

Start a New Family Tradition This Advent

by Kelly Bothum

In an age where we can get just about everything we desire in an instant, Advent is wonderfully old-school.

It's four weeks of pressing pause, which is not like hitting the snooze button. Instead, it's a chance to re-engage with those we love and joyfully prepare for the Christmas season. It's taking a breath amid the chaos and seeing what's really around us.

We may hit the mall to look for the perfect present, but have we really thought about the greatest gift given to us by God? We race to get up the Christmas lights, but do we set aside time to think about the true light of the world?

Advent gives us that, week by week.

So how do we do it? As parents, we need to create opportunities for this mindful pause. Here are a few ideas to consider:

—Enlist some help with the Nativity scene. This is the perfect opportunity to remind children about the real hero of the season—and it's not the guy in the red suit.

Having kids help with the Nativity scene gives parents a chance to talk about everyone's role in the story of Jesus' birth. Children can see themselves in the lowly shepherds and the three Wise Men, and they can certainly imagine how challenging it must have been for Joseph and Mary.

Some families like to up the anticipation ante by hiding the baby Jesus figurine and making a game of finding him on Christmas Eve. Other Nativity traditions include sending the Holy Family statues on a trip throughout the home until they are reunited in the manger. Adding a piece of straw to the empty manger each day during Advent also can help little eyes see the changes that develop from all this waiting.

—Make a Jesse tree. My kids know about their family history through stories and old pictures we share. It's a big part of what makes them feel connected to relatives they have never met.

During Advent, a Jesse tree can show us what a family tree of our Catholic faith looks like. It teaches children about the people in Christ's own family while also introducing some of the Old Testament stories that lead up to Jesus' birth.

What makes the Jesse tree particularly cool is that kids can create their own decorative symbols taken from stories about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, John the Baptist, and others. Plus, any ornament made by a kid instantly becomes a family treasure.

—Celebrate feast days during Advent. We're waiting for Christmas, but we can still have some fun. Several feast days during Advent offer the chance to celebrate before the big day.

First up is St. Nicholas Day (Dec. 6), which is celebrated by having kids leave their shoes out to be filled with treats. The feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Dec. 12) is a great time to celebrate Mexican culture and also talk about the ways God can surprise us in our lives—in this case, by having Mary appear to a poor man. The feast of St. Lucia, or St. Lucy, (Dec. 13), whose name means "light," offers a timely opportunity to take a tour of the neighborhood Christmas decorations.

—Find the light around us. It's simple, but lighting the Advent wreath is one of my favorite traditions.

We keep the wreath on our dining room table, and each Sunday my kids fight over whose turn it is to

light the candles. (I could do without the fighting, but you get the idea.)

What I do like is just how deeply invested my kids feel in this tradition. We keep the candles lit through our meal, and it's amazing how this simple glow warms our family dinner—much like the light of Jesus warms our soul.

This time of the year, frankly, I need the pause that Advent provides. So do my kids, who have been

waiting for Christmas since they shed their Halloween costumes and dove headfirst into the candy.

It seems we are always in a state of anticipation, waiting for the next phone upgrade, the next sequel, the next big thing that's going to change our lives. This year, let Advent teach us who truly is worth waiting for.

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