

Title

*Family Intentionality Through Holy Days
Seasons of Intentional Family Time
Family Spiritual Traditions through the Seasons
Creating Intentional Family Discipleship Traditions

Description

Leading up to Christmas Day and Easter Sunday can be busy times of school presentations, additional church services, community activities, and family travel. Many families want to make spiritual traditions that are meaningful during these times but are too busy to “fit” it into the schedule. We will talk about simple, yet meaningful and impactful ways for families to be intentional during Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter.

Session

I’m so glad for the opportunity to share with you today. My name is Trey Brooks and my wife, Candice, and I and our 3 kids travel full-time serving children’s leaders. We lead a ministry called Equip to Engage.

Today, I’m going to be sharing with you about family intentionality during Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter. Let me share with you just a bit about my upbringing. I grew up in the home of first generation believers and in a small rural church. In the denomination that I am part of, there are some local churches that follow the liturgical calendar very closely and some local churches that do not. I grew up in one of the churches that did not - other than Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. So, when I arrived at the university to study theology and prepare for ministry most of the church calendar information was new to me.

At the university, I learned of the great tradition and depth of meaning that is found in following the Church Calendar. In most areas of our lives, we have times of cycles and rhythms in our lives. Some of these help us to remember past events, some are to get us to come shopping, and others are to celebrate with our families. Our governments have days set aside, retail stores have an annual cycle of sales, we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries with our friends and family. The Church calendar helps us remember and celebrate the story of God. I believe whatever kind of church you are serving in, this session will be helpful for you and the families you serve.

Usually leading up to Christmas Day and Easter Sunday are busy times of school presentations, additional church services, community activities, and family travel - or Spring Break. I believe many people want to make spiritual traditions that are meaningful during these times but are too busy to “fit” it into the schedule. In this session, we are going to talk about simple, yet meaningful and impactful ways for families to be intentional and how Candice and I have approached this in our family. We are going to focus on 4 seasons of the Church calendar...Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. We will also talk about 3 Kings’ Day.

Maybe you’re saying to yourself, “what is the difference between Advent and Christmas, and where does 3 Kings’ Day fit?” Like I said, I grew up in a wonderful church. I loved

the pastor and people of this church. They are why I am who I am today. However, growing up I had no idea what Advent was. Maybe they talked about it, but I don't remember it. I don't remember an Advent Wreath. I thought the season of Christmas was from Thanksgiving until Christmas Day and then it was over. I thought the image of the wisemen being at the manger was the way it was. I missed out on some formational rhythm of the church.

As I mentioned when I entered theological studies, I began to learn tons of awesome things - things that I didn't even know we did in my denomination. Things that brought new and deeper meaning to the celebration of the birth of Christ.

First, Advent

What is Advent? It is a time of anticipation, expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the coming of Christ - both at birth and the second coming. Advent points towards the celebration day. It comes from the Latin word meaning "coming or arrival." Think of it like the time of preparation for celebrating at a wedding or moments of preparation for the addition of a child.

In the preparation there is an element of celebrating, but the actual celebration is what the preparation is pointing towards.

I think about all the preparations for Candice's and my wedding. First, I met with her parents, then I bought a ring, then I had to set up how I would pop the question. After the question was asked and answered, we called and told our friends and family. Then came the details...dress and tux fittings, decorations, service elements, invitations. We got married in August, so as soon as we finished college in May, she made a whiteboard calendar with everything we had to do and when, in order to be ready for August 14. (Which didn't bother me any, I love a good plan and seeing things checked off a list!) There was tons of preparation and celebrating along the way, but it all pointed toward the celebration day.

The same is true for those of you who have children. You find out a baby or a child will be joining your family. Then you begin telling people, decorating, doing a registry so people can help you buy all the things you need. Then, the baby or child arrives and you celebrate.

Or maybe it's an epic trip you are preparing to go on. You dream about the trip, you buy all your supplies, get plane tickets or train tickets, line up your hotels (or at least certain hotels, save money, share the excitement with friends and family that it's coming, take vacation. And finally all the preparation culminates in the celebration of your trip.

All throughout our lives there are times of preparation and celebration. This is the same for the Church...preparation and celebration. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost to name a few. We can use these times, these cycles to better help us understand the story of Christ, the story of God and God's people, and how each of us are part of that story. There are a couple different ways Advent is practiced including how the wreath looks. I'm going to share with you the most common. But in all practices, Advent is a time of anticipation and preparation.

When is Advent? The season of Advent begins 4 Sundays prior to Christmas Day. So it moves around each year. It isn't a certain set number of days each year. That's where "Advent Calendars" that can be bought at a department store lead us wrong. They typically begin on December 1.

In 2021, Advent will begin on November 28. Advent ends with the celebration of the birth of Christ on Christmas Day.

Is Advent in the Bible? No. It isn't a set celebration that's listed in the Bible like the festivals of the Old Testament. It is a tradition of the Church that helps us remember the story of God's people and of the birth and second coming of Christ. It helps us not only think about the birth of Jesus, but also about the prophecy that the Messiah would come and that Christ will come again some day - the entire story of God.

How is Advent celebrated? I think most often it is only celebrated in the Church during the weekend service. During the season of Advent, many churches set up an Advent Wreath on the platform. An Advent Wreath is very simple. It is made up of purple cloth, a wreath, 3 purple candles, 1 pink candle and 1 white candle - each of these having meaning.

The wreath - the evergreen represents the hope of eternal life and the circle represents unending love and care for us.

The purple cloth - represents the royalty of Christ as King of kings.

The first purple candle is the candle of Hope.

The second purple candle is the candle of Peace.

The pink candle is the candle of Joy.

The final purple candle is the candle of Love.

*One side note the second and final purple candles (Peace and Love) are sometimes switched.

The white candle, which is often a larger more pronounced candle is the Christ Candle.

What typically happens is each Sunday there is a scripture read and the candles are lit in that order with the Christ Candle being lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. You can find a great resource for scripture readings at lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu

Also, something to remember is that during the season of Advent, we are singing songs that are assisting us in the anticipation of the birth of Christ. Songs like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and saving songs like "Joy to the World" for the Sunday after Christmas Day.

So, that's often the general idea of what happens in the service during Advent. There are TONS of things we can add to this at church as well as at home. I want to take just a moment and share with you some of the components Candice and I have added to our Advent season at home.

First, we started with a simple Advent Wreath at our house and some readings on Sunday. I found something probably 10 years ago or more that we started using and have tweaked what we do over the years. Here's what it is...we have our Advent Wreath

set up, sometimes as a centerpiece on the dining table and sometimes on an end table. Each Sunday we come home after church, eat lunch together, we talk about what the wreath means, what the past candles we've talked about represent, and read a scripture. Then, the kids take turns lighting the one candle for that week and the candles from the previous weeks. Then, we sing a verse of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We close by praying. It doesn't take long, but over the years the kids expect it, and it is shaping their understanding of the story of God.

Second, a few years later we wanted to do more during Advent than Sundays. So, we found a reading plan that helped us read through the birth of Jesus' narrative together. We added things, took things away and created our own daily Advent readings. It's very simple...short scripture, a couple thinking questions, and prayer. We do this each evening.

Third, we started being very intentional about celebrating along the way of Advent. So, a few years ago, we added a weekly outing and a weekly activity we do together. For example for our weekly activity (these are at home), we've done caramel apples, we use wrapping paper and allow the kids to wrap their doors, we decorate the premade gingerbread houses, we make rice krispie treat trains - we found mold for this, we make Christmas cookies, this year we made simple ornaments. Then we always make a birthday cake for Jesus on Christmas Eve. When we come across an idea we like better, we switch it up. But our goal is inexpensive, easy to do things the kids can do without too much assistance, that help us anticipate the coming of Christ.

Examples of family outings...I go online and search for Christmas things to do in our area...parades, parks with lights, things to do downtown, Bass Pro Shop/Cabela's, tree festivals, concerts, go let the kids pick out inexpensive additions to our Christmas village. Often on our way home from these outings, we bring our daily scripture and read it together and do the questions in the car. Again we're looking for low cost, fun that helps us anticipate the coming of Christ.

This year, we worked with the Children's Pastor at our church and provided the daily reading for each family and supplies for 1 activity (ornaments, cookie mix, hot chocolate mix - to make and take to see lights, and popcorn - to make and watch a Christmas movie) plus suggested 1 outing to do around town.

On Christmas Day, we celebrate. We wake up early, read the story of Jesus' birth, light all 4 candles of the wreath. Then, for the first time of the season, we light the Christ candle and remind the kids the Light - Jesus - is here! Then, we open presents, play with toys, try on new clothes, and watch the Disney parade.

Advent is so deep and rich, and when we allow the scripture and God's story to be at the center, it will impact our families. When we are intentional about focusing everything we do around the anticipation of the coming of Christ...not the opening of presents (nothing wrong with opening presents...I like them) our kids are reminded that God loves them SO MUCH that Jesus was born as a baby. All the other "things" we do are merely tools to help us remember the real reason of Advent and Christmas.

I think we, in the Church, miss out on a huge discipleship, spiritual formation, narrative shaping moment in the lives of families because we don't emphasize the importance of the story of God during this very essential season and give them tools to lead in their home. We get caught up in the programs and pageantry of the season (nothing wrong with those) and miss this opportunity. How are we helping the families of the churches we serve be intentional?

Advent is a time of anticipation, expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the coming of Christ!

Now 12 Days of Christmas

What are the 12 Days of Christmas?

When I was growing up, I had no idea what the 12 Days of Christmas were. I had heard from ABC Family about the 25 Days of Christmas and I knew that started on December 1 and they were going to start showing Christmas movies. But what did the 12 Days of Christmas song mean? When was it? And what do you do with it? Other than the song, I had no knowledge of what it was.

I mentioned above that Advent is a time of preparation for celebration. The 12 Days of Christmas is that celebration we prepared for during Advent.

The song is derived from Church history. Yes, you heard that correct. It's not just some crazy song that was made about a random collection of animals and people.

When are the 12 Days of Christmas?

Let's talk about when it is to help us understand what it is.

The 12 Days of Christmas takes place during the season of Christmas. I know I just told you that the season leading up to Christmas Day is called Advent, so when is the Christmas season? According to the Church calendar, the Christmas season begins on December 25 and ends on January 5. These 12 days are the season of Christmas. "In the Dark Ages, in some Eastern European churches, the 12 days of Christmas meant attending daily church services. For Christians who lived during the extremely difficult age, the 12 days were a time of rededication and renewal. It was also a period when small, simple, and usually symbolic gifts of faith were given to children. Thus [So], in both coded poems and public worship, the twelve days were considered a holy period." "Though...[in our times, The Twelve Days of Christmas have been reduced]...to a little more than a silly Christmas carol,...scholars...deem it a very important surviving example of a time when...codes [were used] to disguise...teachings. Originally a poem written by...clerics, this song was transformed into a carol at a time when celebrating the 12 days of Christmas was one of the most important holiday customs."

So, it was disguised teaching. It was a teaching tool. Teaching of what?

My True Love - God the Father

A Partridge in a Pear Tree - Jesus on the Cross

Two Turtle Doves - Old and New Testament

Three French Hens - 3 Theological Virtues from 1 Corinthians 13 - Faith, Hope, Love

Four Calling Birds - 4 Gospels

Five Golden Rings - 5 Books of Moses or the Pentateuch
Six Geese a-Laying - 6 Days of Creation remembering God rested on the 7th
Seven Swans a-Swimming - 7 Gifts of the Holy Spirit
Eight Maids a-Milking - 8 Beatitudes
9 Ladies Dancing - 9 Fruit of the Spirit
10 Lords a-Leaping - 10 Commandments
11 Pipers Piping - 11 Faithful Disciples...a bit tricky because this doesn't include Judas
12 Drummers Drumming - 12 Points of the Apostles' Creed
The Apostles' Creed is not scripture, however it is an early statement of Christian belief - a creed - and is widely used by a number of Christian denominations.

So you see, exactly who wrote this poem isn't certain, but it was used by the Church to help people remember and learn things about the Christian faith. It was used to celebrate the arrival of Jesus into the world through the entire Christmas season - which is from Christmas Day through January 5.

Are the 12 Days of Christmas in the Bible?

No. I don't think it says anything about geese laying or swans swimming, but these common day things were used to help people remember Biblical knowledge that are most definitely in the Bible. I know for me personally since we started using this in our family, it has deepened my knowledge and has been a helpful way to remember how many Beatitudes or Fruit of the Spirit there are.

How are the 12 Days of Christmas celebrated?

In most homes, it isn't celebrated. It has been overshadowed by Winter Break from school, quick skiing vacations, New Year's Eve and New Year's parties, end of Christmas sales in retailers, people taking their Christmas tree down, and no one gives any thought to it.

I want to encourage you to celebrate this time in your homes! Here's what Candice and I do with our kids.

A few year back, we started to learn about this and created a rhythm in our family for Christmas meaning Christmas Day through January 5. Each evening, we talk about the song. We sing just up to that day. For example, on the first day...we sing from the song the part about the partridge in a pear tree, talk about the meaning of the partridge in a pear tree, read a scripture, ask questions and pray together. The next evening, we sing from the song about the partridge in a pear tree **and** two turtle doves, we review the meaning of partridge in a pear tree, learn about the meaning of two turtle doves, read scripture, ask questions and pray together. It doesn't take a ton of time, but it has become one of those things that is shaping and forming our children spiritually. I LOVE IT! (They love it too!)

We leave our tree and all Christmas decorations up until January 6...which we'll talk about in a moment.

The 12 Days of Christmas are the celebration for all of the preparation that took place during Advent. Jesus is come and we find evidence of that in the 12 things we are reminded of during the 12 Days of Christmas.

To our next topic 3 Kings' Day

What is 3 Kings' Day?

I had never heard of 3 Kings' Day growing up...ever. During my childhood, having the kings/wisemen/magi at the manger scene made sense. I didn't think about how they arrived later (as Matthew tells us). When I arrived at college, I met a friend. Her name is Alma. She was from a Puerto Rican family, and I learned about 3 Kings' Day from her. She called it "Dia de los Reyes." She told me about how on 3 Kings' Day she would wake up and the 3 Kings would have visited in the night and there would be grass on the floor because the camels tracked it inside as they left a gift. I loved this idea! Come to find out, it is a common celebration in some countries.

So, what is it? It takes place on Epiphany - this is a Church celebration of God incarnate as Jesus Christ. Epiphany emphasizes the visit of the Magi to Jesus and the fact that Jesus came for all people - Jews and Gentiles. Epiphany is also called 3 Kings' Day as the 3 Kings are celebrated for arriving where Jesus was living with his parents.

Epiphany is January 6. Epiphany or 3 Kings' Day is when we celebrate that Jesus came not only for Jews, but for Gentiles. It's when we acknowledge that the 3 wisemen/magi/kings arrived later.

When is 3 Kings' Day?

Like I mentioned previously it is on January 6.

Is 3 Kings' Day in the Bible?

As with Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas, 3 Kings' Day is not in the Bible. However, it does help us remember and point to things that are in the Bible. The kings arrived later. Jesus came for all people.

How is 3 Kings' Day celebrated?

For the most part 3 Kings' Day isn't celebrated much.

I think that this is an amazing celebration for us to encourage the families we serve to do as a family. So, I'm going to share with you what our family does.

Our oldest child came along and was getting old enough to participate in something like this. I wanted to do it, but I couldn't remember the details of what my friend Alma had told me, and I couldn't get in contact with her. So, we made up our own tradition to celebrate 3 Kings' Day with what we could remember from Alma and adding some.

When our kids wake up on 3 Kings' Day, there is grass (sometimes strips of cut up green paper) leading them from their beds to the first gift. The grass was left because the Kings' came in on their camels. When the kids get to this gift (sometimes it's a small thing for each of them or something they share), they open it. Also at this gift there is a riddle for them to solve as to where they will find the second gift. When they figure it out and get to the second gift, they open it and find another riddle. When they solve this riddle and find the third gift, they open it. Our thought was to drive home the point that the 3 kings searched and follow the clue (star) to get to Jesus. Then, we all meet back at the Christmas tree and read the scripture about the arrival of the 3 Kings to where Jesus was as well as their departure by another route (which we don't read that part on Christmas morning).

So, 3 Kings' Day isn't a season, but it is a celebration that Christ came for everyone.

Lent

What is Lent?

I like how Britannica.com begins its definition of Lent - Lent a period of penitential preparation for [Easter](#). This is another place that times of preparation and celebration are found similar to that of Advent and Christmas.

The Lenten season begins with Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is a reminder of human mortality and the need for reconciliation with God. On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded from Genesis 3:19, "from dust we came and dust we shall return."

Lent is a time of penitence as well as fasting in preparation for Easter.

When is Lent?

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday which is 40 days (excluding Sundays) prior to Easter. Ash Wednesday is 6 1/2 weeks prior to Easter. Lent ends with the final week called Holy Week. This week begins with Palm Sunday includes Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and ends with Easter Sunday.

Is Lent in the Bible?

How is Lent celebrated?

With the Advent, Christmas and 3 Kings' Day, this question seems to be appropriate. How are they celebrated. But with Lent, instead of how is Lent celebrated, to me a more appropriate question is, How is Lent remembered? For me, Lent is a heavy time as we remember the journey Jesus was on to Golgotha. The joy of the triumphant entry, knowing many of those people who soon yell, "Crucify him." The anguish of Judas' decision Jesus was aware of in the Upper Room. The loneliness we sense in the Garden of Gethsemane. The physical torture he experiences on the cross. The utter darkness of Good Friday. The immense fear the women who visited the tomb must have felt when the stone was moved. I do not feel that Lent is something we celebrate, but something we actively remember as we walk through these day.

So, how do we remember this time with our families? This past year during quarantine, Candice and I started something new. We read the typical Maundy Thursday scripture about the Last Supper. Maundy Thursday is the Thursday of Holy Week. We lit our family Christ Candle (that we use during Advent). On Good Friday, we read scripture of the death of Jesus and extinguished our Christ Candle. Then we placed a black cloth over it for the remainder of Friday and all of Saturday.

For this coming year, we are building on what we did last year. We are in the middle right now of writing a plan for our family that is similar to what we've done for Advent and Christmas. However, it will be going through the final days before the crucifixion. Scripture - mostly from the book of Mark, thinking questions, and prayer. We want to find ways to be intentional during the season of Lent as we have for Advent.

As we move to our final topic for this session. I'm reminded we have an advantage of knowing the story and knowing that Easter is coming. So even in the heaviness of Lent...Easter is coming!

Easter

What is Easter?

Easter, Resurrection Day! This day sets Christians apart - we serve a risen Savior. He is risen. He is risen, indeed.

When is Easter?

So, when I was a kid, Easter was on Sunday. I know it's still on Sunday, but for me now it's so much more. It's the journey from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday to Good Friday...I have been preparing and longing for the joy of resurrection day! But as I learned, Easter was even more than just Sunday, it's actually 7 Sundays! WHAT?! That's right! Easter isn't just one day, it's a season of the Church Calendar. It is the celebration we were preparing for all of Lent.

Is Easter in the Bible?

How is Easter celebrated?

I think as churches we are good at celebrating Easter. We have Easter Egg Hunts for our communities, our worship teams prepare something big for Sunday, we send out invitations to our communities. We plan to participate in these fun ministry opportunities with our kids. My question for you today is how are you helping your families experience the fullness of the Easter season?

This year, on Easter Sunday, we gathered around our Christ Candle and lit it and declared to one another, He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

I'm excited about something Candice and I are planning to do with our family this year during the 7 Sundays of Easter. We are going to be walking through the 7 "I Am" statements found in the book of John.

I am the bread of life.

I am the light of the world.

I am the gate.

I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the way, the truth, and the life.

I am the vine.

We plan each Sunday, just as we do during Advent, to eat lunch together, light our Christ Candle, read one of these passages, and pray together to remember He is Risen and the Light of the World is among us.

I am a huge believer that we need to help the families we serve be intentional. If we aren't teaching them ways to be intentional, many won't be. I think Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter are great times for people, who are new to reading scripture together and having family devotions or as Brian Haynes says, Faith Talks - to give it a shot.

These are stories many will be familiar with and most don't have hard words expect for Quirinus and is it Pontious or Pon-ti-ous. I believe, as church leaders, we can help the families we serve be more intentional about being the spiritual leader in their homes. I think the key is it must be simple, but simple doesn't mean shallow. There is profound depth in simply hearing the Word and responding to it.

Candice and I would be happy to share with you the guides we have created. For more information, you can email at trey@equiptoengage.org.

We have been using the Advent and Christmas one, shaping it with our family for quite some time and love it. We are looking forward to being more intentional from Ash Wednesday through the final Sunday of Easter. I hope this was helpful information and would love to hear any thoughts you have at trey@equiptoengage.org.