Eternal Decree was not to leave us dead in our sins, but to bring about our salvation in Christ Jesus.

Song: *What Wondrous Love is This!* (v.1) – #261

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this, O my soul.
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we cannot think of Christ’s birth without being confronted with our own sin. We ask for Your forgiveness and praise you for giving us new life in Christ. In His Name we pray, Amen.

December 5, 2019

Today, we look at a northern European (i.e., Viking) tradition with respect to the Christmas tree:

This story tells us that when Christianity first came to Northern Europe, three “persons” representing three virtues were sent from Heaven to place lights on the original Christmas Tree. These three “persons” were named Faith, Hope and Charity. (charity is an older word for Love). Their search was long for they were required to find a tree that was as high as hope; as great as hope; as sweet as charity; and one that had the sign of the cross on every bough. Their search ended in the forests of the North for there they found the Fir. They lighted it from the radiance of the stars and it became the first Christmas tree.

Scripture: I Corinthians 13

Family Discussion:

What are faith, hope and love? Reflect on I Corinthians 13 and discuss how we might display our love for one another – discuss how our love is similar to and different from Christ’s love for us. Another good passage to read would be I John 4:7-21.

Song: *Away in a Manger (v.3)* – #204

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray;
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.

Prayer:

Dear Father, we thank you for the gift of faith in Christ, for the gift of hope that is built on Christ’s work and for the gift of your love as displayed in Christ. We praise You that You have loved us so richly, so fully. Help us to love one another, even as we have been loved. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

December 6, 2019

We close our week of looking at the symbol of the Christmas tree with a legend about the pine and its usefulness in the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus from King Herod:

The legend is as follows: when the Holy family was pursued by Herod's soldiers, many plants offered them shelter. One such plant was the Pine Tree. When Mary was too weary to travel longer the family stopped at the edge of a forest to rest. A gnarled old pine which had grown hollow with its' years invited them to rest within its trunk--then it closed its branches down and kept them safe until the soldiers had passed. Upon leaving, the Christ Child blessed the pine and the imprint of his little hand was left forever in the tree's fruit--the pine cone. If a cone is cut lengthwise the hand may still be seen.

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23

Questions:

What do you think it would be like to be chased by soldiers?
Who really protected Mary and Joseph from Herod?
Was it a pine tree as this story suggests?
Who protects us?

Reflect as a family on God's protection over His people, as a church and as individual families. God preserves His saints, even in the midst of great difficulty. Nothing we experience in life (even the pursuit of an enemy that might seem overwhelming) is too much for God. He is able to protect us in all circumstances, bringing about His purposes perfectly.

Song: *Silent Night* (v.3) – #210

Silent night! Holy night! Son of God, love's pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank You for Your protection. You are all-powerful. You are able to bring about Your purposes perfectly. Nothing could stop the salvation that You had ordained – not Herod, not Satan in the wilderness, not the religious leaders. And nothing can stop You from saving us – not our enemies, not Satan, not even our own stubborn hearts. Father, we thank You for Your saving, protecting hand. In Christ, Amen.