

# Distinctive Traditions of Advent

BY AMBER AND JOHN INSCORE ESSICK

**Lighting the candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia's Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree can help us faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. These practices turn our hearts away from the commercialism of the season and toward stillness and reflection.**

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**I**n the days and weeks leading up to Christmas we are inundated with all manner of preparatory activities—attending sundry gatherings and performances, stressing over gift and shopping lists, decorating homes, and travelling to visit family and friends. We become exhausted and lose Christmas before it ever arrives.

Yet beyond “all the bustle you’ll hear”<sup>1</sup> during November and December, the Christian season of Advent directs God’s people toward stillness, reflection, and expectation. Advent, with its own distinctive traditions, is a rich time in the liturgical year that can counterbalance the pre-Christmas flood of consumerism and frantic activity. Congregations and families can welcome the new liturgical year by means of an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia’s Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree. These historic practices enable God’s people to faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. They signal that Christmas is properly understood and celebrated in light of Advent and in advance of Epiphany.

## **WREATHING ADVENT**

Fashioning a wreath with candles to mark the progression of time is not unique to Christianity, yet these candled wreaths are probably the most popular of all Advent traditions. There is no single method of constructing or utilizing an Advent wreath, though the most common ingredients include

an arrangement of greenery, a series of candles, and weekly lections.

Advent wreaths typically consist of fresh or artificial greenery with four candles inserted equidistant around the wreath. Some Advent wreaths have a fifth candle in the center, the Christ Candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve. Originally white candles were used, but in time violet candles were substituted to match the liturgical color of Advent and the penitential focus

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of the season. More recently, as Advent has been distinguished from the penitential season of Lent, blue has become the liturgical color of choice for many wreath arrangements.

Selecting colors for the candles is less important than allowing their light to guide our journey through

the season. When it is difficult to recognize the divine at work around us, the lighting of an additional candle each week signals ever so subtly the imminent arrival of the Light of the World. This progression illustrates that God's redemptive activity operates less like a roaring wildfire and more like a series of small, steady flames.

Sometimes Advent themes or virtues are associated with the candles — for instance, they might signify faith, hope, love, and joy — in order to foster important connections between the wreath and other liturgical acts of praying, singing, preaching, and reading Scripture. It is worth noting, however, that there is no single set of symbolic associations in Church tradition. We should be cautious not to overburden each candle with arbitrary meanings. The simple act of lighting a candle in conjunction with an Advent lection is a rich and sacred practice.

In many congregations the lighting of the candles each week is accompanied by public reading of the Advent lections. These moments provide opportunities for families and children to participate in the liturgy. Though the lections rotate among the Gospels in the Revised Common Lectionary's three year cycle, they retain the same foci for the four Sundays of Advent: Jesus teaching about the final judgment, John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, John the Baptist in different settings pointing to the one who is to follow, and Mary preparing to give birth to the long-awaited promised one.<sup>2</sup> The readings begin with Jesus' eschatological teaching; not until the fourth Sunday of Advent is the Christ child mentioned. The Advent wreath and corresponding lections habituate God's people in hope, expectation, and patience as they await both the arrival of the child and God's future reign.

While the Advent wreath is a liturgical staple for many congregations, celebrating and marking Advent time with a wreath can also be a meaningful familial practice. Our family constructs an Advent wreath each year out of fresh greenery from a local greenhouse and places it in our living room. We light the appropriate number of candles for meals, gatherings, and times of prayer. The presence of the wreath in our living space is a helpful reminder that we are in the season of Advent. The flickering flames are a serene backdrop for the lections and silence Advent invites. During a time when congregations and families are tempted by rush and hurry, the wreathing of Advent is a worthy tradition that encourages patience and stillness.

### **ST. LUCIA'S DAY: LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS**

Another distinctive tradition of Advent that is attentive to the coming Light is the celebration of St. Lucia's Day on December 13. Lucia (or Lucy), whose name derives from the Latin root for "light," was martyred during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian around the year 303.<sup>3</sup> For centuries the longest night of the year fell on December 13, and so it became customary to mark the occasion with a festival of light.<sup>4</sup> Lucia's triumph over the darkness is reenacted each year when a young girl, representing Lucia, dons a white dress and a crown of glowing candles, to deliver coffee and buns to all in attendance. Variations on the practice include "Lucia" leading a procession in which each processant carries a single candle.

Squeezing another event into our busy December schedules might seem difficult, but reclaiming Advent requires that we come to terms with the fact that many of the festivities we enjoy during Advent are better suited for the season of Christmas. The observance of St. Lucia's Day might be organized in lieu of a Christmas pageant or celebrated on the Sunday nearest December 13. As with the Advent wreath, St. Lucia's Day is well-suited for the home and can easily involve the entire family. When celebrated in conjunction with the Advent wreath, the theme of a growing light surfaces yet again. Consider drawing attention to the increasing hours of darkness and our great need of light. Lucia's story provides ample material for discussions of virtues such as faith, hope, courage, and charity. St. Lucia's Day is a distinctive tradition of Advent worthy of our consideration, for we are too often blind to the light that "shines in the darkness" (John 1:5a).

### **THE JESSE TREE: TRACING GOD'S PATH**

In addition to lighting the Advent wreath and celebrating St. Lucia's Day, making and decorating a Jesse Tree is a daily ritual of Advent by which God's people trace the narrative of salvation. The Jesse Tree derives from Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots," and from the accounts of Jesus' lineage in Matthew and Luke. Medieval artists depicted a sleeping Jesse, the father of King David, with a shoot emerging from his side, with Israel's kings and

prophets forming the branches that connect Jesse to Mary and Jesus.

The Jesse Tree is a wonderful tool for telling the history of God's redemptive work from creation, through the people of Israel and the birth of Christ, and on to Jesus' final reign. The story unfolds through short daily readings as ornaments representing each reading are hung on a tree.

Of all the practices of Advent discussed here, the Jesse Tree requires the most preparation. In addition to constructing a two- or three-dimensional "tree," you should make an ornament for each day of Advent. Because Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, and Christmas can fall on any day of the week, the number of required readings

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and ornaments will vary from year to year. The Jesse Tree could be as ornate as a quilted banner or carved wooden tree, or as simple as a homemade poster or bare branch in a plant pot. Likewise, the ornaments for the tree could be hand-stitched on felt or drawn on paper by the children. Typically the images on the ornaments are simple, such as an apple to represent humanity's fall or a white lily to represent Mary. The simplicity of a homemade tree and ornaments makes the Jesse Tree particularly suitable for children.

The annual rehearsal of the salvation narrative is formative for children. From an early age, children who attend church inevitably begin to form their "canon within the canon" of Scripture based on the Bible stories taught most often in Sunday school or presented in Bible story books. Listening to and discussing a series of Bible stories during Advent will help children identify recurring themes of redemption in each story, and in time, hopefully enable them to understand the Incarnation in light of the greater salvation narrative.

Adults also benefit from rehearsing the gospel narrative by using a Jesse Tree. We typically gather news and information in sound bites and headlines, and seldom does any bit of it hold our attention for more than a few minutes. We are conditioned to guard our time jealously. This sense of hurried half-attention is exacerbated during the November and December holiday rush. As we gather each day to participate in the ritual of readings and decorations, we learn that not only the story of our faith, but also the manner in which it is told, are counter-cultural. We learn that the best stories take time to unfold and are worth retelling. Instead of participating in the daily grind of news segments and the seasonal pull toward shopping and gift-giving, God's people become storytellers. We slow down to reflect on the good news of God.

The Jesse Tree may lead us to deeper insights regarding God's call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-7) when we read it along with the call of the young boy Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-21), or the account of the exodus from Egypt when it is juxtaposed to the prophets' warning of the coming Babylonian exile. Phrases like "All people on the earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3) and "Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17) still ring in our ears as we reflect on God's purposes in the Incarnation. We find both continuity and novelty in Christ's coming as an infant, bringing divine light to the world. Through the practice of decorating the Jesse Tree and reflecting daily on the spiritual heritage of God's people, we come to understand better our own place in the story by tracing God's path.

Given the complexity of the Jesse Tree practice, a few practical suggestions are in order. First, *think ahead*. Several reputable websites and books describe a Jesse Tree, sell handmade ornaments, and provide daily readings. Though the Internet makes information on the Jesse Tree easy to find, the suggested lections for each day may need to be condensed or abbreviated to keep the celebrants from being overwhelmed by lengthy readings. Making the tree and ornaments before Advent begins is also advisable.

*Be realistic*. If you or your family are not in the habit of regular devotions or readings, gathering for the daily ritual of the Jesse Tree may initially feel unnatural. Therefore, we suggest you simplify the custom as much as possible for your first year. Telling the story in your own words to children is recommended since it may be more difficult to find a children's Bible with all the suggested lections included. If you do not have children, it may be that reading a few short verses of the story each night and hanging the ornament is all you need. Start simple and let your ritual grow over the years.

Finally, *be creative*. This pertains both to the method of decoration and the stories you choose to tell. Whatever material you use for your tree and ornaments, it should be appropriate for the group using it. Children may enjoy making the ornaments themselves, in which case imperfections should be allowed. Including new stories each year may be more difficult, but as you celebrate year after year, you may find yourself wanting to include lesser known stories of God's redemption that are important to you. You might be drawn, for example, to passages featuring God's use of women and children in redemption—such as the midwives' cunning in the Exodus or the boy who offered Jesus his lunch to feed the crowd. You might end up creating a two- or three-year cycle of stories, demonstrating that the Jesse Tree has become of fixture of your family's Advent season.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we begin to practice some of Advent's distinctive traditions, our hearts and minds turn away from a commercialized interpretation of the season and toward stillness and reflection. In lighting the Advent wreath,

we attend to the growing light and keep vigil for the coming savior. Celebrating St. Lucia's Day invites us to embrace and embody what she symbolizes: purity, generosity, and light. Using the Jesse Tree to tell the story of God's redemption encourages children and adults to develop the art of telling the gospel as narrative.

All Advent traditions involve hearing the ancient and future stories of salvation that prove formative for our understanding of the Incarnation. The continual and communal celebration of Advent over many years, however, yields the richest meaning for Christians. That we return annually to these stories and practices reflects both our need to hold them in our collective memory and the merits of habit in spiritual formation. Thus, in reclaiming Advent we rehearse our witness to the world as we prepare the way of the Lord.

### **SUGGESTED WEB RESOURCES**

The Voice ([www.crivoice.org](http://www.crivoice.org)), a wonderful online resource for all things liturgical, has helpful overviews of the Advent wreath ([www.crivoice.org/cyadvent.html#Celebrating%20Advent](http://www.crivoice.org/cyadvent.html#Celebrating%20Advent)) and the Jesse Tree ([www.crivoice.org/jesse.html](http://www.crivoice.org/jesse.html)).

The website [www.jesse-trees.com](http://www.jesse-trees.com) offers different sets of Jesse Tree ornaments, including a do-it-yourself cross-stitch kit. Parent and child devotionals, with questions for reflection and discussion, are available for each day of Advent.

Information on St. Lucia's Day is more limited, but these videos show how a St. Lucia's Day celebration might unfold in a church worship service ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=948h\\_gHSzW0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=948h_gHSzW0)) or in the home ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5tXLC1Fub8&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5tXLC1Fub8&feature=related)).

### **NOTES**

1 We borrow this apt description of contemporary Christmas busyness from Jay Livingston and Ray Evans's popular song "Silver Bells" (1950).

2 The Gospel lections in Year A are Matthew 24:36-44; 3:1-12; 11:2-11; and 1:18-25. In Year B they are Mark 13:24-37; 1:1-8; John 1:6-8, 19-28; and Luke 1:26-38. The Year C lections are Luke 21:25-36; 3:1-6; 3:7-18; and 1:39-45 (46-55).

3 Tradition holds that Lucia was born into a wealthy family in Syracuse, Italy, and raised as a Christian by her mother Eutychia. As a young woman, Lucia took a vow of celibacy. When her mother, who knew nothing of the vow, persuaded her daughter to accept the marriage offer of a suitable young man, Eutychia became quite ill. Not until she visited a holy site on Lucia's advice was she healed. Lucia promptly secured her dowry and gave it to the poor. The suitor, outraged by the sudden turn of events, informed the governor of Lucia's Christian faith. Lucia went before the court, gave witness to her faith, and was condemned to death. The intended instruments of her death, including ropes and flames, failed to harm her. Some accounts record that when her eyes were gouged out they miraculously reappeared. It was only after her throat was cut that Lucia died. She

has often been depicted holding a burning lamp or a plate with two eyes on it, the latter being the primary reason Lucia is the patron saint of the blind.

Her story is told in greater detail in Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints*, volume 15 (Edinburgh, Scotland: John Grant, 1914), 168-170. This work is available online at [www.archive.org/details/livesofsaints15bariiala](http://www.archive.org/details/livesofsaints15bariiala) (accessed August 10, 2010).

4 The winter solstice in the northern hemisphere, which is the shortest day and longest night of the year for people living north of the equator, fell on December 13 according to the unreformed Julian calendar. On our Gregorian calendar, it falls on December 21 or 22.

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