

100 WAYS TO MAKE THE SEASON SACRED

# FAITHFUL FAMILIES

FOR ADVENT & CHRISTMAS



TRACI SMITH

A holiday companion to *Faithful Families*:  
*Creating Sacred Moments at Home*

“Smith shows us how to grow hope, peace, love, and joy in our homes. Full of fresh, engaging, and helpful prompts and ideas, this book is a gift!” – **Jennifer Grant, author of *A Little Blue Bottle* and *Maybe God Is Like That Too***

“The gift of Traci Smith’s new book is that you can open it anywhere and find one simple, lovely thing to do, pray, tell, or make with your family that day (or let’s be honest, as Traci is, maybe the next day) to add joy and meaning to the holiday season. Advent is a time to draw near to God as God draws near to us in the birth of Jesus, and *Faithful Families for Advent & Christmas* is brimming over with wonderful, easy suggestions to help you do just that.” – **Wendy Claire Barrie, author of *Faith at Home: A Handbook for Cautiously Christian Parents***

“The beautiful thing about this book is that even though a plethora of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany practices are presented, author Traci Smith does not overwhelm families, but instead manages to encourage them to celebrate sacred moments and find together the true meaning of this holy season. This book truly is a treasure.” – **Glenys Nellist, author of *’Twas The Evening of Christmas* and *’Twas The Season of Advent***

“Traci creatively turns all kinds of simple acts into opportunities for both sweet and profound connection.” – **Arienne Braithwaite Lehn, author of *Ash and Starlight: Prayers for the Chaos and Grace of Life***

“Can you have too much of a good thing? Not if you’re talking about Traci Smith’s creative ideas for infusing faith into daily life. This book is a gift to all who want to enrich the spiritual lives of families as they celebrate Advent and Christmas with one another. Within these pages are rich insights, honest prayers, and compelling practices. Unwrap them with your family and enliven the spirit and the spiritual of the holidays.” —**David M. Csinos, Atlantic School of Theology and Founder of Faith Forward**

“As promised, far from taxing families with MORE to do during hectic Advent and Christmas seasons, Rev. Traci Smith offers families what we really need: LESS to do. In each of these simple, hands-on practices, Smith gives families the tools to slow down, wait, and focus on all that Jesus coming into the world means. This is a must-have for any family or children’s ministry leader’s library.” —**Caryn Rivadeneira, author of *Grit and Grace: Heroic Women of the Bible***

“Christmas can be overwhelming, and the faith we affirm can get lost in the shuffle. *Faithful Families for Advent & Christmas* will help families claim their home as a sanctuary from the overwhelming rush of Christmas. Families will also find everything they need to prepare for and celebrate Christmas. Families of all sizes and ages will find ideas to deepen their faith and grow closer to each other.” —**Lee Yates, Project Manager for *InsideOut Outdoor Ministries Resources***

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T R A C I S M I T H



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*For Samuel, Marina Lynn, and Clayton*

*With love, Mom*

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## Chapter 1: Beginnings

The four weeks leading up to Christmas Day are called Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, meaning “coming” or “arrival.” It is a season of waiting and preparation before the birth of Jesus, a time to prepare our hearts and our homes for the arrival of the baby Jesus. This time of waiting invites us to take time to slow down and reflect instead of diving in headfirst to all of the glitz and glitter. That we must wait for Christ to be born is a spiritual discipline and a useful practice. We live in a society that tells us we can have what we want instantly. The message of Advent challenges this and invites us into a time of deliberate waiting, though this is not the message we receive from the culture around us. The cultural expectations of the season to spend, to entertain, and to hurry are in stark opposition to the spiritual invitation of the season, which is to wait, to reflect, and to slow down.

The practices and prayers in this chapter invite you and your family to observe a holy Advent, rooted in waiting and preparation. The practices laid out here are not meant to add another “to-do” in the midst of an already crowded season. On the contrary, this chapter is an invitation for you to plan your Advent season around moments of connection and meaning before things get too hectic. Perfection is not the goal. How will you create holy space in your home and life this season? The practices that follow will help you answer this question.



## Spiritual Practices for Beginning the Season

### Set an Advent Intention

Spiritual practice is not just “accidental.” If your Advent season is to be a time when connection, family time, and spiritual practice are the focus, it will happen because you and your family have made it a priority. This is not easy, and it goes against the tide of culture. Before the hustle and bustle of the season, take a few moments to set an Advent intention. What would you like the season to look like? Would you like to intentionally limit the number of outside invitations you accept as a family in order to have more peace and less rush? Would you like to set aside one day of the week for family time? Maybe you would like to be guided by an Advent word such as *peace*, *joy*, *hope*, or *love*. Get the whole family in on the discussion, as age and maturity level allow. If you choose, write down your intention in a journal or somewhere the whole family can see it. The Advent intention will look different for each family, but here are a few examples:

- This Advent, we will focus on the Advent values of hope, peace, love, and joy.
- We will not be overscheduled this Advent, but instead, we will take time for one another.
- Every Sunday evening during Advent, we will do a spiritual practice together.
- Advent will be a time of peace and quiet for our family, not noise and hustle.

## **Create a Sacred Space**

Advent and Christmas are a time for decorating and making space. As you prepare your home for Christmas, consider setting apart a sacred space that will be devoted to some of the prayers and practices in this book. The sacred space can be as simple as a small table. Place this book on the table with perhaps some of the prayers in it written on separate slips of paper, an Advent calendar, or any of the other symbols you create as you work through the practices of this book. Perhaps you will add some candles or sacred objects from your own family. However you create the space, your family will know that it is set apart for spiritual practice. If you have the space, add a chair where family members can come and sit for a few minutes of peace and quiet during the season.



### Make a “Not-to-Do” List

Often, we busy ourselves with endless “to-do” lists, especially during a busy season such as Advent. One fun way to turn off worry and the tendency to achieve and to do is to make a “not-to-do” list. What are the things you and your family want to be intentional about *not* doing this Advent season? Maybe your not-to-do list will include “spend too much time shopping,” or “worry,” or “schedule.” Consider what takes away from your spiritual health and well-being, and put it on the list. The not-to-do list could be done individually or as a family. If you decide to do it as a family, you could do one collaborative list or have each person make their own list and then compare when you’re done. Approach this exercise with levity and fun. Sometimes the best way to figure out what we want to do is to define what we *don’t* want to do. The not-to-do list need not be long. Perhaps it is simply one or two things you vow to let go of this season. End your not-to-do list session with a quick reminder that God is with us throughout the season, no matter what we do (or don’t do!). Pray: *God, thank you for all of the possibilities this season of Advent and Christmas brings. Help us to let go of the things that aren’t important and focus on your Spirit. Amen.*

## **Acts of Kindness Advent Tree**

This Advent calendar is created by adding acts of kindness on a tree as they are completed. Here's how to make it:

Step 1: Find a branch from outside and put it in a vase.

Step 2: Write down acts of kindness (see below for examples) on paper ornaments and place them in a basket.

Step 3: As you complete each act of kindness throughout the Advent season, punch a hole in the ornament and tie it to your acts of kindness tree.

### ***Variations:***

- Put the acts of kindness ornaments on your Christmas tree instead of a separate branch.
- Write acts of kindness on a sheet of paper and put a star next to them as they are completed.

### ***Ten Acts of Kindness for an Acts of Kindness Advent Tree***

1. Hold the door open for someone at the store.
2. Return grocery carts in a parking lot.
3. Bake sweet treats and take them to a neighbor.
4. Help a family member or friend put up Christmas lights or decorate their house.
5. Leave a kind note on someone's windshield.
6. Write a thank-you note to someone who serves you.



7. Collect mittens and hats for a local charity.
8. Pick up trash in your neighborhood or local park.
9. Bring dog or cat food to a pet shelter.
10. Color paper placemats and take them to a senior center.

## **Paper Chain Advent Calendar**

An Advent calendar marks the days until Christmas, and a paper chain calendar is one of the simplest styles. Simply take 24 (or 25) strips of paper and link them together, removing one each day until Christmas. The chain is a visual reminder of how many days are left until Christmas. There are endless variations on a paper chain Advent calendar. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Number the strips as you put them together.
- Color Christmas symbols and scenes on the strips.
- Write down ideas for fun things you will do together and then do them as you remove them from the chain.
- Make an Advent chain in reverse: Instead of removing a link from the chain each day, start with one link and add a link every day. Each day you add to the chain, write down something you are grateful for on the link, or write down a memory from the day. At the end of Advent, you'll have a chain full of gratitude or memories!



## **Advent Wreath**

Many Protestant and Roman Catholic churches use Advent wreaths to mark the passing of the four weeks in Advent. The candles are lit, one additional one per week, for four weeks. On Christmas Eve, a fifth candle is lit to represent Christ, the light of the world. In this version for the home, the family gathers around a very simple votive wreath to have dessert together and reflect on each of the four Advent values: hope, peace, joy, and love.

To make your wreath, place four votive candles on a plate in a circle with a pillar candle in the center. Light one candle per week, starting with the first Sunday in Advent (four weeks before Christmas). On each subsequent week, light an additional candle. The first week represents hope; the second, peace; the third, joy; and the fourth, love. On Christmas Eve, light all four candles as well as the candle in the middle, representing the baby Jesus.

During each of the four weeks of Advent, on Sunday evening after dinner, sit around the table with your dessert and candles and go through the simple routine of lighting the candle, discussing the Advent value, and ending with a simple prayer. The depth of discussion will vary, depending on the ages of children involved. For very young children, simply saying the word and ending with the prayer is sufficient and lays the foundation for future years. For more in-depth discussion of each of the values, you may choose to lean on some of the practices in chapter 6.



### **Week 1: Hope**

Light: Today we light the candle of hope.

Read (optional): Psalm 25:4–5

Discuss: What does it mean to have hope? What do you think about when you hear the word *hope*? How can we share hope with others?

Pray: *God, we thank you for giving us hope. Help us to have hope and to share hope as we wait for Jesus to be born. Amen.*

### **Week 2: Peace**

Light: Today we light the candle of hope and the candle of peace.

Read (optional): John 14:25–27

Discuss: What does it mean to have peace in your heart? How can we share peace in our family and in the world?

Pray: *God, please help us to understand peace and to share it with others. We wait for Jesus to be born with hope and peace. Amen.*

### **Week 3: Joy**

Light: Today we light the candles of hope, peace, and joy.

Read (optional): Philippians 4:4–6

Discuss: What does it mean to rejoice? How is joy the same or different from happiness? How can we share joy with others?

Pray: *God, we thank you for the gift of joy. Help us to share it with one another. We wait for Jesus with hope, peace, and joy. Amen.*

**Week 4: Love**

Light: Today we light the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love.

Read (optional): 1 John 4:7–12

Discuss: When have you felt or seen God’s love? How can we show God’s love to the world?

Pray: *God, thank you for showing us what true love is. Help us to love you and to love one another. We wait for Jesus with hope, peace, joy, and love. Amen.*

**Christmas Eve or Christmas Day: The Christ Candle**

Light: Today we light the candles for hope, peace, joy, and love, and we light the center candle for the birth of Jesus.

Read (optional): Luke 2:1–16

Discuss: The day we have been waiting for is here! How does it feel to celebrate the birth of Jesus today? What does the birth of Jesus mean to you?

Pray: *God, today we are thankful for the birth of your son, Jesus, and for the lessons he teaches us about how to love one another. Help us throughout the year to share hope, peace, joy, and love wherever we go. Amen.*



## Prayers for Beginning the Season

### **A Prayer for Advent**

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As we wait for the birth of Jesus, we pause and think about what we want this season to be:

- a season of hope,
- a season of peace,
- a season of joy,
- a season of love,
- a season of family togetherness,
- a season of reflection.

### **At the Beginning of Advent**

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During Advent, we wait:

- We wait for Christmas Day.
- We wait to give and to receive.
- We wait for family.

God, please help us to be patient as we wait and to enjoy the journey together.

**While We Wait for Christmas**  
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While we wait for the excitement of Christmas Day, we pray for patience to enjoy the season with our family. May we always remember to be kind to one another, to spend time together, and to slow down when things get hectic. Help us as we share your love with others this season.