

ADVENT: A TIME BETWEEN THE TIMES

Compiled by Rev Glynis Goyns for the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI)



Advent commences on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. It begins the liturgical calendar for churches of the Western tradition. Advent is a season of expectant waiting and appropriate preparation focussing on the time between Christ's first coming as God's incarnation and his second coming as the Judge. It includes spiritual preparation to celebrate the birth of Jesus and anticipation of Christ's return. It celebrates the truth about God and his self-revelation in Christ whereby all creation is reconciled to God. Bible readings focus on our accountability for faithfulness until his coming, judgement for sin, and hope for life in all its abundance.

In this dual focus on past and future, advent symbolizes a spiritual journey affirming that Christ has come, is present in the world today, and will come again in power. This provides a basis for kingdom ethics, a profound sense of living salvifically and sacramentally "between the times", and our calling to be faithful stewards of all that God has entrusted to our care. As the church celebrates God's inbreaking into history in the incarnation and anticipates the future consummation for which "all creation is groaning", it confesses its responsibility as a people commissioned to "love the Lord your God with all your heart" and to "love your neighbour as yourself".

We celebrate with gladness the promise in advent while acknowledging a more somber tone of warning in the strong prophetic call to accountability and judgement. Because of the dual themes of warning and promise, advent is a time of preparation marked by contemplative prayer - prayers of humble devotion and commitment, prayers of submission, prayers for deliverance, prayers from those walking in darkness who await and anticipate a great light! The spirit of advent is captured in the parable of the bridesmaids anxiously awaiting the Bridegroom (Mt 25:1-13) who experience profound joy at the Bridegroom's expected coming but confront the need to be prepared.

It is a season of fasting before the feast; of critical introspection and self-assessment; of repentance and transformation as we remember God's self-sacrifice in the incarnation and crucifixion, and anticipate his return and the coming judgement. Traditional practices include keeping an advent calendar; lighting candles on an advent wreath; praying a daily advent devotional; and setting up an advent or Jesse tree.

The Jesse tree is a wonderful multi-generational and interactive way to include the whole family in celebrating the faithfulness of God across millennia from creation through to the birth of Jesus. The tree is decorated on each day of advent with a new symbol representing Old Testament events and characters through to the birth of Jesus. The dead branch used as a tree represents the stump of Jesse from which Jesus sprang (Isaiah 11:1; 53:2). The ornaments are linked to his genealogy, and signs of God's imminence and action in the world in relation to these Old Testament ancestors. The concept of a Jesse tree dates back to medieval times, with a proliferation of art inspired by this theme over many years.

The keeping of an advent wreath is common practice in many homes and churches. This is circular and evergreen with five candles, four around the circumference and one in the centre. The wreath serves as a vehicle to tell the story leading up to the birth of Jesus. The circle reminds us of God's mercy and love that have no beginning or end. The evergreen speaks of our hope in God of new life. The candles symbolize His light entering the world as our source of life. The four outer candles represent a period of waiting with repentance and joy, the colours being three purple and one rose. The candles are lit one by one over four weeks leading up to Christmas

day to symbolize the darkness of fear and despair receding and the shadow of sin falling away as more and more light is shed in the world. The flame of each new candle reminds us that something is happening and more is yet to come. Finally, the light that has come into the world is clearly visible as the fifth Christ candle (white) is lit on Christmas Eve, and worshippers rejoice that the hope and promise of long ago have been realized.

The readings for the first Sunday in advent relate to the Old Testament patriarchs who were Christ's ancestors. The first advent candle (purple) symbolizes hope. The reading for the second Sunday concerns prophecies of the birth of Christ. The second candle (purple) represents Bethlehem or the prophets. For the third Sunday, a rose-coloured candle is used. Readings relate to John the Baptist and the candle represents joy. Readings for the fourth Sunday relate to the annunciation of Christ's birth. The candle (purple) represents the angels. The Christ candle is white and is placed in the centre of the wreath. It is lit on Christmas Eve to mark the end of advent or, alternatively, on Christmas morning.

We suggest celebrating an ecological season of advent from 27 November through to 24 December, with the emphasis on making a pilgrimage with God from the beginning of time, through a time between times, to the end of time in recognition and celebration of creation, re-creation and a new heaven and new earth. It would be a season of fasting and expectant living in anticipation of rebirth and renewal of all creation with a strong shift away from extravagant purchases and consumption which have become the norm of today for the Christmas period, with shops cashing in on the wild spending spree from as early as the beginning of October.

An excellent way of introducing this into the home for multi-generational participation is to create a Jesse tree with each family member helping to make and add a new decoration each day for a living advent calendar with stories, prayers and activities. In church, the Sunday services over four weeks could be shaped around the advent wreath and lighting of the five candles to bring a message of hope and new life as God's light grows in the darkness to dispel sin and despair. Encourage members to participate actively by contributing to a shared daily devotional of visual parables and personal stories suited to the readings and symbols for each day in advent. More detailed information is given below.

Table of Contents

Creating a Jesse Tree	4
Daily Content:.....	5
Date: 1 December	6
Date: 2 December	7
Date: 3 December	8
Date: 4 December	8
Date: 5 December	9
Date: 6 December	10
Date: 7 December	10
Date: 8 December	11
Date: 9 December	12
Date: 10 December.....	13
Date: 11 December.....	13
Date: 12 December.....	14
Date: 13 December.....	15
Date: 14 December.....	16
Date: 15 December.....	17
Date: 16 December.....	17
Date: 17 December.....	18
Date: 18 December.....	19
Date: 19 December.....	20
Date: 20 December.....	20
Date: 21 December.....	21
Date: 22 December.....	22
Date: 23 December.....	23
Date: 24 December.....	24
Date: 25 December.....	25
Examples of Advent wreaths for Sunday services leading up to Christmas day.....	27
First Sunday in Advent	28
Second Sunday in Advent	28
Third Sunday in Advent	29
Fourth Sunday in Advent	30
Christmas Eve or Christmas Morning	31



Some examples of home-made Jesse trees using different materials and forms

Creating a Jesse Tree

Materials: A large dry branch from an indigenous tree; 26 circles made from recycled cardboard; string or coloured wool; enough leaves cut out of green recycled cardboard for each member of the family to add one new leaf for each day of advent; 26 symbolic decorations as described below.

Construction:

- Choose a dry branch from an indigenous tree. It may have to be a dead branch given the time of year!
- Stabilize this branch in a pot or vase with soil or pebbles.
- Create 26 circles using recycled cardboard.
- Write dates on the circles from 30/11 through to 25/12 and punch holes in the top of each circle.
- Tie the circles to the Jesse tree with pieces of string or coloured wool.
- Display the Jesse tree with its dates in your home as an advent calendar from Sun 29 Nov.
- Family members take turns to replace the appropriate date with a symbolic ornament and each member also places a green leaf on the Jesse tree for every day in advent.

Procedure:

- On each day of advent, at a suitable time for the whole family to gather together:
 - Read the Bible verse for the day.
 - Discuss the relevant message.
 - Exchange the relevant date for the specified or other appropriate symbol, preferably asking a child who has just learnt their numbers to help with this process. Symbols may be two or three dimensional.
 - Ask each member of the family to tie a green leaf on the tree to symbolize the beginning of rebirth.
 - Challenge each family member to take appropriate action, using the ideas below as a guideline.
 - Conclude with an appropriate prayer for the age of the children. Sample prayers are provided.
- Emphasize the idea of simple living, reduced consumption, and respect for all creation as essential features of advent as you wait expectantly and prepare as a family to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Daily Content:

Date: 29 November

Symbol: Jesse tree & calendar dates on cardboard circles for the season of advent

Reading: Genesis 1:8-9; Revelation 22:1-2

Message: Advent is a season of waiting and preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus on Christmas day and his return at the end of time. We rejoice in God's gift of life for all creation. We focus on the past and the future as we confess our responsibility as stewards of creation, called to live holy lives, to love "God with all your heart" and "your neighbour as yourself". We celebrate the promise of advent but hear the warning to be prepared regarding our accountability and judgement on sin. Advent is a season of fasting, critical self-assessment, repentance, and transformation.

The story of creation includes a picture of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the story of the new creation describes the tree of life. The Jesse tree connects the story of creation, through the birth of Jesus, with the story of a new creation. The ornaments symbolize Jesus' Old Testament ancestors and God's actions in the world. They tell the story of God's faithfulness over thousands of years from creation through to the birth of Jesus and into the future. As we add new ornaments, read the Bible, pray, talk and take action, we make a pilgrimage with God. The people's climate march today was the start.

Activity: Work together as a family to make the Jesse tree, dates for the advent calendar, green leaves, and symbols needed as ornaments to decorate the tree on each day in advent.

Prayer: Creator God,
You made the universe with all its galaxies.
Every form of life on Earth is shaped by your hands.
You look at all that you have created
and say, "This is good; this is very good."
You loved the world so much that you sent your Son, Jesus,
so that all could have life in abundance.
This Jesse tree reminds us that you bring
the promise of new life for all.
Help us to protect and care for the Earth
as we make our journey, not only through advent,
but through the whole of life. Amen

Date: 30 November

Symbol: A star

Reading: Genesis 15:1-6

Message: God loves to make promises. Have you ever made a promise that was hard to keep? Has someone ever made a promise to you and then broken it? When that happens, we feel sad; but God never breaks his promises. He promised Abram that he would have a family and a place to belong. God used a sign to show that he would keep this promise. He told Abram to look at the stars in the night sky and said he would be the father of a family like that, the family of all believers

with a place to belong on earth. The stars remind us of this promise and the fact that we all belong to each other, and must love and care for each other as the family of God and the community of all life in God's creation.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 30/11 with the symbol of a star. Depending on the children's ages, sing a song like "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" or look at a planetary chart and talk about how the planets orbit around the sun, or identify star formations. Discuss the earth's relationship to the sun and how this causes different patterns/rhythms in life like the seasons, day and night. Talk about families and how members relate to each other in an orderly way like the stars. Let each family member add a green leaf to the Jesse tree.

Prayer: Father God,
you have made us members of a family.
We all have fathers and mothers,
grannies and granddads,
and some of us have brothers or sisters,
uncles, aunts and cousins.
Help us to understand that we're also part of
the bigger family of life in creation
and that we all depend upon each other
just as the stars and planets belong together.
When we look at the stars in the night sky,
remind us that we are part of this awesome creation;
remind us that you are a God of promise
and that you promise to make all things new.
Amen.

Date: **01 December**

Symbol: A branch with green leaves

Reading: Isaiah 11:1-2

Message: God has a plan for everything. Long before Jesus was born there was a man named Jesse. He had seven sons, the youngest was called David. When David grew up, he became a great king. Jesus was part of Jesse and David's family tree, and part of God's plan for people of all times and places even though he was born many, many years after David. People waited a long time for the birth of the Saviour. Advent is a season of waiting for us too. We wait for Christmas, the day that we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It's hard to be patient and trust that God has a plan for us. Why is it hard to wait for something special?

Activity: Tie the symbol of a branch with green leaves onto the Jesse tree. If possible, plant an indigenous tree in your garden or a public space where it will be cared for and appreciated. Talk about the different characteristics of trees and how to recognize them by their bark, leaves, flowers and fruit. Point out how many different types of trees there are and how important they are to the local

environment in providing homes and food for God's creatures. Each place a green leaf on the Jesse tree as a symbol of new life.

Prayer: Living God,
we celebrate the beauty and importance of the trees you have made.
May our worship join with that of all creation so we are united in praise.
May the worship of our hearts be reflected in the care that we take of all creation
so that the trees of the field may clap their hands,
and the trees of the forests sing for joy.
Thank you that we are part of a family tree.
Make us strong and tall, with deep roots and good fruits. Amen.

Date: 2 December

Symbol: The Earth: a miniature globe, blue & green sphere, or picture of the earth

Reading: Genesis 1:26-31

Message: God created all things. He made the world and everything in it. When God finished creation, it was perfect. Today there is sin, sickness and sadness in the world, but God still provides for it. He expects us to care for creation too by showing kindness to all living things. The world is God's gift. He wants us to enjoy it and treat it with love and care.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 02/12 with a symbol of the earth. Talk about family activities to care for the earth, like saving water or electricity, driving less and walking more, growing your own vegetables, picking up litter, buying fewer things for Christmas. Agree to one family activity. Each member places a green leaf on the Jesse tree as a symbol of their commitment to live in a simpler more eco-friendly way.

Prayer: Dear Lord
Thank you for making this amazing world.
Thank you for making it so beautiful.
Thank you for loving all life.
Please help us to look after your creation.
Please help us to look after each other.
Please help us to put a stop to climate change
and actions that hurt your creation.
Please help us not to be greedy
and to trust you to give us enough.
Please help us to share what you have given to us.
Amen

Date: 3 December

Symbol: An apple, chewed apple core, or a snake

Reading: Genesis 3:1-19

Message: Yesterday, we read about the perfection of God's creation. Today, we read about Adam and Eve's disobedience. God said they could eat fruit from any tree except the one in the middle of the garden, but they were greedy. Many problems today come from greed - greed for beauty, knowledge, power or material things. This greed destroys the perfection of God's creation so we no longer live in a garden, but struggle instead to survive in the wilderness. Are you ever greedy? What causes your greed and what is the result?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 03/12 with the symbol of an apple, chewed apple core or a snake. Discuss ways in which your family may be guilty of greed. Agree to change the way you live so the world doesn't suffer from your actions. Each member places a green leaf on the Jesse tree as a sign of their commitment to change their lifestyle.

Prayer: Almighty God,
you created us in love to enjoy and to serve you and your creation.
We also know that we often do not do your will.
With clenched hands, we can neither give nor receive.
With eyes tight shut, we cannot see pain or beauty.
With feet of clay, we cannot dance in joy or run to help others.
We ask for your help to change our greed into generosity.
Open our hands and eyes, move our feet,
enlighten our minds to love life and to trust in You. Amen.

Date: 4 December

Symbol: A rainbow

Reading: Genesis 7:24-8:14 & 9:13

Message: When we sin, this makes God sad. Long ago the world became so wicked that God sent a flood, but God rescued Noah's family and enough animals for creation to have a new start. When the flood was over and his creatures were safe on dry ground, God promised never again to send a flood to destroy the world. As a sign of this promise, God placed a rainbow in the sky. With climate change bringing droughts, floods and hurricanes, we see the effects of sinful, careless human action in the world today. Has God broken his promise? Talk about this openly and honestly.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 04/12 with the symbol of a rainbow. Discuss how to become part of God's rainbow promise by actions to reduce climate change and care more responsibly for the Earth. Talk about the family's progress with responsible action. Each member adds another green leaf and renews their commitment to care for creation.

Create a rainbow by taking a glass of water and a sheet of paper near a window with plenty of sunlight. Hold the glass of water above the paper, being careful not to spill it, and watch as the sunlight shines through the glass to form a rainbow of colours on your paper. Rainbows form in the sky when sunlight refracts (bends)

as it passes through raindrops. It acts in the same way when it shines through your glass of water. When the sunlight refracts, it separates into red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

Prayer: Creator God,
you made the living Earth, with cloud, rain and wind.
Then you placed it in our care.
We confess that the way we live today
is changing the climate, the seas and the balance of life,
with serious consequences for the poor,
future generations, and the environment.
Build our lives into an ark for all creation;
make us heralds of a new rainbow covenant,
choosing life for all creation,
as our neighbours near and far.
Amen.

Date: 5 December
Symbol: A compass or a tent
Reading: Genesis 12:1-7

Message: Sometimes God asks us to do things that are hard to do. He asked Abram to make a long journey to an unknown place far from his home; but God also promised to bless Abram so he could bless others. Life was still difficult for Abram, but God kept his promises and never left him to struggle alone. Because he had to travel such a long way, Abram had to live in a tent and find his way when he wasn't sure where to go. A compass helps us find our way and a tent provides shelter. God's Word in the Bible is our compass in life and God himself is like a tent sheltering us from harm. He is described as tabernacling with his people, which is another way of saying that he pitches his tent among us.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 05/12 with the symbol of a compass or a tent. This is a wonderful opportunity for the family to go hiking or camping together, making actual use of the items used as symbols for the day. If you do this, place the symbols on the tree when you return on Sunday, together with a green leaf each. Introduce a spiritual element to the family's way of relating to God and nature.

Prayer: A five word hiker's prayer by Sybil Macbeth: "Step, Breathe, Gawk, Praise, Smile" or one by Denise Hill below with some modifications:
Thank you, God, for the rising sun,
and the gift of another new day.
Creation sings your praises and I am part of that worship.
Heal my tired soul; restore my aching bones.
Lead each step along my path today.
Quench my thirst with your living streams.
Like the cool morning breeze, your peace refreshes me.
Steady me on the slippery slopes;
protect me from hidden dangers.
Lift me up from the shadowy valley
to the mountain peaks so I can rise up high.
Bless my travelling companions along the way.
The trail is rugged and narrow, but you are beside me;
thank you, God, my trusted Guide.
Amen.

Date: 6 December
Symbol: A baby's crib
Reading: Genesis 21:1-7

Message: Have you ever wanted something so much you thought you would die if you didn't get it? It's hard to be happy if we focus on what we don't have, instead of what we do have. It can make us dissatisfied and jealous of other people. Sarah wanted a baby more than anything. As she got older, she began to give up hope, then God gave her son and she named him Isaac. At last her dream was fulfilled. But most of her life was spent wishing for something she didn't have. We should learn to be content with and to enjoy what we have rather than wanting something else or more than we already have.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 06/12 with the symbol of a baby's crib. Think about something you really want, then honestly decide whether you could live without it. What impact would this have on others and the environment? Add a green leaf each and promise to be content with what you have.

Prayer: Creator God,
sometimes you answer our prayers in amazing ways.
At other times, you tell us to wait.
Then there are times when you say, "No!"
Help us to understand that when you say, "No",
it's because you know what's best for us;
you know when the things we desperately want
will actually harm us, others, or the Earth.
Help us to accept your "No" graciously,
and to be content with the life we have,
understanding that everything we have is a blessing from you
so that we are able to bless others. Amen.

Date: 7 December
Symbol: A sheep or a small ball of wool
Reading: Genesis 22:1-14

Message: Do you have a special treasure? How would you feel if you were asked to give it away? Isaac was extra special to Abraham and Sarah because he was their only son and they had waited until they were very old before he was born. Imagine how Abraham felt when God told him to take Isaac on a journey and to offer him as a sacrifice. Why would God ask such a thing? Is God asking you to sacrifice something? What and why? How do you feel about this? Can we make sacrifices that improve life for others? Talk about this.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 07/12 with the symbol of a sheep or small ball of wool. List what God might ask you to sacrifice for the good of his creation. Choose at least one thing you could sacrifice as a family to make a difference to the problem of climate change, eg bottled water, plastic packets, heaters in winter, travelling by car. Add a green leaf each as a symbol of commitment to sacrifice for the sake of others and the Earth.

Prayer: Lord God, you gave all of yourself
when you entered our world in Jesus

and he died on the cross for our sins.
Help us to give some things of ourselves
so that others may be enriched by our sacrifice.
Teach us the ways of the Earth that are neither greedy
nor wasteful, but perfectly balanced for an equitable share
without having to barter for survival.
Help us to share creatively with your creation.

Amen

Date: 8 December
Symbol: A ladder or a stone
Reading: Genesis 28:10-22

Message: Jacob was just like us. He made mistakes and was sometimes unkind to others. Even so, God met with him and gave him a message in a dream to say that the promises he had made to Jacob's father and grandfather were also for him; that he would be blessed so all people might be blessed by him. What does this mean? Then Jacob promised God that he would give back a tenth of everything he had been given if God would care for him. How are you blessed? How can you bless others? What do you give back to God in thanksgiving?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 08/12 with the symbol of a ladder or a stone. Identify one blessing that you can share with others and make a commitment to do this as often as you can in the days ahead. Add a green leaf each as a symbol of commitment to use your blessings to bless others.

Prayer: *If at all possible gather bare-footed outside as a family for this contemplative prayer.*

Creator God,
you give us a place to belong
with roots stretching back over generations
and deep into our local context
connecting us with all life on Earth
across time and generations.

Curl your toes into the earth beneath your feet like roots reaching deep.

We are at one with the Earth,
fed and nurtured by her gifts.
As the Earth blesses us through you, Creator God,
may we bring blessings of life in abundance.

Stand on your toes and stretch your arms high as if reaching for the stars.

The beauty of the heavens,
the vastness of the universe with its galaxies,
call to us to reach high in expectation
of the richness of your promises,
with anticipation of endless opportunities.
You bless us with your presence
creating a divine link, like Jacob's ladder,
between heaven and earth.

Sink back onto your heels and stretch out your hands to each other to create a circle.

As links in your chain of connectivity
between here and there, now and then,

blessed by you as your family,
may we be a blessing to each other
as continuous links in an endless chain of being
in the beauty of unity with all life.

Amen.

Date: 9 December

Symbol: A scroll or the number “10”

Reading: Deuteronomy 5:6-21

Message: God wants us to treat others the way we would like to be treated. In ancient times God gave Moses ten rules for good living. They were called the ten commandments and they are still good rules for living today. We often don't like to follow rules, but all games need rules. They're not intended as punishment, but make it possible for life to be fair for everyone. These rules help us to make good decisions about how best to live life. What are the rules that help you to live happily together as a family? How could these rules be extended to include the whole community of life in God's creation?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 09/12 with the symbol of a scroll or a “10”. Choose one of your family rules to be extended to all creation and make a commitment to practice this rule in all life not just at home. Add a green leaf each to symbolize this commitment.

Prayer: *Inspired by the “Ten Commandments Prayer” by Pastor Paul Tautges of Cornerstone Community Church in Cleveland, Ohio*

Lord God, we pray that you would help us to:

- have no other gods before you and not dishonour you by replacing your ultimate priority for our lives with pleasures, possessions, power, or pursuits that deflect our time and energy from your purpose for us
- worship you in spirit and truth, living our lives in faith according to your Law to bring glory to your name as Creator of all things visible and invisible
- avoid using your Name carelessly or misrepresenting you by using your Name falsely, hypocritically, blasphemously, rashly or irreverently; speaking flippantly of holy things or acting in disregard for the sanctity of the life you created
- honour the wisdom of your pattern of rest for all creation, not allowing the “rat race” to rob us of time to look at the sunset, or our busyness to destroy the immense value of the Sabbath for all creation to celebrate your gift of life
- show respect for our earthly parents as gifts to be honoured and cherished; not forgetting the elderly but gladly accepting the role-reversal of becoming caregivers; and learning to respect your authority structures and hold them accountable
- not dishonour your gift of life by nurturing resentment, bitterness or hatred but cherishing the sanctity of all life and reflecting the light of your love in the darkness of this troubled and injured world
- hold the marriage covenant in the highest regard, pursuing righteousness, faith, love and peace, and respecting the dignity of others in our relationships with all life
- honour your provision for us by learning to be good stewards of all that you entrust into our care, avoiding self-centred spending habits and financial dealings that are unethical

- honour your truth by authentic Christian living and avoiding perjury, bribery, slander, gossip, or flattery, as well as creating a false public image of ourselves to impress or deceive others by making ourselves look better than we are in reality
- honour your gifts to us by avoiding any desire for what does not rightfully belong to us and greed for more than you have provided, treating other people's property and creation as a whole with respect.

Creator God, we pray this for this family, our family in Christ, and all creation. Amen.

Date: 10 December

Symbol: A red piece of rope

Reading: Joshua 2:1-21

Message: Joshua sent two men into the Promised Land to see if it would be safe for them to enter. This was dangerous and they were almost caught, but a woman called Rahab saved their lives by helping them to escape by rope from the windows of her home. In return, the men promised to protect her and her family from harm. She hung a red rope from her window to remind them of their promise. It was dangerous for Rahab to help them. It required tremendous courage. Can you think of a time when God gave you courage to do something difficult to help someone?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 10/12 with the symbol of a red piece of rope. Make a plaited rope out of three different pieces of fabric. Talk about the strength of each piece of fabric on its own and how much stronger it becomes when all three are plaited together into one rope. Discuss how we become stronger to cope with problems in life when we work together both as human communities and the community of life. Each member places a green leaf on the Jesse tree.

Prayer: Almighty God,
grant us strength to break free of our limitations;
the courage to step into the light and be truly honest;
compassion to treat all life with love and respect.
Grant us the wisdom to be still and to listen;
the love to forgive and forget;
the mercy to surrender our judgementalism;
and the joy to celebrate all that is beautiful and true in your sight.
Amen.

Date: 11 December

Symbol: A small sheaf of wheat

Reading: Ruth 1:15-2:3

Message: Naomi was a refugee who went to another country because of a famine. While she was there, her sons married local women but her life in her adoptive country wasn't happy, especially when her husband and two sons died, so she returned home. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, insisted on going with her. Many people today are forced into exile because of climate change and insecurity in food supplies. How do we respond? Have our actions helped to cause climate change and food insecurity? In those days, some of the food harvested was left in the fields for the poor. What does this teach us about food, the land and providing for the poor so they can live with dignity?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 11/12 with the symbol of a sheaf or ear of wheat. Bake bread together. Talk about the ingredients used. How much wheat would Ruth have had to glean to make a loaf of bread large enough to feed both her and Naomi? How much effort would have been needed to reduce the kernels into flour? What about the other ingredients needed, including wood for cooking? Discuss the difficulties of those with no money to feed their families. How do they feel? Do you have space in your garden to grow your own vegetables? Would you be able to grow enough to share with others? Each place a green leaf on the tree to symbolize your commitment to new beginnings.

Prayer: *From Caritas, Australia, "A Prayer for Food"*
Creator God,
thank you for the blessings of food, water, shelter, family and well-being.
As we enjoy a healthy meal together as a family,
we think of those who struggle to feed their families every day.
You taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread".
We pray this for the millions who go hungry every day.
You fed the hungry; inspire in us the commitment
to follow your example, showing compassion in action
and sharing what we have with those who have so much less.
You cared for all; help us to remember your command to love one another.
Help us to see you in each of our brothers and sisters -
especially those who are in need.
You are the Bread of Life; strengthen us
as we work for justice and equity in the world.
Help us to stand in solidarity with the poorest of the poor.
You came so that we could have life in abundance.
Our prayer is that this might be true for all.
We pray that communities and governments
might recognize their shared responsibility
to be more just in sharing Earth's resources equitably.
Help us to care more deeply, to live more simply
and to share more fully.
Amen.

Date: 12 December

Symbol: A small bottle of olive oil

Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Message: God had a plan for David to be anointed king of Israel. God has a plan for you. Even when we are young, he sees into our hearts and knows what kind of people we are and what kind of people we will become. Most grown-ups in those days just thought that David was a kid who looked after the sheep, but God chose him as the future king when he was still a child. God's servant, Samuel, poured oil on David's head and anointed him. God has a plan for you to serve in special ways. It's important to listen for God's call and to find ways to honour God in our lives. How can you honour God in your life? How can you serve?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 12/12 with the symbol of a small bottle of olive oil. Prepare two sets of icing for biscuits, one as usual with sugar and the other with lots of salt. Decorate some plain Marie biscuits with both types of icing. Make the salty ones look especially inviting with colour. Just put plain icing on the others.

Give each child one of each type of biscuit. When they've tasted them, discuss how something can look good on the outside but be bad inside. Some things don't look special on the outside but they're the best on the inside. People are like that too. God doesn't decide what we are like because of our looks. He judges us by what we are capable of - what's in our hearts. Ask each member of your family to place another green leaf on the Jesse tree.

Prayer: Almighty God, our source of power and inspiration,
give us strength and joy as followers of Jesus called to serve.
Fill us with gifts of the Spirit that we may be eager, equipped
and faithful in serving you with faith, hope and love,
for to serve you is our purpose and our joy.
Father God, yours is the beauty of creation and all that is good.
Help us to begin each day joyfully in your name,
and to spend each day in loving service of you and all of creation.
May everything we do begin with your inspiration,
continue with your saving help,
and reach completion through the power of your Spirit
as we work together with unselfish love.
Amen.

Date: 13 December

Symbol: A picture of a cave or a hurricane

Reading: 1 Kings 19:3-13

Message: Despite Elijah being a man of God and a prophet, he was still afraid of Jezebel. He ran away and hid from her. What had happened to his faith? Have you ever felt so afraid of something that you just wanted to hide away in a little corner somewhere? Even then, God did not abandon Elijah. He gave him food and water to make him strong enough for the long journey he planned to take to hide in a cave on Mt Horeb. When he was in the cave, God showed him, through the forces of nature, that he doesn't always make his presence known to us in huge, spectacular ways. He also shows himself to us in small, gentle ways like a whisper. Does God sometimes reveal himself to you in nature? Are there times when the forces of nature make you ask questions about who God is? He also challenges our faith and obedience to our calling like Elijah by asking, "What are you doing here?" Are there times when you feel God is asking you this question?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 13/12 with a symbolic picture of a cave or a hurricane. Watch a National Geographic video together and discuss how God reveals himself to you through his creation. Talk about how God might like you to respond to his self-revelation in nature. Make a commitment as a family to watch more documentaries about creation together and to have more outings in nature to develop a better understanding of the nature of God who created the whole universe. Practise listening to the pulse of life as God talks to you through his creation. Then place another green leaf each on the tree.

Prayer: Creator God,
as we take time to know you through your creation,
help us to listen deep in our inner selves
to the rhythm of the Earth breathing;
to the pulse of your heart beating
as you breathe life into all that you have made.

Open our ears and eyes and hearts and minds
to the words you choose to speak to us.
We thank you for making us wonderfully unique;
for knitting together our talents, moods, personalities;
our dreams and your special purpose for each one of us.
At the moment of our creation, you were there,
shaping us and loving us beyond measure,
an integral part of this vast universe
that you have formed with such infinite care.
You know our every need this day and this season;
You provide us with abundant blessings and gifts,
sufficient for us to meet each challenge with strength and courage.
Help us, Father, to listen for your whisper;
help us to hear what it is that you ask of us today
and in this special season of advent.
Help us as a family to live and act with compassion and kindness;
to learn to engage boldly with all that life holds for us;
to be guided by the example of Jesus
as we serve with excitement, obedience and joy.
Amen.

Date: 14 December

Symbol: A royal sceptre or a star of David

Reading: Esther 4:9-16

Message: God is at work in everything even when we can't see or understand what he's doing. Esther was a beautiful Jewish woman who became queen under the rule of King Xerxes. She was also very brave and helped to save the Jews from persecution. When her cousin, Mordecai, told her of the danger to her people, she put her own life at risk to save the lives of others. She did this when Mordecai challenged her by saying: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" Have you come into the world specifically for such a time as this? Why?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 14/12 with the symbol of a royal sceptre or star of David. Talk together as a family to identify one major crisis in your community that you believe you might be specially equipped and called to help to resolve by your actions. Pray for wisdom, guidance, strength and courage to act together as a family to help resolve it. Then place another green leaf each on the tree as a sign of your commitment.

Prayer: Lord God,
have you placed us in this part of the world
at precisely this time for a specific reason?
Help us to be honest about ourselves and our context.
Give us discernment and wisdom to understand
where and how we can make a difference as a family.
We call on you today for your divine guidance and help.
There are crises all around us that call for action.
Our hearts are troubled, but we will strive to focus on you,
as your infinite wisdom shows us the right way to respond
with love, justice and compassion.
Thank you for being there for us and allowing us

to cry out to you in times of need and crisis.
It's amazing that the Lord of the universe
takes time to listen to us and to care for us.
Lord God, there are things happening around us right now
that we do not understand that make us feel weak, helpless and afraid.
Yet even in the midst of crises, we know that you are Lord;
we know you hold everything in your hand and we can trust you.
Grant us strength and insight to know what action
you want us to take, and courage to handle the situation
in a way that will bring glory to your name.
Amen.

Date: 15 December

Symbol: A small candle or a set of Christmas lights

Reading: Isaiah 9:2, 6

Message: Many years before the birth of Jesus, the prophets predicted the coming of a Messiah. They reminded the people that God wanted them to be kind and just towards each other, and to worship God. They also spoke of the promised Saviour of the world. They bring a message of hope for the future no matter how bad things might seem in our local context. They reminded the people that God had not forgotten them and that he would send a child who would be the Saviour of the world. This is his promise to all creation.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 15/12 with the symbol of a small candle or Christmas lights. Yesterday you identified a major crisis in your community that you thought you might be specially equipped and called to help resolve. You prayed for wisdom, guidance, strength and courage to act together as a family. Now talk about what you think God is asking you to do and make plans to act appropriately according to God's purposes. Each one places another green leaf on the Jesse tree to symbolize their commitment to a new beginning.

Prayer: *Based on a prayer by Pope John Paul II*

Holy Father, look upon this humanity of ours
as it takes its first shaky steps
along the path of the third millennium.
Life is still deeply marked
by hatred, violence and oppression,
but the thirst for justice, truth and grace
still finds a space in the hearts of many people
who are waiting for salvation in Jesus.
We need to live the salvific message of the Gospel
for suffering humanity and the injured Earth.
Sanctify us with your grace and send us out
into the darkness of this world to shine
with the light of your love and mercy.
Moved by the power of your Holy Spirit,
may we help to bring the salvation of Christ
to all creation in this time and space. Amen

Date: 16 December

Symbol: A picture of a wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, or calf and lion together

Reading: Isaiah 11:6-9

Message: Animals are one of God's gifts to us. Each one is unique and special. God has created all life to be inter-dependant and linked in one way or another. Human sin interrupts the balance of life and leads to species becoming extinct. Think about the poaching of rhinos and elephants for ivory. The picture we have from Isaiah is of a world with all of nature held together in peace with no more violence, pain or war.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 16/12 with symbols of different animals together. Make a list of extinct and threatened species. Talk about the reasons why they have become extinct or threatened. Talk about the effects of industrial farming of animals, as well as bulk transportation and handling of these animals at abattoirs so we can eat meat. What can you do about this? Can you eat less meat or become a vegetarian? What about the feast you're planning as a family for Christmas? Each one puts a green leaf on the tree as a sign of commitment to new eating habits.

Prayer: *Including extracts from a prayer by St Francis*
Almighty God, you created the whole universe for your own purposes and to fulfil our needs. By our own fault, the beauty of our relationship with all creation has been damaged. As we repent and our relationship with you is restored, so is our relationship with all creation. Give us wisdom to see animals as gifts from you and grace to treat them with respect as your creatures. Hear our prayer, O God, for our friends, the animals, especially those who are suffering; for animals that are overworked, underfed and mishandled; for all wistful creatures held in captivity that beat their wings against bars, yearning for the freedom of flight; for any that are hunted, lost, deserted, frightened or hungry; for all that will be put to death as a source of food. For each one of them, we ask your mercy; for those who deal with them, we ask for compassionate hearts, gentle hands and kindly words. Help us to be true friends to all animals and to share with them your blessings of mercy and love.
Amen.

Date: 17 December

Symbol: [Picture of a whale](#)

Reading: Jonah 1:7-3:2

Message: God gave Jonah an important job to do, but he didn't want the job, so he ran away. How can anyone run away from God! You can't run away from God! God was with Jonah on the storm-tossed boat; he was with Jonah in the belly of the whale; he was with Jonah when he finally went to Nineveh to do the work God had asked him to do. It's crazy to try to run away from God and avoid the purpose for which he has created us. But even when we do foolish things like this, God loves us and watches over us in all places at all times.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 17/12 with a picture of a whale. Then play a game of spiritual hide and seek by taking turns to list things you know God wants you to do that you hide away from. Talk about how God makes it easy for you to do the things that you don't want to do. Agree to do one of the things that you've been hiding away from. Each place another green leaf on the Jesse tree. It must be looking wonderful by now!

Prayer: *Based on the prayer of Jonah from the belly of the whale (Jonah 2:2-9)*
In the depths of our trouble we call to you, Lord God,
and you listen to our cry even when you send us
into the storm and your waves sweep over us.
We admit we are unworthy to stand in your presence
because the darkness of sin surrounds us,
but you redeem us and give us new life.
In our distress, we remember you and our prayers rise to you.
With thanksgiving we promise to make our sacrifice to you.
Salvation comes from you, Lord God.
Help us to respond positively to your purposes for our lives.
Amen.

Date: 18 December
Symbol: Picture of a lion
Reading: Daniel 6:13-23

Message: Daniel understood that God wants to be our top priority, even if this is a risk to our lives. Daniel would not stop worshipping God and was punished for breaking the law. He was thrown into a pit with lions, but God protected him. People learn about God's power from situations like this. Other people learn to trust and honour God when we remain strong and faithful in difficult circumstances. Do you love God better than anything else?



Activity: Replace the circle dated 18/12 with the picture of a lion. Make a lion snack. Here's an example from the internet. Then each add a new green leaf to the tree.

Prayer: Lord God,
we can't imagine how terrified Daniel must have been
when he was thrown into the lions' den.
How incredible it was that he loved you enough
to keep on praying even when his life was at risk.
How did he feel when the lion's did him no harm
and he was set free the next day?
We confess, Lord, that we often compromise our faith
by giving up on you and doing things we know are wrong
just because it makes life easier for us.
There are many ways in which we banish life
to the lion's den because we can't be bothered
to live lives that honour your creation.
We often leave taps dripping instead of changing the washers;
we throw away rubbish instead of sorting and recycling it;
we leave lights burning and travel by car instead of walking.
We do these things every day, risking the life of the planet.

How can this bring honour and glory to you, Creator God?
Help us to take the trouble to put you first
by changing our behaviour even if it seems difficult.
Amen.

Date: 19 December

Symbol: A picture of Bethlehem or a shepherd's crook

Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

Message: Often God does things that surprise us. He chose the small town of Bethlehem to be Jesus' place of birth. God chose Bethlehem long before Jesus was born. Micah wrote about this. Even so, Bethlehem wasn't ready, so there was no place prepared for the birth of God's son. There are many people living in the streets in our cities because they have nowhere to stay. Christmas will soon be here; we need to prepare our hearts to make room for Jesus in our lives. We need to consider others who have much less than we do.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 19/12 with a picture of Bethlehem or a shepherd's crook. Let us remember the many homeless people in our cities. Rather than spending money on things we don't need, let's think about ways to turn Christmas into a time of joy for those who do not have the privileges and opportunities that we enjoy. Tie another green leaf each on the Jesse tree.

Prayer: *Based on the combination of a prayer from Housing Justice UK entitled "In Your House" and one by Jane Deren from Education for Justice*

Father, in your house
there is enough room for everyone.
We pray for those who live in crowded shanties
with paper-thin walls, corrugated iron roofs,
no clean water, no electricity, no hope.
We pray for families squeezed into one inadequate room;
refugees in tents, cold in winter, hot in summer;
young people in night shelters, lonely and apprehensive;
children living on the city streets,
vulnerable to violence and abuse.
We pray for people who sleep rough in all weather.
We realize that "home" is more than four walls and a roof;
it's warmth when it's cold, comfort in a difficult world;
it's the safety and security of calling any place "home".
To be homeless hurts not only the body
but the hearts and souls of those who have nowhere to belong.
Father, this was not your intention.
It is we who allow this to happen to your people.
It is we who must arm ourselves with your courage, love and compassion
so that we can help to build your kingdom of hope
where people can live in dignity, comfort and security.
Call us all home, Lord God, call us all home.
Amen.

Date: 20 December

Symbol: Picture of an elderly couple

Reading: Luke 1:5-25

Message: Zechariah and Elizabeth honoured God and he loved them, but they had no child. Then, when they were very old, God miraculously blessed them with a son called John the Baptist. Zechariah wasn't sure he trusted the words of the angel who told him they would have a son, so his voice was taken away as a sign of God's power. Imagine how he felt having such wonderful news to share and not being able to tell anyone? Their son came to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 20/12 with the picture of an elderly couple. Set up an obstacle course. Designate one member of the family as the leader. The leader shifts the obstacles out of the way so that the others can follow from the starting point through to the finish. Explain that John the Baptist was clearing obstacles out of the way so that there would be a clear path for the people to follow Jesus when he came. Often we have bad habits that create obstacles in our lives, preventing us from living salvifically. These bad habits often damage the environment, leaving creation groaning for our adoption as sons and daughters of God. Talk about this. Then put another green leaf on the tree.

Prayer: Lord God,
sometimes people wait for years to have children;
others wait their whole lives without receiving this blessing.
When a baby is finally expected,
there are still nine months to wait for its birth.
Advent is also a time of waiting.
This presents us with a challenge
because we want immediate action.
We live in a society of instant gratification
and we just hate to wait!
Yet you often call us to show our faith in you
by waiting on you for our prayers to be answered.
Impatience and instant solutions threaten our world today
because a "quick fix" is often a temporary solution at best
or an inappropriate answer that can cause further damage.
Help us to simplify our lives and to learn to wait patiently
so we can live in synchrony with the rhythm of the Earth,
which is slow and steady allowing for patterns of work and rest,
holding all life in equilibrium for the benefit of all.
Amen.

Date: 21 December

Symbol: A picture of a locust, bee, or jar of honey

Reading: Matthew 3:1-6

Message: John grew up in a strict sect called the Nazarene's. His diet was limited to locusts and wild honey. He lived a very simple life with no luxuries and spent his time calling the people to a baptism of repentance to prepare them for the coming of Jesus. It's odd that these days we prepare for Christmas by making life more and more complicated as we buy presents, gift wrap, cards, decorations, Christmas turkey's, mince pies, Christmas cake ... John wanted people to know Jesus as the promised Messiah. He wanted them to be ready to believe in Jesus. He knew the people needed to recognize and repent of their sins. Baptism reminded them that God forgave them for their sins. Because John didn't look like others or live like

them, the people must have thought he was a bit strange, but many listened to him and were ready to believe in Jesus.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 21/12 with the symbol of a locust, a bee, or a jar of honey. Give each member of the family a small cake box. Have old magazines handy with scissors and glue. Ask each person to make a box that represents who they are by decorating the outside of the box with pictures and words cut out of the magazines to represent their personalities. Then allow a time of silence for each person to think about their lives and the secret things they hide from the world for which they need to be forgiven, as well as things that have been done or said to them that have hurt them or made them angry that they need to forgive. When everyone has finished with their boxes, light a fire and invite everyone to burn their boxes in silence while they meditate on this as a sign of complete renewal because of Jesus and starting afresh with no baggage from the past. End with a braai, preferably vegetarian! And remember to add another green leaf each to the tree.

Prayer: Lord God,
when the time was ripe and the hour had come,
you sent your servant, John,
to proclaim the coming of the Messiah.
A voice is heard in the darkness,
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Make way! Level the valleys! Straighten the paths!
Prepare the way for his coming, the coming of the Lord!”
Lord God, open the ears of our souls
to hear your word of salvation.
Open our hearts and minds
to see, feel, hear, and know your salvation.
In the lonely places, the wilderness
where we stand forlorn, windswept and alone,
your voice calls out: “Prepare a way for the Lord.”
In the dark places, the shadows,
where we hide our fears,
embrace our tears as your voice calls out:
“Prepare a way for the Lord.”
In the desert places where we walk,
the streets we roam, the paths we cross, guide our feet.
Take us to the places where you would have us go;
give us words that you would have us speak
that we too might point the way
in this advent season of promise and preparation.
Amen

Date: 22 December

Symbol: An angel

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Message: God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus. This was an enormous challenge as she was probably no more than 14 years of age. Jesus needed a mother who was smart and strong and loving, but also one who could make a major sacrifice. The angel brought God’s message to Mary. Although she was puzzled by it, she was willing

to submit to God's purposes for her. Mary understood that this would be a difficult and important task, but she knew God would be her guide and she loved him enough to trust in him, so she said "Yes" with a joyful heart.



Activity: Replace the circle dated 22/12 with the symbol of an angel. Use an angel cookie cutter and a simple recipe for making biscuits. Bake angel biscuits decorated with icing sugar as a gift to carry the message of God's love to someone in need in your community. One of these biscuits could also be used as your symbol for the Jesse tree. An alternative or additional activity to that of baking angel biscuits would be to identify one good quality personal possession that you could clean up, mend, wrap and deliver to someone who might otherwise not receive a gift for Christmas. Then add a new green leaf to the tree.

Prayer: In "Praying in Colour" on the internet, Sybil Macbeth talks about doodling in prayer. She says, "When I doodle in prayer I try to let go of my expectations and trust God. 'Here's what I think I want, God; now it's yours.' God knows the real needs and has marvelous things in mind for my friends and for me." Here's an example of one of Sybil's doodle prayers:
As you think about the challenge that Mary faced as the mother of Jesus in her teens, try a combined family doodle prayer about the challenges that you are facing at present.

Date: 23 December
Symbol: A carpentry tool of some kind
Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Message: Yesterday we talked about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Today we learn about his earthly, adopted father, Joseph, who was a carpenter. Once again, an angel brought a message from God in a dream to say that her baby would be very special because God had chosen her. When Joseph woke up, he knew that he and Mary were part of God's plan. He went ahead with his preparations for their marriage and the birth of Jesus.

Activity: Replace the circle dated 23/12 with the symbol of a carpentry tool of some kind. I'm pretty sure, as a carpenter, one of the first things Joseph did to prepare for the birth of Jesus would have been to make a crib for the baby. Why don't you, as a family, start preparing a nativity scene to put up tomorrow evening? You could use a cardboard box as the stable and old toilet rolls covered in scraps of fabric to make the figures of Joseph, Mary, the shepherds and the angels, as well as some sheep if you stick cotton wool on the cardboard toilet rolls and matchsticks for legs. Some of you may have more creative ideas, but every family is able to make a nativity scene of some kind in preparation for Christmas. Add an extra green leaf each. Your Jesse tree must be almost completely covered with leaves and symbols now. It will be a wonderful sign of new life in Christ on Christmas day when you celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Prayer: *Hold hands and turn slowly in a circle while someone stands in the centre holding a candle and reads the following prayer from the internet, www.faithandworship.com*
Circle us, Lord,

circle us with the light of your presence,
 bright within this dark world.
 Enable us to be overcomers of fear and temptation.
 Enable us to be victors over sin and despair.
 Enable us to become that which you would desire.
 (Silent prayer)
 Lord of creation, Lord of salvation,
 Circle us with the light of you presence.
 Circle us, Lord,
 circle our family within the shelter of your outstretched arms.
 Protect them in each moment of their daily lives.
 Protect them in the decisions that they face.
 Protect their homes and relationships.
 (Silent prayer)
 Lord of creation, Lord of salvation,
 Circle our families and homes with the light of you presence.
 Circle us, Lord,
 circle this nation with advent love and hope.
 Create a desire to listen to the advent message.
 Create a willingness to understand and respond.
 Create a need to reach out to the Christ child.
 (Silent prayer)
 Lord of creation, Lord of salvation,
 Circle our nation with the light of you presence.
 Circle us, Lord,
 circle this world with the wholeness and joy of salvation.
 Where there is sickness, injury or disease, bring your healing.
 Where there is hunger and despair, bring your hope.
 Where there is injustice and oppression, bring equity and freedom.
 (Silent prayer)
 Lord of creation, Lord of salvation,
 Circle this world with the light of you presence.
 Amen.

Date: 24 December

Symbol: Sandals

Reading: Luke 2:1-5

Message: Taking a trip can be great fun, especially if you are going on holiday. Sometimes it's not such fun, like going to the doctor when you're sick. But usually when we're on a journey, whether it's a short trip or a long one, we learn something new along the way. Mary and Joseph went on a journey. They had to walk all the way so it took a long time. It wasn't a holiday and Mary was near the end of her pregnancy so it must have been quite a strain. But this was all part of God's plan for the birth of his Son. That was one of the things that Mary and Joseph learnt along the way. You have been making a pilgrimage with God through the season of advent. What have you learnt along the way?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 24/12 with the symbol of a pair of sandals. Yesterday you spent time as a family making a nativity scene. Put your nativity scene on display next to your Jesse tree and add another green leaf each. Let each member of the family talk about their favourite part of the pilgrimage you've made together through advent as you wait to celebrate the birth of Jesus and his return

at the end of time. Listen to why a particular part of the journey has been especially meaningful to each one of you.

Prayer: *From two prayers on the internet, www.faithandworship.com (with modifications)*

Almighty God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
from the very beginning was your Word
that spoke the universe into being; your Word
that thunders from the skies; your Word
that flows like mountain streams; your Word
that whispers in the morning breeze; your Word
revealed through priests and kings and prophets; your Word
revealed through the praises of angels; your Word
revealed in humble service; your Word
revealed through a tiny child; your Word
alive from the very beginning of all things
and through to eternity.

May this eternal truth be always in our hearts
that the God who breathed life into being,
placed the galaxies into the far reaches of outer space,
and designed a butterfly's wing
is the God who entrusted his own life
into the care of ordinary people like you and me,
became vulnerable that we might know
how strong is the power of Love -
a mystery so deep it is impossible to grasp;
a mystery so beautiful it is impossible to ignore.

Amen.

Date: 25 December

Symbol: A star on the very top of the Jesse tree

Reading: Luke 2:6-21

Message: Our waiting is over. Baby Jesus is born. The star is shining. The angels are singing. the shepherd are worshipping. Our Saviour is here. How happy Mary must have been with her beautiful baby. She knew that raising God's Son would be an enormous challenge but, for the moment, she is amazed by everything surrounding his birth. When sin first entered the world, God made a promise. Even when the people forgot about God and his promises, God didn't forget about the people. He guided them, protected them, and loved them even when they were sinful. God is faithful and today his promises are all fulfilled in Jesus. What is your favourite part of the Christmas story?

Activity: Replace the circle dated 25/12 with a star on the very top of your Jesse tree. Instead of adding to the consumer-orientation of Christmas, adopt a Secret Santa approach using "pass the parcel" as a process for distributing gifts. This can be followed by "love bartering" to exchange unsuitable or unwanted gifts with more suitable ones received by others. This places far less financial strain on family members as each person purchases only one gift. Suggest a particular theme for the gifts and a maximum cost, eg something humorous, a book, toiletries, an ornament, or recorded music. Your gifts could even comprise a simple written commitment to help with an essential task on a specified date in the future, or

when called upon to perform this task, eg washing the car, cleaning the windows, washing the dishes, feeding the pets, doing the ironing, etc.

You might like to add one extra gift each for the children with a little adventure to the giving. Have a different coloured ball of wool for each child. Tie their gift to the end of the wool and unravel it in such a way that you create a maze of wool to be followed in order for each child to find their particular gift.

Finish the day by each placing one final green leaf on the Jesse tree and singing Christmas carols together as a family.

Prayer:

A combination of two prayers from the internet, www.faithandworship.com and Wilda English from "Thoughts about God" (with modifications)

Father God,
we worship the birth of a baby,
and in doing so we acknowledge you, Lord God,
reaching down to touch the earth
and bless it once again;
to walk with you in the garden
in the cool of the evening.

We worship the birth of a Saviour,
an infant in whose fragility
lay all the signs of sacrifice;
born in humility,
growing into his kingdom
as the Bible's Promised One.

We worship Jesus, Saviour and King.

God grant us the light of Christmas, which is faith;
the warmth of Christmas, which is purity;
the righteousness of Christmas, which is justice;
the belief in Christmas, which is truth;
the all of Christmas, which is Christ. Amen.

Examples of Advent wreaths for Sunday services leading up to Christmas day
Using an Advent Wreath for the Liturgy in the Lead-up to Christmas 2015



The idea is to keep the advent wreath simple, using only locally grown greenery and a means of keeping the plants fresh using oasis or a circular container. Pot plants placed in a circular arrangement can also be used for this purpose with the contents planted in the church garden after Christmas. Some people like to include some colour in the arrangement, but the important aspect from a symbolic point of view is the evergreen content. You will need five candles, three that are blue, purple or lilac to be lit on the first, second and fourth Sundays; one rose coloured candle to be lit on the third Sunday; and a white candle, preferably bigger than the others and placed in the centre of the wreath or arrangement to be lit either on Christmas eve or Christmas morning.

The circle reminds us of God's mercy and love that have no beginning or end. The evergreen speaks of our hope in God of new life. The candles symbolize His light entering the world. The four outer candles represent a period of waiting with repentance and joy. The candles are lit one by one over four weeks to symbolize the darkness of fear and despair receding and the shadow of sin falling away as more and more light is shed in the world. The flame of each new candle reminds us that something new is happening and more is yet to come. Finally, the light of Jesus entering the world is symbolized by lighting the Christ candle for Christmas.

Often the readings for the first Sunday in advent relate to the Old Testament patriarchs who were Christ's ancestors with the first advent candle symbolizing repentance and the hope of salvation. The readings for the second Sunday may concern the prophecies of the birth of Christ with the second candle representing Bethlehem and the prophets. On the third Sunday, a rose-coloured candle is used with readings usually related to John the Baptist. The candle represents joy. Readings for the fourth Sunday concern the annunciation of Christ's birth with the candle representing the angels. Lighting the white Christ candle in the centre of the wreath marks the end of the waiting period of advent and the realization of the hope and promise of Christ over generations.

The emphasis in this time of waiting is on repentance and fasting, on simplifying life and changing our attitudes and actions away from possession to service, from individual self-interest to community inter-connectedness. The challenge is to resist the commercial rat race and prepare for the birth of Jesus with a deep spiritual focus that allows his light to illuminate the darkness in the world today. Try to eat simple meals with home-grown or locally produced food. Resist the temptation to rush out and spend money on extravagant gifts and Christmas decorations. Focus instead on the universal reconciliation that Jesus brings and to which we are all called.

The readings and prayers overleaf are suggested as part of the liturgy for the four advent Sundays leading up to Christmas with an ecological emphasis on creation as a whole and salvation for all life.

First Sunday in Advent

Readings: Psalm 146:5-8 as a Call to Worship; Isaiah 2:2-5 for the Old Testament reading; and Matthew 25:1-13 as the New Testament reading

Theme: Recognizing our rebellion and the effects of sin on creation, and learning to walk in the light of the Lord, reflecting the light of his love to all life.

Prayers: *Before lighting the first candle. The prayers used each Sunday throughout advent before lighting the candles on the wreath are copied from the internet, "Barnabas in Schools".*

Father God,
we understand that a candle cannot light itself
but needs to receive light from another.
Thank you for the light that Jesus brings to us
and the light we are able to pass on to others.
When a candle is lit, it can give away its light
without losing the light that it has.
Thank you for giving us so much love
that we can give it away to others
without losing the love we have received from you. Amen.

After lighting the candle, a prayer written by Rev Dr Nicholas Hood III (with modification)

Lord God,
We thank you for the light that shines from within.
Help us to recognize how your light shines within us:
The light of faith, the light of hope, the light of love!
Regardless of whether or not the sun is shining
or the rain is falling, remind us that there is a light
that you have given to us that will never go out.
Help us, through our lives,
to brighten the world of the depressed;
to glow in a world of darkness;
to shine when others struggle to find joy.
Remind us that we have the light of your love
and you have commanded us to let our light shine.
In times of war, may our light be a light of peace.
In times of hate, may our light be a light of love.
In times of poverty, may our light be a light of prosperity.
In times of scarcity, may our light be a light of abundance.
Bless us this day to be a light to the world.
Help us this day to let our light shine
that all creation may know
your goodness, mercy and power. Amen.

Second Sunday in Advent

Readings: Psalm 148:1-13 as a Call to Worship; Isaiah 11:1-9 for the Old Testament reading; and Matthew 3:1-12 as the New Testament reading

Theme: John was a voice in the wilderness to prepare the way for Jesus. We wait for Christ's return and must prepare for that event by building his kingdom here on earth, bringing renewal and reconciliation for all creation.

Prayers: *Before lighting the second candle. (Light the first candle before the start of the service.)*

Lord God,
a candle burns as brightly when it is new
as it does when there is only a small stub left.
Thank you that whatever age we are,
we can still be used by you to be a light to each other.
We recognize, however, that the flame of a candle
is sensitive, reacting to the slightest breath of air.
We thank you for knowing us so well
and picking up every little thought and feeling
that we have because you care about us.
Help us to be equally sensitive and kind to others
including all life on this planet. Amen.

After lighting the second candle, say this prayer by the Paulist Fathers

God of compassion,
you sent Jesus to proclaim a time of mercy
reaching out to those who had no voice,
releasing those trapped by their own shame,
and welcoming those scorned by society.
Make us ambassadors of reconciliation.
Open our ears that we may listen
with respect and understanding.
Touch our lips that we may speak
your words of peace and forgiveness.
Warm our hearts that we may bring
wholeness to the broken-hearted
and dissolve the barriers of division.
Guide the work of your Church
and renew us with the Spirit of your love.
Help us and all people to shape a world
where all will have a place,
where the flames of hatred are quenched,
and where all life may grow together as one.
Forgive, restore and strengthen us through Jesus. Amen.

Third Sunday in Advent

Readings: Psalm 126:1-6 as a Call to Worship; Isaiah 35:1-6 for the Old Testament reading; and Matthew 11:2-11 as the New Testament reading

Theme: We rejoice in the promise of healing and wholeness, of renewal and rebirth for the whole of creation that begins with the birth of Christ and depends on our attitudes and actions as we prepare for his return.

Prayers: *Before lighting the third candle. (The first and second candles are already lit.)*

Lord God,
the flame of a candle is the same
whatever the size, shape or colour of the candle.
Thank you, Father, that we all matter to you
and have equal value in your sight
even though we are all different.
Help us to see the light of your love burning
in everyone we meet and the whole of your creation.

You teach us, Lord, that the light of a candle
is designed to be seen and is best placed up high
so that it can give light to all;
it isn't for hiding away.
That is the lesson you teach as
as we reflect your light in the world around us. Amen.

*After lighting the third candle, read this "prayer for everyday for all creation",
collectively authored by the Millionth Circle Initiative, 5th World Conference on
Women and Circle Connections, followed by a Gaelic blessing.*

Creator God,
let us see one another through eyes
enlightened by understanding and compassion.
Release us from judgement so we can receive the stories
of our sisters and brothers with respect and attention.
Open our hearts to the cries of a suffering world
and the healing melodies of peace and justice for all creation.
Empower us to be instruments of justice
and equality everywhere.

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of the infinite peace to you. Amen.

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Readings: Psalm 89:1-4 as a Call to Worship; Micah 5:2-5a for the Old Testament reading;
and Matthew 1:18-25 as the New Testament reading

Theme: God breaks into this dark and injured world with the birth of Jesus. He makes it
clear that what happens on earth matters to him and that he chooses to journey
with us through life so that we may know his precepts, feel the breath of life in
him, and understand the nature of his love for the whole world.

Prayers: *Before lighting the fourth candle. (The first, second and third candles are already
lit.)*

Lord God,
although a candle flame burns upwards,
it sheds its light outwards.
Help us to put you first every day every way
so the light from our flame may grow tall,
sending out more light to the world around us.
Unless the light of a candle is passed on,
that light dies when the candle itself comes to an end.
You have made it clear that you want your light
to be passed on to others.
You are the light of the world and you call us
also to be a source of light in the world.
Help us to burn brightly for you in the darkness. Amen.

After lighting the candle, read this prayer from www.faithandworship.com

Into the daily cycle of our lives,
when all seems well with us and with the world;
when our yoke is easy and our burden light,
you break in

and scatter our complacency.
Into the daily cycle of our lives,
when we are comfortable and at our ease;
when the fire is lit but our eyes are closed,
you break in
and challenge our dependency.
You break into our daily prayers,
humble hearts and lay souls bare.
You break in;
you break in.
You break in when defences are down,
with an angel's shout
or the quietest sound,
you break in;
you break in.
And we change;
all things change
when you break in. Amen.

Christmas Eve or Christmas Morning

Readings: Psalm 96:1-4a, 11-13 as a Call to Worship; Isaiah 9:2-7 for the Old Testament reading; and Luke 2:1-14 as the New Testament reading

Theme: Creation itself recognizes the birth of the saviour and joins in the angels song of acclamation as we recognize God's presence breaking into all life on Earth.

Prayers: *Before lighting the fifth, central candle. (All the other candles are already lit.)*
Lord God,

at the heart of the candle's light
there is death taking place
as the wick is burnt up and the wax melts;
just as the light of Christ came only
from the death of Jesus on the cross.
We thank you, Lord, for sending Jesus to die for us
so we can be forgiven and come to share in your light.
When eventually the candles are snuffed out,
smoke, like incense spreads and fills the room.
This is even more powerful if the candles are perfumed.
It's like the invisible presence of Jesus
that travels everywhere with us,
even when we can't see a candle burning
to remind us he is there.

Thank you, Father,
that even when we cannot see you,
you are still with us.
May your invisible light shine brightly in and through us
wherever we go in the days that lie ahead. Amen.

After lighting the central candle, read this prayer, adapted from one written by Howard Thurman and found on the internet at Charles Henderson's GodWeb

Lord God,
when the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,

when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild creation,
to bring peace to all nations,
to make a little music with the heart ...
and to radiate the light of Christ,
every day, in every way, in all we do and all we say.
Then the work of Christmas begins. Amen.

A Blessing in Conclusion

Reproduced from “Web of Creation” on the internet.

May the Spirit of God,
who is above all and in all and through all,
fill you with knowledge of God’s presence in the Earth
and the presence of Christ within you.
Go in peace, serving Christ and loving all creatures. Amen.

Wishing you a blessed Christmas filled with light, love and hope.