



**A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
TO A  
SACRED SEASON**



A fire crackling as Christmas carols play overhead. A much sought-after gift being opened to complete surprise. Cozy time with family. There is much to look forward to about Christmas.

But often, stress and busyness steal the Christmas magic right out from under us. So many things to buy, create, plan, and do! How do you find balance? How do you celebrate Christmas well?

This guide will lead you through intentional reflection so you can create a meaningful Christmas that works for you. One of the keys to doing Christmas well is making space to celebrate what we call Sacred Christmas. Sacred Christmas— Advent in the church— is a season for preparing your heart and mind for the arrival of God on Earth. It generally involves focusing your time, attention, and energy on God and God’s gift in Jesus. This is different from Cultural Christmas— the season of fanfare, gift-giving, and parties before Christmas Day.

Both Sacred and Cultural Christmas are valuable. Both help make the season meaningful. But if we aren’t careful and we don’t plan ahead, we can end up sidelining Sacred Christmas in favor of what we think we are “supposed” to be doing culturally. In doing so, we often miss out on the true meaning of the season and find ourselves unsatisfied and burned out by December 25th.

This guide will help you brainstorm ways to give yourself margin so that you can do both Sacred and Cultural Christmas well.

**Enjoy!**





# TAKE INVENTORY OF WHAT MATTERS TO YOU

WHAT IS YOUR MOST CHERISHED CHRISTMAS MEMORY? WHAT MADE IT SO SPECIAL?

Keeping this memory in mind, use the list below to narrow down what matters most to you this holiday season. Circle the things that you really love to do. Write in your own special holiday traditions. Use the box to write down your answers.

**DECORATE THE TREE**

**DECORATE INSIDE THE HOUSE**

**DECORATE OUTSIDE THE HOUSE**

**MAKING GINGERBREAD HOUSES**

**MAKING CHRISTMAS TREATS TO GIVE AWAY**

**MAKING CHRISTMAS TREATS TO EAT AT HOME**

**CHRISTMAS MOVIE NIGHTS**

**GOING TO CHURCH ON SUNDAYS IN ADVENT**

**LIGHTING AN ADVENT WREATH**

**HOST A FAMILY MEAL**

**HOST A CHRISTMAS PARTY**

**FAMILY PHOTOS**

**SEND CHRISTMAS CARDS**

**DISPLAY CHRISTMAS CARDS**

**ADVENT CALENDAR OR DEVOTIONAL**

**DRIVE AROUND TO SEE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS**

**FAVORITE CITY HOLIDAY EVENT**

**VISIT SANTA**

**SCHOOL PARTY**

**OFFICE PARTY**

**VISIT OUT OF TOWN FAMILY**

**GO ON VACATION**

**CREATIVE AND/OR PERSONALIZED GIFTS**

**CHRISTMAS PLAYLISTS**

**CAROLING**

## YOUR LOVE-TO-DOS



# CULTIVATE YOUR CALENDAR

## 1 CULL YOUR LOVE-TO-DOS.

While we would love to spend Christmas doing everything we love, it's not always possible. Maybe you recently went through a major life change or are in the middle of a big transition? Maybe your body is just not feeling as energetic as it used to? Take time to reflect on each item you listed with the questions below. Write your final choices in the box.

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**WHAT MIGHT KEEP THIS FROM  
HAPPENING THIS YEAR?**



**WHAT MIGHT KEEP THIS THING FROM BEING  
MEANINGFUL TO ME OR MY FAMILY THIS YEAR?**



**IN LIGHT OF WHAT I KNOW, IS THIS  
THING WORTH DOING THIS YEAR?**

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## WHAT MATTERS MOST TO ME THIS CHRISTMAS

## **2 PUT YOUR “WHAT MATTERS MOST” ON YOUR CALENDAR.**

Block time for each tradition on your calendar. Schedule the things you already know have dates. Choose dates for the rest. Be sure to include preparation time. For example, if you want to bake cookies for neighbors this Christmas, schedule when you will buy the supplies.

## **3 MAKE YOUR CHRISTMAS CALENDAR RULES.**

Book club book exchange? Costume design for school pageant? Work dinner party? As the invites flood in, we are tempted to say yes to everything. We believe that more experiences means a more meaningful Christmas, but that’s not always the case.

To celebrate well, we have to make choices. Saying no is hard, but when it comes to keeping our Christmas meaningful, we must protect our time and energy.

Reflect on the questions below. Then, use your answers to make Christmas calendar rules. Choose rules that help you protect your time and energy so you can celebrate well.

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**HOW MANY EVENTS CAN YOU HANDLE PER WEEK?**



**WHAT TYPES OF EVENTS GIVE YOU ENERGY?**



**WHAT LIMITS CAN HELP PROTECT YOUR TIME AND ENERGY TO CELEBRATE WELL?**



**HOW ARE YOU SCHEDULING REST AFTER OR DURING EACH ACTIVITY?**

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## **MY CHRISTMAS CALENDAR RULES**

(i.e. every family member has an out for one event, only two major events per week, etc.)



# CENTERING YOUR SEASON

As you review your calendar, you may notice that there is significant time spent in Cultural Christmas. We spend much of our holidays in the fanfare of a cozy, cultural Christmas. This is totally normal and can bring much joy. As Christians, we want to make sure there is room for Sacred Christmas.

Creating space for Sacred Christmas is not rocket science. It often involves taking what you are already doing and refocusing your attention through a prayer or ritual. Read through these short (but meaningful) practices. Star a few that pique your interest. Commit to 1-2 practices and add them to your calendar if appropriate.



## CREATE A SACRED SPACE.

Find a prominent place in your home to create an Advent space. Arrange meaningful items there (an Advent wreath or devotional, nativity scene, Bible, candle, etc.). Make sure this is a space you can easily access and see daily. Use this space to reflect on a devotional or start off the day with a prayer.



## LIGHT A DAILY CANDLE.

Every day, light a candle to remind you of God's gift in Jesus. You could do it as a part of family dinner or just as you go about your day. Pray the prayer below outloud. If helpful, write down the prayer on an index card and leave it next to the candle.

*O God, your Light is coming into the world! During this season, help us to remember you and the gift of your Son in all that we do. May we shine your light today. Amen.*



## TRY AN ADVENT (AND CHRISTMASTIDE) CALENDAR.

Countdowns have long been an effective way to build anticipation. Advent is no exception. The marking down of days can help build anticipation for the arrival of Jesus on December 25th and remind us of the sacredness of each day before we reach Christmas.

The season of Advent is followed by 12 days of celebration known as Christmastide (or The Twelve Days of Christmas). Adding these extra days to your countdown might help alleviate some stress by elongating time to get things done and provide much needed rest post-Christmas.



## **BLESS THE CHRISTMAS TREE.**

When you decorate the tree this Christmas, light a candle.  
Say this blessing over the tree when you are done.

*God who created all things, bless this tree in our home as we decorate it together. May it be a reminder of hope and life even in darkness. May its branches remind us of the shelter and shade you provide all of us in hard times. May its trunk remind us of your strength. May its lights remind us of your peace. May the gifts underneath it remind us of your gift to us this season, your son Jesus. Amen.*



## **CELEBRATE THE UNVEILING OF THE NATIVITY SCENE.**

Make taking the nativity out of its box a significant moment. Call the family together. Say a prayer over each piece. Consider storing baby Jesus until Christmas Day to mark the day of his coming.

**MARY:** *Thank you God for Mary's bravery and her strength.*

**JOSEPH:** *Thank you God for Joseph's compassion and loyalty.*

**MANGER:** *Thank you God that you can take ordinary things like a manger and turn it into an extraordinary thing.*

**ANGEL:** *Thank you God that you still work in the world just as you did through the angels who shouted, "Do not fear!"*

**STAR:** *Thank you God for your true Light that shines brightly on the darkest night.*

**SHEPHERDS:** *Thank you God for the shepherds' faith who believed the angels' news.*

**WISE MEN:** *Thank you God for the wise men's commitment and hope to find a Savior.*

**WHOLE NATIVITY:** *God of the universe, bless this nativity scene and bless us as we use it to remember the story of Jesus' birth. May it be a reminder of your continuing story in the world today. Amen.*



## PLAN ADVENT DINNERS

Celebrate each Sunday of Advent with a scheduled family or friend dinner. Go all out with hospitality. Bring out the cloth napkins and the fancy plates. Invite neighbors, friends and family to share in this special meal as you light a candle on an Advent wreath. Accompany it with a devotional if you'd like.



## CHANGE UP YOUR GIFT-GIVING.

We give gifts at Christmas to reflect God's ultimate gift to us, his Son. As you plan your gift-giving this holiday, ask yourself: how can I alter my gift-giving to reflect God's goodness and love? Some ideas:

### GIVE FEWER GIFTS.

Sometimes our gift-giving is burdened by expectation. We give because we feel like we have to repay some debt or because we want to prove something to someone. The reality is the definition of a gift means that it is given freely, meaning there is no expectation of repayment. True gifts are given out of love. Try limiting your list this year or giving fewer gifts than you normally do.

### GIVE DIFFERENT GIFTS.

Part of true gift-giving means letting go of our definition of "a good gift". Too often, we buy the latest and greatest instead of focusing on what makes the gift, a gift. Go through every person on your gift-giving list. Think through a major event that has happened or will happen in their life this year. Did they get married this year or are they planning on a job search next year? Think of what they like to do or what makes them feel more like a person. Jot some ideas down for each person based on their own interests and life.

## GIFTS TO A PERSON'S FAVORITE CHARITY OR A CHARITY THAT REMINDS YOU OF THEM



**CONSIDER:** GIFTS OF EXPERIENCE (DINNERS, CONCERTS, MUSEUM PASSES, TIME TOGETHER, ETC.)



HOMEMADE GIFTS (BAKED GOODS, ART, ETC.)



## PRAY OVER YOUR CHRISTMAS CARDS

Christmas cards are a fun tradition to make sacred. Say a quick prayer over each card as you receive them or dump all the cards in a bowl and each day, pull one card out to pray for at dinner.



## CHRISTMAS DAY

As you wake up on Christmas morning, make space to recognize the birth of Jesus! Place baby Jesus in the nativity if you haven't already. Sing a carol that reminds you of occasion— Joy to the World, On Christmas Day or sing Happy Birthday to Jesus if you have kids. Say this Christmas blessing from St. Bernard of Clairvaux or another of your choosing.

*Let your goodness, Lord, appear to us that we, made in your image, conform ourselves to it. In our own strength, we cannot imitate your majesty, power, and wonder nor is it fitting for us to try. But your mercy reaches from the heavens through the clouds to the earth below. You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries. Amen.*





## REFLECTING ON YOUR SEASON

When the tree is put up and lights are taken down, it is worth taking a moment to reflect on the past season. Use the questions below to reflect on what made your Christmas meaningful and what you could do differently for next year.

### WHAT GAVE YOU LIFE THIS CHRISTMAS?

### WHAT DRAINED YOU THIS SEASON?

### WHAT DID YOU DO TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF? DID IT WORK?

### WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE MOMENT OF THE SEASON?

### WHAT IDEAS DO YOU HAVE FOR NEXT YEAR?

 **THE GROVE CHURCH**

