

Some Ideas About Celebrating Advent and Christmas with Children

Written by Rick Bellows with many ideas of Danielle Bellows
who read many of them in *To Dance With God* by Gertrud Mueller Nelson

To Open Hearts Celebrating Advent and Christmas

When my children were very young, my wife suggested fresh ways to celebrate, that wouldn't involve lying to our children about the existence of Santa Clause, and that wouldn't provide one burst of presents on Christmas morning. Instead, she integrated Episcopal traditions with different resources and her own ingenuity to come up with a plan that worked very well at spreading the celebration to include Advent, the 12 days of Christmas, through the Feast of the Epiphany. The goal was to open our children's hearts towards others.

Advent

We begin preparing for Christmas by celebrating Advent as Advent. We would not sing Christmas carols, but instead would sing Advent hymns of anticipation. WE would use an advent wreath with candles at the dinner table and say a prayer for light as the days darkened but a candle was lit, then another, and on and on.

In early Advent, our eyes would begin to look towards Christmas remember the enthusiasm of St. Francis in setting up the first creche scene to make Christmas come alive. He used live animals used little statues. We set them up with various year 1st century AD visitors set around the house at the appropriate distance, from the manger. The wise people were most distant, as well as their pack animals, for they arrive on Epiphany, January 6th. Shepherds and angels would be closer for the arrive on Christmas night, the night of December 25th. Mary and Joseph would arrive the 24th, and Jesus the star of the show, would arrive the morning of the 25th. Every few days as each arrival date drew near, children brought the statues closer to the scene.

St. Nicholas: Secret Giving and the Foretaste of Christmas

On December 6th, on the Feast of St. Nicholas¹ we would celebrate the inspiration behind Santa Clause. We preferred to go to the source of the tradition of mysterious giving.

St. Nicholas was the Bishop of Myra in the early to mid-4th century. Many legends have grown up around the saint, including some about secret giving. Nicholas gave without the need to be

¹ One of many resourceful websites.: <https://www.stnicholascenter.org/>

thanked or honored for his generosity. Sometime during the day, we would tell the story of the Three Poor Maidens,² about secret giving.

Nicholas continues this tradition through “little Nicholases” who on his feast day set the table with Christmas candles and icons, and a special breakfast. We chose dried fruit, nuts, coffee cake, speculacious cookies, and chocolate candies (including chocolate filled coins, a reminder of one of his secret giving stories). You could choose whatever breakfast you want that is special.

It was important to us that the food Nicholas left was unique to the feast. The cookies would be made after the children went to sleep, and the coffee cake before they got up. Some years we would include friends in the tradition, leaving a plate of the recognizable distinctive delicious food on their doorstep. My wife and sometimes I would make enough speculacious cookies for us, our friends, and to last through Christmas. We would often be up late the night before.

Next to the plate at the table, St. Nicholas would leave a gift to complete the foretaste of Christmas. This would be some gift that was small. We always wrapped it in purple or blue plain paper, to distinguish it and to honor Advent.

All this we did in St. Nicholas’s name, secretly after his example, as little Nicholases. When the children grew old enough, they too would help as little Nicholases as appropriate to their age.

If celebrating St. Nicholas Day is of interest to you, please explore websites that provide different ethnic traditions of celebrating St. Nicholas Day.

Saint Clare Brings Light to the Dark and Sees A New Perspective Near the Solstice

Saint Clare of Assisi can help us with our Advent and Christmas celebrations: Her feast day is in the summer but we also remember her in the dark days of Advent because her name means *bright* and *clear*. We remember her especially with a prayer for light on some evening near the solstice Dec. 21st. One possible prayer is the *Phos hilaron*.

O gracious Light,
pure brightness of the everliving Father in heaven,
O Jesus Christ, holy and blessed!
Now as we come to the setting of the sun,
and our eyes behold the vesper light,

² <https://www.stnicholascenter.org/who-is-st-nicholas/stories-legends/traditional-stories/life-of-nicholas/three-impooverished-maidens>

we sing your praises, O God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
You are worthy at all times to be praised by happy voices,
O Son of God, O Giver of life,
and to be glorified through all the worlds.

We said this every night of Advent while lighting the Advent candles at dinnertime, too.

Clare used the image of a mirror in her spiritual writings. Therefore, on that night play with a mirror and a light. See how they interact and bring light to new places.

The Christmas Season: All 12 Days

Christmas Eve: the Mystery of God

On Christmas Eve we chose to bring our children to the late service, usually at 11 PM. This was a mysterious evening service that the children loved. Their Christmas would begin when they would watch Christmas movies (i.e. the Grinch who Stole Christmas and it's a Wonderful Life) or the service of lessons and carols on the air from England. After the service they would make sure their stockings were out, and then go to bed.

The First Day of Christmas: the Nativity

Christmas Day, on Christmas morning, they were able to eat a donut from a wonderful local shop, while Daddy went to Church for the Christmas Day service. When I got home, we would all take turns opening our stocking gifts, and two gifts. Most of our family understood how we celebrated and spread out the gift giving over 12 days. My children's great grandparents did not. So, their gift and a gift from St. Nicholas would be all that were opened that day.

Both my wife and I have sisters with Christmas birthdays, so we would call them in the evening to distinguish their birthday from Christmas.

The Second Day of Christmas: The Feast of Saint Stephen

In honor of St. Stephen, first deacon and martyr, we would sing Good King Wenceslas. We would also do a family service project. When the kids were young this would be simple, like organizing food on the shelves of a food pantry. Older kids would like to feed the poor, or take poinsettias to elderly widows and other sick and shut in. This service project would often be transferred to another day in order to meet the schedule of the need.

The Third Day of Christmas: The Feast of Saint John

Saint John filled his Gospel and Letters with love, so on this day we would toast the love of St. John at dinner and share our love for one another. Gifts from some family members who love us would be opened on this day.

The Fourth Day of Christmas: The Feast of Holy Innocents

We would celebrate childhood, because the Holy Innocents were killed early in their childhood.

It would be children's day, when the kids opened their presents from us, the parents. Only kids would receive presents on this day.

In age appropriate ways we would talk about the concept of dying for another. When they were younger, we would tell the story emphasizing Herod. When older, we would imagine Mary and Joseph telling most stories over the dinner table when Jesus was young but waiting to tell him this story until he was a teenager. We would consider how Jesus got the idea of dying for someone else from those who died in his place when he fled to Egypt as a refugee.

The Fifth, Sixth, Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh day of Christmas

One of our family members would be assigned a given day. We might celebrate a day by seeing a movie as a family, eating out, or having guests over. We would be creative. One of these days the Clare Mirror Project could be done. Other days could be transferred for convenience of others. Hospitality rules always apply.

On A Free Day of Christmas plan to celebrate with youth or older children fresh ways of looking at Christmas using the mirror of Clare (mentioned earlier). Welcome her bright and clear mirror to help you see anew.

Use the mirror to find a fresh and new understanding of Jesus in a manger. Consider the grace of God through the poverty, humility, and endurance of Jesus lying in a manger at Christmas. Look at these things as if through a mirror, from different angles. Use the mirror to thank God for these different perspectives.

As Clare illuminated,

“Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility, and ineffable charity are reflected in that mirror.... With the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror. Look at the parameters of this mirror, that is, the poverty of Him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. O marvelous humility, O astonishing poverty! The King of the angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger! Then, at the surface of the mirror, dwell on the holy humility, the blessed poverty, the untold labors and burdens which He endured for the redemption of all mankind.”³

The Seventh Day of Christmas and New Years Eve

Other than Christmas itself, this would be my favorite day of Christmas. We would all write 3 Christmas Love Letters, one to each of us (minus ourselves). We would keep them. I have almost all of them uploaded and I've given them to the adult children. I am not sure they mean as much to them as they mean to me, but that is life, for now.

³ 4th Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Prague.

The letters would be the only thing given on December 1st. There would be no gifts.

This day is also New Years Eve, but that is not a Christmas celebration, at least it wasn't to us. We would stay up, watch the crystal ball drop in Times Square on TV, and toast in the new year with something bubbly.

The Eighth Day of Christmas: The Feast of the Holy Name

A Jewish boy would be named on the eighth day when he would be circumcised. However, it would be the naming that we would celebrate this day. As parents name their children, we would celebrate it as parent's day when only us parents would open presents from the children.

The Twelfth Day of Christmas

Any remaining presents would be opened during this last day of Christmas. Then at night, it would be the Eve of the Epiphany, the Thirteenth night, but nonetheless called it Twelfth Night. On this night we would act out the whole story. It would be most fun to invite guests, especially some hams or over-actors. There are a lot of roles, some very dramatic and fun. Herod was my favorite, and Zacharia if we included him. There would be wise people, the shepherds, angels, the Archangel Gabriel, the Holy Innocents, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the innkeeper, the townspeople, soldiers, and if there are enough people, Zechariah, Elizabeth with John in the womb. We would try to go over the story and act out the story embellished with actions, words, and conversations that are not in the Bible, but some of them could have happened. We would always end up laughing very hard as our celebration of Christmas would end, each of us a bit wiser because of how we celebrated.

Flexibility, Practicality, Hospitality

As the Preface of the Book of Common Prayer begins so I highlight at the end:

It is a most invaluable part of that blessed "liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free," that in... every [home this] may be altered, abridged, enlarged, amended, or otherwise disposed of, as may seem most convenient for the edification of the people," according to the various exigency of times and occasions."

Hospitality and the convenience of guests always takes precedence. Remain flexible regarding all things and be practical or this will kill Christmas for you and your guests.

Peace and all good,
Rick Bellows, TSSF

