



Finding God[®]

Our Response to God's Gifts

Special seasonal issue by [Amy Welborn](#)

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Advent Signs and Symbols

Candles, greenery, lights everywhere, angels, and colors—over these four weeks of Advent, we fill our lives with signs of Jesus' coming. In fact, these

signs can be the most memorable parts of this season, especially for children. They can hardly wait to light the candles, hang the decorations,

open the doors on an Advent calendar, and prepare the manger.

Over hundreds of years, Christians prayed and reflected about what the coming of Jesus meant to them. They often communicated the faith through images, sounds, and even good things to eat. So too, our children can learn about Jesus' coming in the colorful, bright signs that we share with them.

Let us enjoy these treasures of the Advent season that remind us that Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, God-with-us. ■



Week 1: The Advent Wreath

“But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.”

—Luke 21:28

Be ready and be alert! That's what the Gospel reading for the first week of Advent calls us to do: Jesus tells his friends to look to the heavens, where they'll see signs of his return. (Luke 21:25–28;34–36)

Life is so busy for all of us, and it can be easy to forget Jesus' presence in our daily lives. That's why it helps so much to have physical signs and symbols around our homes that remind us: He's coming! A favorite Advent symbol is, of course, the Advent wreath.

The Advent wreath is most often made in a round shape. This circle symbolizes God, who, like a circle, has no beginning or end. And God, who is the creator of the whole universe, sent his light into the world in Jesus, his Son. So as a sign of Jesus and his coming, the Advent wreath features four candles, with a new one lit

each week: three violet and one, for the third week, pink.

The Advent wreath, like many of our familiar Christmas symbols, including the Christmas tree, gained popularity in Germany. We can purchase an Advent wreath or make it ourselves. It doesn't even have to include actual greenery; if it does, even that's a symbol too: of God's evergreen love for us that never fades and never dies. ■



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Build an Advent Wreath

We can make an Advent wreath using family heirlooms to decorate the wreath. An Advent wreath can be as simple as placing four candles of any color (if you can't find violet or pink, of course) in a circle. Even this simple display can remind us that Christ is the light of the world. ■



Jesus' Family Tree

Jesus' genealogy, or family tree, is described from two different perspectives in the Gospels: in Matthew (1:1–17) and Luke (2:23–38). Here are some of the specific symbols frequently found on a Jesse tree:

- The earth (creation)
- Tree with fruit (Adam and Eve)
- Rainbow/ark (Noah and the flood)
- Ladder (Jacob's ladder)
- Wheat sheaves (Ruth)
- Burning bush (Moses)
- Tablets (The Ten Commandments)
- Star of David (King David)
- Lyre (King David)
- Whale (Jonah)

The Jesse Tree



Scan the QR code to learn more about the history of the [Jesse tree](#) and to find more fun activities!

Week 2: The Jesse Tree

But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him.

—Isaiah 11:1–2a

What fun it is to sit with our children and go through old family photographs. They love to see themselves as babies—and they love to see us in our younger, goofier days too, don't they? These images also give them a chance to enter their family history, a history that brought them to be and shapes them. They see faces, they imagine different times and places, and they hear stories



that perhaps someday they'll tell too.

Jesus also had a family history, and it's brought to life in a symbol called the Jesse tree. The root and the trunk of the tree is Jesse, King David's father, since Jesus comes from the House of David. Hanging from its branches are symbols representing Jesus' earthly family, God's Chosen People, as we learn about them in the Old Testament.

These symbols are another kind of family picture album, aren't they? They're a chance for our children to see where they came from spiritually through the family tree of their brother Jesus. As we share these symbols, it can be a moment like flipping through the pages of that old photo album. We tell the stories of our family in faith. We learn who Jesus was and why he came to us on earth, and because we're part of his family, it's who we, too, are called to be. ■

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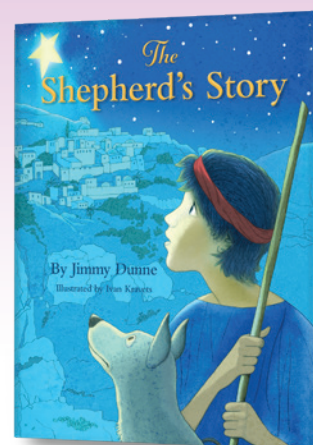
Make a Jesse Tree

Make a Jesse tree for your home. You can draw a tree on posterboard or use a real tree branch. Read the stories of Jesus' family tree and use the images presented in the sidebar to make an ornament for each person in Jesus' family history. Then hang the ornaments from the Jesse tree. Let your children's creativity flow! ■

The Shepherd's Story

A familiar, beloved rhyme scheme paired with a fresh perspective on the Christmas story, *The Shepherd's Story* provides readers with a profound experience alongside a courageous shepherd boy who is searching for meaning in life. Come along with the curious young shepherd to explore the human and divine natures of the birth of Jesus. ■

The Shepherd's Story by Jimmy Dunne (Loyola Press, 2020).



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Week 3: Colors

*Shout for joy, daughter Zion!
sing joyfully, Israel!
Be glad and exult with all your heart,
daughter Jerusalem!*

—Zephaniah 3:14

“What’s your favorite color?” Why is it that children like to ask, and be asked, this question? I don’t have an answer to that, but I do have a favorite color: dark, not-quite-purple maroon. What’s yours? Do you know why? What associations does it have?



Colors can carry great meaning in our lives. We might instantly recognize our high school or college colors—or those of our archrival! In our homes, we might embrace or avoid a certain color scheme

because of the way those colors make us feel and the memories they evoke.

Colors are important symbols in our faith too. Each of the Church’s liturgical seasons has particular colors attached to it. During most of the year, called Ordinary Time, we’re surrounded by green. On feasts, it’s white and gold that fills our churches. On Pentecost, as well as on the feasts of martyrs, it’s red.

And during Advent, it’s violet, or purple. Why is that? Well, traditionally, violet is a color that represents penance, and yes, Advent is a penitential season, too, just as Lent—the other violet-filled season—is. During Advent, we’re mindful of how

much we need Jesus to come into our lives, and we’re sorry for those sins and failings.

But there’s another Advent color as well, and it’s one you’ll see on the third Sunday of Advent: rose, or pink. The priest’s and deacon’s vestments will be rose, and so, of course, is that third candle on the Advent wreath.

Rose represents joy and happiness.

During the first part of Advent, we’ve thought a lot about the darkness in our world and our lives that calls out for a Savior. Now, so close to Christmas, we see that he’s coming, and we rejoice! ■

ACTIVITY

Rejoice as a Family!

When your family attends Mass this week, take time before or after to point out these special colors to your children. At home, on this third Sunday of Advent—also called *Gaudete* Sunday—say a prayer of joy as you light the pink candle, and give everyone in the family a chance to share something that gives them special joy and happiness. And have a fun celebration of this *Gaudete* Sunday! ■

Advent Gifts



Scan the QR code to reflect on a different [spiritual gift](#) for each week of Advent.

Christmas Symbols

Of course, there are many more signs and symbols of the Advent and coming Christmas season. Children delight in these concrete signs of faith, and we can help them by connecting these signs and symbols to our faith with the following prayers:



A Prayer for a Christmas Tree. *Just as sin came into the world through the fruit of a tree, everlasting life comes to us through another kind of tree: Jesus' Cross. May we always see signs of God's eternal, never-ending love.*



A Prayer for Outdoor Decorations. *Jesus is the light who conquers darkness. May the lights that decorate our homes carry Jesus' light to all people.*



A Prayer for Stars. *God used a star to guide the Magi to Jesus. May we always let God guide us in our daily lives.*



A Prayer for Gifts. *God's greatest gift to us is Jesus. May we share the gift of love with everyone we meet. ■*



Week 4: Nativity Scene

*But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah
least among the clans of Judah,
From you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel.*

—Micah 5:1

Have you ever noticed that human babies take longer to reach independence than the young of other animals? And that our young seem to have to learn so much more than other young creatures, who mostly simply grow into their instincts?

We can only learn and grow in spirit and mind, it seems, if we connect with others.

Perhaps, I've sometimes mused, that's because God has created us to be in communion. If we're going to learn and develop, we have to do so from another person. We learn who we are in communion with others.

It's the same with the deepest questions of life. Why am I here? What should I do with my time on earth? Where am I going? Am I really and truly loved?

God teaches us through the presence of one whom we can see, hear, and even touch. A Person: Jesus, God made flesh, dwelling among us, sharing love and truth.

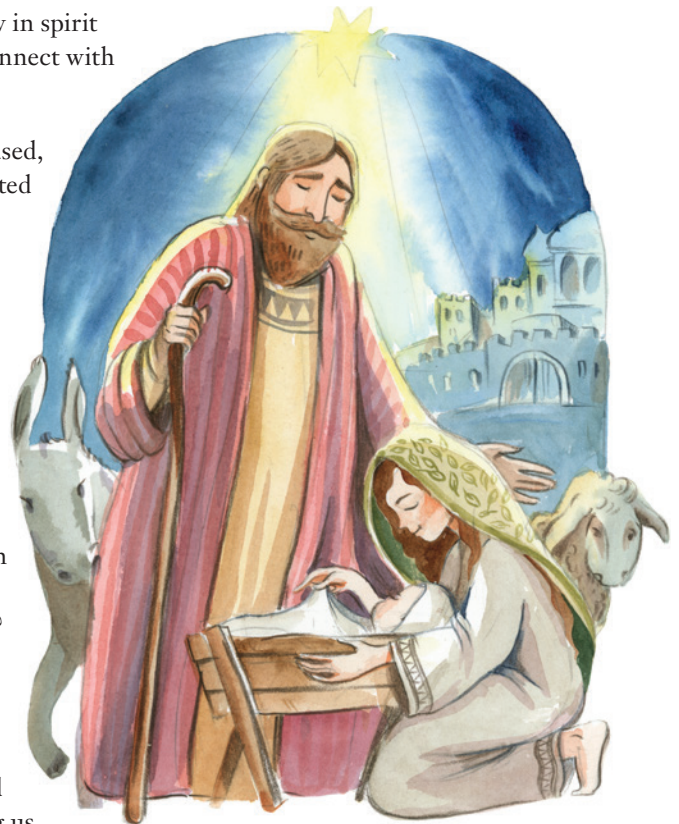
What better way to bring this truth home but through images of Jesus himself? That's what the Nativity scenes in our homes and in our churches do. As children arrange and play with the figurines, they get to know Jesus and his family, making the Holy Family part of their lives and their families.

Through the signs and symbols of our nativity sets—through the angels, the

shepherds, the magi, the animals, the humble stable, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus himself—a child is presented with a vivid sign of God's love, not as an abstract idea, but as he really and truly came to us, reaching out to us from the manger.

It's what Saint Francis of Assisi wanted the people of Greccio, the site of the first living nativity, to understand as he called the people of the village to see the Gospel enacted in front of their eyes:

Love comes to us as a person. And that person's name is Jesus. ■



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