



The Advent of Simple Gifts

Family Prayers and Activities
to Give and Receive
the True Gifts of Christmas

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The Drummer Boy or Girl in All of Us



We are living in tough economic times. Hard times bring their share of struggles, but they also have a gift to offer us. It is a mistake to romanticize the suffering of poverty, but it is also unwise to underestimate the penalties of affluence. As Christmas gifts become more extravagant, they bring fewer surprises, reduced creativity and the danger of becoming impersonal. My sister refers to modern Christmas giving as “passing gift cards to the right.” In the process, perhaps we lose some of the presence of presents—the thought and care that should accompany gifts.

Surely the poor understand how far we have strayed from the simple gifts of Christmas. Perhaps they have small tube TVs with rabbit ears, but they still see the ads with giant red bows on luxury cars, big screen TVs and \$60 video games as stocking stuffers. Christmas bids us to embrace the little drummer boy or girl in each of us. As we see the Christ child lying in a bed of straw, we realize the truth that “we have no gift to bring that’s fit to give our king.” In our poverty, we find the only appropriate gift in offering a part of ourselves: “Shall I play for you?”

This book is designed to help households celebrate the simple gifts of Christmas. Regardless of what we are able to afford, let us play for each other, bake for each other, visit each other, work and play with each other, affirm each other, listen to each other and share with each other. Let us give children gifts that promote imagination, creativity, interaction and laughter. Let us forego extravagance in favor of offering more of ourselves to loved ones and more of our time, talent and treasure to the needy. As we offer our gifts to the Lord and to each other, implicit in our giving is the humble faith admission, “I am a poor boy too.”

Gifts Made or Given with Love

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all. —1 Thessalonians 3:12



When we learned that our grandchildren were moving away because of a new job, my wife determined to give them a very personal gift before they left. She made her own clothes for years, so she decided to sew two Sherpa vests for them, though it took many more hours than usual because she now has Parkinson’s disease. Upon receiving them, the grandchildren proudly wore their vests everywhere. When I examined the finished products, each of them had a tag hand stitched into its collar. It read, “Made by Grandma with love.” When humanity moved away from God through sin, God determined to send us a singular gift of love, the gift of his only begotten Son. Jesus is a profoundly personal present that was a long time in coming, but one that we wear everywhere after we “put on Christ” through our baptism. When we look into the fabric of our life with Christ, we see the tag it bears, “Sent by God with love.”

Activity: Make a simple gift for a loved one. Draw a picture, bake or sew something, or make a craft item. Wrap it and include a gift tag: “Made by [name] with love.”

Prayer: Creator God, you formed us out of the clay of the earth. Teach us to use our hands to fashion gifts of beauty and love.

The Gift of Unexpected Visitors

Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. —Matthew 8:8



In the age of Skype, cell phones and text messages, it is no longer common to have unannounced guests. Still, many of us have had the experience of an unexpected ring of the doorbell, causing us to wonder, “Who could that be?” Instinctively we survey the house and realize that we are not ready for visitors. When we open the door, perhaps we find a friend or relative who “just happened to be in the neighborhood.” Advent is all about preparing for a divine guest who is always in our neighborhood, yet often arrives spontaneously or unannounced when our personal houses are not in order: “The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Christ comes visiting in many forms—a stressed out colleague at our office door, a neighbor facing an emergency, or the poor, homeless and hungry in need. We may not feel ready or able to accommodate these guests, but the Lord invites us put aside unworthiness to give the gift of ourselves: “Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me.”

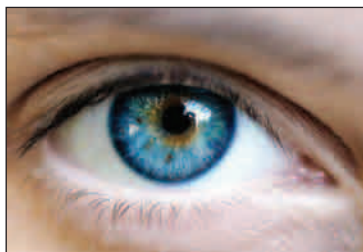
Activity: Show your readiness to welcome the Lord by adding a “welcome” sign or mat to your front door or by embellishing the one that you have with evergreen sprigs, pine cones, etc.

Prayer: Loving God, may we welcome Christ in one another by readying our homes and hearts for company this Christmas.

The Gifts Hidden in Plain Sight

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear.

—Isaiah 11:3



The anchor on the evening news was reporting a plane crash that injured several people and threatened innocent lives. Oddly, he used the term “spectacular” to describe it, as in “spectacle,” that is, “thrilling, magnificent or impressive.” Fortunately, no one was killed, but this incident provides a clue as to why our savior was born “under the radar” of human awareness. As it says in John’s gospel, “He was in the world, but the world did not know him.” We live in a world that looks for the spectacular. We are enthralled with bright lights, celebrities, fireworks and disasters. Meanwhile, the true light of the world is born in a humble stable near an obscure town on a silent night. Jesus is the gift that, like so many of life’s real treasures, is hidden in plain sight. We need new eyes to see him and new ears to hear his voice. We do well during Advent to seek out the quiet, remote, subtle, overlooked and unspectacular corners of our world if we are to find the birthplace of our Messiah.

Activity: Hide a votive candle or small gift for each child in plain sight, that is, obvious, but easily overlooked places.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in our blindness we miss your presence all around us. Open our eyes to see your glory hidden in plain sight.

The Gift of Contentment

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. —Psalm 23:1



One of my strongest memories of childhood is a pervading feeling of contentment with what I had. My family never owned a color TV, bought a new car or took an out of state vacation, yet there was never a sense of want or insufficiency. It is harder these days for parents to foster contentment in their children because of the omnipresence of television and consumer society's penchant for making us feel inadequate. Implicitly we are taught that if we don't have the coolest gadget, the latest upgrade, a bigger TV or the "it gift," we should feel dissatisfied or deprived. Advent awaits the coming of the Good Shepherd and embraces a life of faith that "shall not want." One of the first things we teach our children is to ask what they want for Christmas. During Advent we can also teach them contentment with what they have and eagerness to help those who have less.

Activity: Hang candy canes on your tree today as a sign of your contentment in the Lord. Make sure to eat one as a kind of communion in the legacy of the Good Shepherd.

Prayer: Good Shepherd, you lead us to green pastures and restful waters. Restore our souls with the gift of contentment.

The Gift of Mystery

*Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace,
in peace because they trust in you. —Isaiah 26:3*



I remember examining presents under the tree during December to probe the mystery of what I was getting. I shook the package, tried to peer through the paper, gauged its size and shape and looked for tell-tale gaps in the wrapping. Today there are fewer surprises in Christmas gifts. Gift cards and finely tuned wish lists have diluted the mystery and perhaps the faith that parents can be trusted to deliver pleasant surprises. God's gifts, however, are still full of mystery. The blessings of our talents, attributes and appearance are largely determined before we are born. There can be great delight in these surprises, but also challenge, especially for those prone to comparisons. If we look beyond the wrapping, hidden inside this mystery are amazing gifts of uniqueness, diversity and possibility. It is up to us to explore and develop our gifts to their full potential. We find peace as open ourselves to the mystery and trust our divine parent to surprise us.

Activity: Wrap one mystery gift for each child and leave it under the tree during Advent. Let them experience the wonder and surprise of these presents. Talk about the mystery of God's gifts.

Prayer: Generous God, you give us unique and amazing gifts. Help us explore and steward your blessings for the good of all.

The Gift of Anticipation

Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage.

—*Psalm 27:14*



Most of us have voiced our displeasure with waiting by means of a familiar complaint: “I can’t wait till Friday” or “I can’t wait till summer.” We are not a particularly patient people and we don’t place much stock in the value of delayed gratification. If we pause to reflect, however, we realize that waiting is a hallmark of being alive. Having something to wait for is akin to having something to look forward to. When we have no expectations, life can become dull or meaningless. In other words, once we stop waiting, we begin to die. This Advent we may find ourselves echoing the perennial holiday cry, “I can’t wait until Christmas!” Every expectant mother knows, however, that the joy of birth cannot be hurried. As we eagerly anticipate the nativity of our savior, let us gently remind each other that waiting bears the promise of our future in its vexing pockets, confirming the wisdom that “good things come to those who wait.”

Activity: Cut a Christmas tree shape out of green paper and write anticipated family events on it. Put the list on your tree or refrigerator as a joyful reminder of good things to come.

Prayer: Eternal God, as we await your birth at Christmas, give us patience and excitement in the promise of your coming.

The Gift of Healing

God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. —Psalm 147:3



While attending a parish festival as a child, I blew my allowance early on a difficult carnival game. Devastated, I went to my mother in tears. She hugged me and dug some extra change out of her purse. It was a trivial episode, really, but it has always stayed in my mind as an early experience of healing. Mary surely had numerous opportunities to comfort and heal the child Jesus as he was growing up. These memorable encounters no doubt helped foster his emergence as a miraculous healer. Advent is a time to gratefully reflect on God's healing power made flesh in the person of Christ. As we come before our newborn king for healing of body and spirit, we also share in his power to heal one another with kind words, gentle touch and heart-felt compassion.

Activity: Gather around a lighted candle. Rub oil or lotion on the forehead or hand of each family member as a prayer for healing.

Prayer: Healing Lord, we come to you today to heal our wounds and dry our tears. Make us channels of your peace and healing.

The Gift of Being God's Work in Progress

The one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. —Philippians 1:6



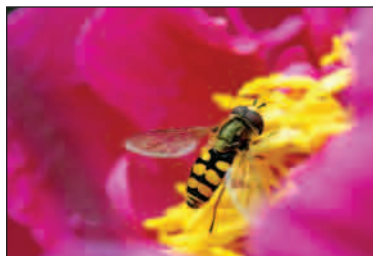
There is a wise saying that is sometimes seen on bumper stickers: “Be patient with me; God isn’t finished with me yet.” For confirmation of this truth, we may recall that it took thousands of years to form the majestic Grand Canyon, a natural wonder that is actually still “under construction.” We who are children of God—and potential supernatural wonders of the world—take heart in knowing that God’s work is gradual and requires time. Advent calls us to be patient while awaiting God’s arrival, but also to be patient with ourselves as we wait for our arrival or coming of age. When it comes to the divine architecture of personal holiness, we do well to adopt Paul’s attitude of confidence that the one who begins the good work in us will bring it to completion on time, that is, on God’s time.

Activity: Cut or mold cookie dough into angel shapes, then bake them. Eat a cookie when they are done like a gift of angel food.

Prayer: Loving Father, you are the potter and we are the clay. Make us holy like angels and crown us with glory and honor.

The Gift of Interdependence

*Truth will spring up from the earth
and justice will look down from heaven. —Psalm 85:12*



Our world thrives on reciprocal relationships. Humans exhale the carbon dioxide that trees require to produce the oxygen we need. Bees pollinate flowers while taking nectar. Children are helpless when they are young, but care for their dependant parents in old age. Life gives and receives in a cosmic bartering program. These sorts of mutual, complementary arrangements are called “symbiotic relationships.” The spiritual world works like this as well. If we do justice, we get peace in return. If we repent our ways, we elicit forgiveness. Advent is a season to enter fully and freely into the graceful rhythm of symbiotic relationships. Perhaps the birth of Christ is the pinnacle of such reciprocity, for as God “descends” to become human, we are raised to the level of the holy. As the Lord becomes a child, we are given the grace to grow into spiritual maturity. As Jesus dies for us, we are given new life to be the body of Christ on earth.

Activity: Get a 24 piece jigsaw puzzle and give each person several pieces. Assemble it as a promise to work together to complete the picture of Christ’s coming.

Prayer: Almighty God, each of us has a part to play in your plan. Help us to give and receive your gifts as we await your birth.

The Gift of Being Level-Headed

The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

—Isaiah 40:4



It used to be considered a compliment to be level-headed, but these days that quality seems to inspire yawns or disregard. Lately we gravitate to the extremes of behavior and perspective. Talk radio is filled with grating voices that howl harsh opinions and issue diatribes. Reasoned dialogue and rational behavior no longer garner desired ratings. Apparently we would rather watch people scream and throw chairs at each other. The way of the Lord is best prepared, however, by smoothing out the extreme highs and lows in our world and embracing the middle way of dialogue, balance and common ground. My parents used to call this plain old common sense. The glory of the Lord will best be revealed as we “level with each other,” remaining level-headed and level-hearted while placing everyone on equal footing.

Activity: Using play dough, soil or sand, make a level surface in a baking dish. Use a carpenter level if you have one. Brainstorm ways to be more level-headed in your family interactions.

Prayer: Emmanuel, God with us, smooth our anger, straighten our paths, calm our fears and level our heads and hearts.

The Gift of Memories

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all God's gifts.

—*Psalms 103:2*



Our six-year-old grandson was painting wooden craft symbols at our house recently. When it came time for him to leave, we put his handiwork in a small box for him to take home and show his parents. Upon receiving the box, he pulled out a wooden heart he had painted and handed it back to us. His advice was wise and generous: “You should keep this one so that you can have this memory too.” The holiday season is a time for making lifelong family memories. We do this quite effectively by sharing simple gestures and symbols that represent good times and blessed experiences together. Unlike expensive toys that are sometimes forgotten a month after they are opened, these priceless memories remain treasured gifts for years to come. Jesus understood this when he broke bread and said, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Activity: Share a special family meal today. Break one dinner roll or piece of bread for everyone to symbolically share.

Prayer: Incarnate God, may we remember you every time we gather as a family to share food, fun or faith.

The Gift of Opening Ourselves

Let anyone with ears listen! —Matthew 11:15



As a child, I remember wondering on Christmas morning, “What should I open first?” After that, I asked myself, “What should I open next.” For a child on Christmas morning, this dilemma can be at once excruciating and delightful. Not every child has a gift to open and many children have only one, but for a Christian, the real gifts of Christmas are both abundant and amazing. This makes the same question quite relevant: “What should we open first?” This Advent, let us open our hearts to feel love and compassion. Let us open our eyes to see the wonder of a child and the truth of what really matters in life. Let us open our ears to hear the songs of angels and the cries of the poor and suffering. Let us open our minds to know the Word of God and to heed the wisdom of the gospel. Let us open our hands in friendship and loving service. Finally, let us open our mouths to give thanks and sing praise, “Glory to God in the highest!”

Activity: Wrap a picture of each family member in a small box and place each one under your tree. Open these with the other presents on Christmas.

Prayer: Word of God, you proclaim the good news that we are precious gifts in God’s sight. May we open our ears to hear it.

The Gift of Another Way

Their delight is in the law of the Lord. —Psalm 1:2



When a public figure or fictional character explains a difficult or painful decision, the ultimate choice is often depicted as the only alternative: “I didn’t have a choice” or “you left me no choice.” It is tempting to rationalize vexing decisions in this way, but faith reminds us that we are blessed with the gift of free will. The teaching of Christ, summarized in the Beatitudes, is filled with alternatives for challenging dilemmas. St. Paul echoes this truth in Corinthians, “I will show you a still more excellent way,” the way of love. The options of faith are rarely the popular or easy choices, but they consistently offer us alternatives to hatred, violence or war. Few of us can practice this truth as fully as Martin Luther King or Dorothy Day, but all of us can explore the path that Robert Frost called “the road less traveled.” Perhaps the roads less traveled in our day are the ways of integrity, service, patience, humility, restraint, forgiveness, justice and peace.

Activity: Read Robert Frost’s poem, *The Road Not Taken*. Pick a favorite family destination on a map and count how many ways there are to get there.

Prayer: Lord, you are the way, the truth and the light. Show us the road less traveled that leads us home to your kingdom.

The Gift of the Discomfort

Then Elijah arose, a prophet like fire, and his word burned like a torch.
—Sirach 48:1



There is a revealing moment in the film *Gandhi* when Ben Kingsley paces a room while he ponders the injustice of an English law that requires Indians to carry special identification papers. After wrestling with the matter internally, he turns to his friends and firmly insists, “It must be fought! We are children of God like everyone else.” Most of us have faced similar situations in our lives. After some encounter, we experience sleepless nights or gnawing feelings of uneasiness. This is the experience of prophetic fire in the belly, the feeling that something isn’t right or the sense that something must be done. This uneasy feeling reminds us that Jesus came for two reasons—to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. It is sometimes the duty of the Lord’s disciples to “make waves” for the sake of justice. It is always the response-ability of the faithful to relieve this spiritual “dis-ease” with loving action.

Activity: Gather around a bowl of water and have each person gently make prophetic waves by stirring up the waters.

Prayer: God of justice, stir up the holy waters of discomfort in us so that we may speak up, stand up and act up for what is right.

The Gift of Kindness

Let your kindness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

—*Philippians 4:5*



The word “kindness” sounds a lot like kin-ness. To treat others with kindness, then, can be likened to treating them as kin or family. Once we recognize the stranger, the neighbor or even the enemy as a sister or brother, immediately our view of them changes and our behavior toward them alters accordingly. After our eyes are opened, we treat them kindly or “in kind.” Kindness is the result of right relationship, the art of seeing all people as more alike than different. Once the Lord takes human form, it becomes easier to recognize him in the face of our neighbor. Kindness springs from a willingness to let go of rank, power and privilege to embrace the basic equality of all God’s children. Elizabeth is initially shocked by Mary’s visitation: “Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me.” Mary’s gracious presence reflects her faith, for she sees Elizabeth, not as an inferior, but as her kin or kind.

Activity: Gather around a special glass or goblet filled with milk. Pass the cup and drink from it as a pledge to practice the virtue of kindness.

Prayer: God of compassion, today we share the milk of human kindness so that we may show your goodness and mercy to all.

The Gift of Hand-Me-Downs

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. —Matthew 1:1



I was the third of six children, so I saw my share of hand-me-downs over the years. The idea of getting used clothes or toys can be distasteful to us, for we instinctively associate self-worth with new things. Perhaps only the poor, who have little choice, fully embrace the value of used gifts. It may sound strange or even irreverent to think of Jesus as a divine hand-me-down. Yet, the genealogy makes it clear that Christ was the end product of generations of holy men and women who nurtured, practiced and passed down the ways of God. In the realm of the spirit, gifts are like fine wine. Their value only grows with age and use. It seems that mercy, compassion, justice, healing and wisdom are all spiritual hand-me-downs. Our savior is the end product of a long line of well used graces that were passed from generation to generation until they were made perfect in the person of Christ.

Activity: Gather up some family hand-me-downs. Then identify family values and traditions that have been passed down to you.

Prayer: Holy God, we are the blessed recipients of your many and well used gifts. Let us pass your holy ways to our children.

The Gift of Help

*For God delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper. —Psalm 72:12*



In the novel *The Help*, the house maids are treated as inferior beings who are not to be trusted, respected or loved. Yet, even while they suffer terrible discrimination, the maids do much of the vital work in raising their masters' children. One fragile little girl is repeatedly comforted by her maid's constant and loving affirmation: "You is kind; you is smart; you is important." The Lord comes to save us, but he also calls us to be "God's little helpers." Just like those maids, however, the disciples of Christ are often rejected and persecuted: "If the world hates you, realize that it hated me before you." In the end, however, we know that the only real power and glory in this life comes, not from lording power over others, but from offering it in service: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

Activity: Make two "help wanted" signs. Hang one in your living room today as a reminder to help each other. Hang the other inside your front door as a call to reach out beyond your walls.

Prayer: Merciful God, you have been our help through all ages. May we give your humble gift of help to those most in need.

The Gift of Buoyant Hope

For you, O Lord, are my hope; my trust, O Lord, from my youth.

—*Psalm 71:5*



There is a movie title that is striking for its profound simplicity. *Hope Floats* is an accurate description of how this theological virtue works. In hard times, when we feel like we are sinking, hope rises to the surface of our lives to buoy us up. In other words, as hope floats, we tend to float with it, even when it feels like we are barely treading water. In the Buddhist tradition, the lotus blossom is a sign of hope, a symbol of beauty floating on the waters and rising above the mire of earthly struggles. Perhaps the Christ child whom we await becomes adept at walking on water because he is so filled with faith and hope. Indeed, when someone lacks hope, we protest the dire effects of their attitude by saying, “You’re bringing me down!” True believers have the opposite effect on women and men, using their hope in Christ to lift hearts and raise spirits.

Activity: Get one or more floating candles or several flower blossoms. Place one for each family member in a tub of water. As you do so, share prayer intentions and reasons for your hope.

Prayer: Faithful Lord, St. Peter bids us to always be ready to give a reason for our hope. Today we place our hope in you.

The Gift of Holy Messengers

*The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.
—Luke 1:26*



There is a red light on our home phone that blinks brightly whenever someone has left us a message. Many of our electronic devices also give us signals alerting us that we have received a text or voice message. When the one who sent the message talks to us later, he or she may ask, “Did you get my message?” In the mystical world of divine communication, messages work a bit differently. There are no electronic beeps or flashing red lights, but nonetheless God’s Spirit speaks to us and calls us to action. We may get these messages through dreams, through unexpected encounters, through people in need or simply as we pray or read the scriptures. Advent is a season in which God asks, “Did you get my message?” In case there is any doubt, God sends Jesus to be the word made flesh who calls us to discipleship in person.

Activity: Put a feather at each dinner plate today as a sign that God is sending each of us a message of love and a call to serve.

Prayer: Word of God, often we are too busy to answer your call. Leave us a message in Christ so that we may serve your people.

The Gift of Shields

Our soul waits for the Lord, who is our help and our shield.

—*Psalm 33:20*



The warning has sounded many times on *Star Trek*: “Captain, our shields are down to twenty percent!” Sometimes we feel like that in life, as if our defenses are all but exhausted, leaving us vulnerable to attack. Parents spend a lot of time shielding their children from harm. They child-proof the home, keep watch for predators and bullies and screen unsuitable entertainment. God is our shield in the life of faith. Yet, faith provides a unique brand of shielding, not the protection of invulnerability, but the defense of hope and trust. God doesn’t rescue us from all harm, but faith assures us that the wounds we suffer are not the final word. There is healing after injury, forgiveness after failure and life after death. The Lord surrendered the shielding of divinity in order to embrace the vulnerable state of the human condition. It seems that Christ prefers to carry the shield of solidarity and compassion that we call love.

Activity: Work together to make a shield for each family member or one larger shield for the whole family. Draw designs or symbols on them to make each shield personal.

Prayer: Almighty God, sometimes we feel vulnerable, defenseless and under attack. Be our help and our shield.

The Gift of Turnabout

God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
—*Luke 1:53*



There is an old saying that insists, “Turnabout is fair play.” My parents taught us this virtue through the simple practice of taking turns. If things went awry, any of us could correct the imbalance by calling out in protest, “Hey, it’s my turn!” The gospel could be called the master blueprint of turnabout. Faith has a highly developed sensitivity to the inequity of life and strives to give everyone a turn, a voice and an opportunity. Sadly, the world is not yet convinced of the benefits of turnabout. We live in a time of unequal opportunity where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. It is up to the followers of Christ to hear and amplify the cries of the poor, “Hey, it’s our turn!” The Lord assures us that God’s Spirit is firmly on our side as he promises that the last shall be first, the servant shall be the master, the hungry will be satisfied and the meek will inherit the earth.

Activity: Play a game together that requires you to take turns. Many board games have cards or spaces that say “lose a turn.” Talk about how this feels and how this happens in real life.

Prayer: God of justice, correct our imbalance and heal our inequity so that all may have a turn at life, hope and joy.

The Gift of Cooperation

Then I said, “See, God, I have come to do your will.” —Hebrews 10:7



Recently at a mall, I needed to get to the second level to rejoin my group. Rather than take the long way around to the stairs, I impulsively climbed up a down escalator. It looked like a fun and daring challenge from the bottom, but when I got to the top, I felt foolish and worn out. Faith can be like this. The Spirit of God moves in a certain direction, but often we choose to exert our independence by going against the grain. This feels exciting at first, but soon we wear ourselves out by swimming against the current or running into the wind. The wind of the Spirit is happy to be at our backs, but we need prayer to gauge its direction. We frustrate the work of the Spirit by rashly going our own way. We choose war over peace, control over cooperation and material over spiritual concerns. Faith doesn't mind taking the long way in order to move with the graceful momentum of God's Spirit.

Activity: Go outside on a windy day and walk into the wind, then turn to move with the wind at your backs. Discuss specific ways that we do this in life.

Prayer: Spirit of Jesus, help us to move with the wind of your grace and flow with the river of your love.

The Gift of Room

Go and tell my servant, David: “Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?” —2 Samuel 7:5



I was walking in a park recently when I noticed three young men approaching me. As they drew closer, I realized that they were not moving over, though the path was easily wide enough to accommodate all of us. Only my decision to turn my shoulder at the last moment prevented a collision. It was a simple encounter, but it stayed with me for days. Perhaps such incidents are a microcosm of our violent world of conflict. We have not been well trained to make room for each other, but rather to stand our ground and protect our turf. Movies sometimes romanticize this approach to life. The rancher demands, “Get off my land!” Clint Eastwood raises a gun and barks, “Get off my lawn!” So it is not surprising that when the Lord comes among us, there is no room in the inn. Security has its place in the world, but faith practices the fine art of inclusion. We make Christmas happen by sharing God’s gift of hospitality: “Let every heart prepare him room.”

Activity: Make a heart out of construction paper or poster board. Then write the names of friends, family members and people in need. Fit as many names as you can, then hang it on your tree.

Prayer: Gracious God, you created a universe filled with space. Help us make room in our hearts for the Christ in every person.

The Gift of Martyrdom

While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

—Acts 7:59



The birth of Christ brings tidings of comfort and joy to the world. Yet, the Lord's coming also marks the beginning of Christian martyrdom, the bittersweet gift of suffering for our faith. Indeed, the Church celebrates three Christian martyrs in the week immediately following the feast of Christmas: St. Stephen, the Holy Innocents and Thomas Becket. Not many of us will be asked to die for our beliefs, but most of us will be called upon to suffer for our convictions. We may be mocked for our values or bullied for being good. We may lose a friend over a principle or sacrifice fame or fortune to pursue greater goods. These various forms of martyrdom all represent a kind of death. Yet, they are also gifts, not because we relish suffering, but because they prove that our faith is genuine. As Martin Luther King once put it, “Anyone who won't die for something is not fit to live.”

Activity: Have each person place a small stone or a nail next to your manger scene or around a lighted candle as a sign of what you have suffered or will suffer for your faith.

Prayer: Saving Lord, you gave your life out of love for us. Help us to stay true to our faith, even when it demands a price.

The Gift of Witness

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. —1 John 1:3



Our salvation might never have come without the birth of Christ. Yet, perhaps Jesus could not have changed the world without the efforts of evangelists. The most powerful story in the world loses its significance if it is not passed on to others. The impact of Christ would certainly have been minimized if the many witnesses to his birth and life had kept their mouths shut and their pens capped. Like St. John the Evangelist, each of us is a witness to the marvelous truth of Christ's coming—by word of mouth, stroke of pen or key and most importantly, witness of action. It is up to us to tell the story of God's transforming presence and saving action in our lives. The last thing we want as Christians is to turn the birth of Christ into a well kept secret, making it, *The Greatest Story Never Told*.

Activity: Have each person write down a personal experience of God's presence or action. Young children may draw a picture. Combine the pages into a "family book of good news."

Prayer: Saving Lord, your story has changed our lives. Help us to proclaim the good news of your birth by word and deed.

The Gift of Belonging

He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. —Luke 2:51



A Holy Family is a place of belonging. Human families may fall short in embodying this marvelous gift, but in the Holy Family we find our role model and inspiration. This is not the belonging of possession, as in, “You belong to me.” Rather, it is the experience of being intimately part of a family, forever identified with a people or irrevocably joined to a community. We know that we belong when we are valued, accepted, challenged and remembered. Human families may be splintered by cliques, feuds or rivalries: “I belong to Paul; I belong to Cephas.” In the family of Christ, however, there are no favorites, black sheep or factions, but rather, “You belong to Christ and Christ belongs to you.” Regardless of whether this gift comes to us with a birth family, a group of friends, a set of colleagues or a community of believers, the ability to say “I belong” is a gift to be gratefully treasured and diligently preserved.

Activity: Plan a family outing or activity that can include everyone. Affirm each person as part of your holy family.

Prayer: God of love, you gather us in family, friendship and faith. Today we rejoice in the wonderful gift of belonging

The Gift of Motherhood

They went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in a manger.—Luke 2:16



Apart from Christ on the cross, perhaps no image is imbedded more deeply in the Christian consciousness than the Madonna and Child. This image has no doubt been stamped on the face of more Christmas cards than any other in history. The great art masters of the Renaissance were so drawn to this subject matter that they produced hundreds of depictions of this evocative relationship. Moreover, since the birth of Christ, every mother who has ever held her newborn infant reproduces this sacred bond in real flesh rather than in canvas and oils. This is no forgery, for faith tells us that every mother is a “mother of God,” for every child is “another Christ.” The birth of Jesus is a time to marvel at the beauty of motherhood and the grace of the mother and child relationship. God’s eternal love is the model for this gift, as it says in Isaiah, “Thus says the Lord, as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.”

Activity: Look at Madonna and Child images on Christmas cards or on the Internet. Choose your favorites, then complement them with mother and child pictures from your own family.

Prayer: Nurturing God, you comfort us like a mother comforts her child. Today we celebrate the gift of holy motherhood.

The Gift of Knowing

The mystery was made known to me by revelation. —Ephesians 3:3



Every parent has had the unhappy experience of desperately trying to convey some vital truth to their children, only to see their advice rejected until it is learned by personal experience. It is in such “aha” or epiphany moments that we discover essential life wisdom and learn that our parents mysteriously get smarter as we grow older. Sometimes these are unhappy realizations, like learning that we have been used, like Herod used the Magi for evil purposes. Happily, we also have wondrous epiphany moments when a light suddenly goes on and we realize that we are truly gifted, deeply loved or divinely blessed. These insights change us forever, for they do not arise from intellectual knowing, but from the Spirit and from divinely infused human experience. For Christians, the ultimate epiphany is the rising of the star that leads us to Christ as the center of our lives: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”

Activity: Affix a large piece of dark blue paper or poster board to a wall. Write personal epiphanies—bits of gained wisdom or truth—on cut out yellow stars and post them on your night sky.

Prayer: All knowing God, our midnights are illuminated by the epiphanies of your truth. May they guide us to the perfect light.

Celebrating God's Gifts with the Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath is a beautiful sign of the season that is made up of several smaller symbols of the many ways God comes into our world and lives. To observe the season well with the Advent wreath is also to celebrate the divine gifts it signifies.

Week 1: The Gift of Constancy: The boughs of the Advent wreath are “ever green,” fitting reminders of God’s constant love in every age and season. Before lighting the first candle, let each person gently grasp one of its branches as you pray: Living God, make us ever-green like you—ever true, ever loving, ever alive.

Week 2: The Gift of Life: The circle of the Advent wreath mirrors the circle or cycle of life. The gift of another season together is a stirring sign of how God’s love keeps coming around again. Before lighting two candles, gather around the wreath in a circle as you pray: Eternal God, renew us each day and each Christmas season in the endless circle of your life.

Week 3: The Gift of Joy: The pink candle is a gentle reminder of the joy of Christ’s coming. Before lighting it, pass the candle and have each member name a source of personal joy while holding it. Then pray: Emmanuel, this day and this week we are mindful of your presence as we “rejoice in the Lord always.”

Week 4: The Gift of Light: The four burning candles are a reflection of how the Lord arrives. As Christ gets nearer, the light in our lives grows brighter. Have different family members light the four candles as you pray: Light of the world, shine in our hearts like the dawn to brighten the darkness in our lives.

The Gift of Light

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

—John 1:9



At the climax of John Steinbeck's *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Ethan Hawley teeters on the brink of isolated despair, "It isn't true that there's a community of light, a bonfire of the world. Everyone carries his own, his lonely own." Christmas is God's antidote to the darkness that threatens to envelop us. The true light of the world arrives in a dark and lonely time with the warmth and brilliance of a bonfire big enough to gather all God's people together. Once we are assembled, the Lord invites us to form a community of light so that no one should ever again feel cold or lost or abandoned. In the end, that responsibility of being a light for others pulls Ethan back from the brink to save his daughter, "else another light might go out." Christmas is the dawn of our winter of contentment. We confidently let our lights shine this day to give hope to everyone in God's house.

Activity: Gather a circle of votive candles around one large lighted candle. Then have each member light one small candle.

Prayer: Light of the world, today we gather around you as a community of light to give hope and joy to the world.