

Simply Advent



No one yearns for a more complicated holiday season. Simplicity brings freedom, especially in the midst of hectic schedules, high expectations, and other pressures. Our celebrations should be about what matters most to us, but we have to be intentional to make that happen. Instead of going on auto-pilot, consider these eight ideas for a more joyful, faith-filled Christmas.

Stop and Be Intentional

Plan a household gathering—or set time aside for yourself—to decide how you want your holidays to be this year. What might you do differently? Brainstorm creatively, then refine your ideas and reach consensus. Find a checklist on the next page.

Set Good Expectations

Be clear about your holiday intentions early, from children's gifts to how elaborate your parties will be and how you want to spend time together.

Make Room For God

How can we make room for God's gift of Jesus to us this holiday season? Set intentions for personal and family prayer (such as around an Advent wreath).

Make Room For The Needy

We are especially challenged to reach out to those in need during the holiday season. Some choose to set aside a percentage of their holiday giving charitably.

Change Slowly But Surely

Don't try to dramatically change everything this year if that will meet with strong resistance and frustration. Try making a couple meaningful changes each year.



Watch the Work

Are there members in your family who become stressed during the holiday season because they do a disproportional amount of the work (cooking, decorating, shopping)? How can you change that this year?

Give Intentionally

Find creative ways to make gift-giving more fun, personal, practical, sustainable, and joyful. Give quality over quantity. Prioritize presence over presents. Look for ideas on the next page.

Start a New Tradition

Is it time to try a new activity that will bring you closer together with family or friends? Let go of a less life-giving activity to make room for this one.

Ideas for Creative Gifts and More

GIVE THE GIFT OF TIME by creating your own gift card for a service (e.g., babysitting, car wash, petsitting, chores, making dinner, organizing an outing).

GIVE A HANDMADE GIFT like a memoir of cherished memories with that person, a book of family recipes, a collage of pictures and mementos, or a calendar filled with the birthdays and anniversaries of friends and family.

OFFER TO TEACH A SKILL YOU POSSESS (e.g., knitting, photography, computer skills, financial planning, a foreign language, music lessons, cooking).

CONSIDER LESS COMMERCIAL GIFTS for children, such as arts/crafts supplies, books, a magnifying glass, or building blocks.

CREATE A PAPERLESS HOLIDAY LETTER on the computer and email it to friends and family.

HAVE A WHITE ELEPHANT PARTY instead of a traditional gift exchange, where each person brings a wrapped secondhand item in good condition.

DRAW NAMES IN YOUR FAMILY FOR GIFT-GIVING (for extra fun and surprise, make it "Secret Santas"), so that you can put more time and thought into one gift instead of having to give to several people.

INVITE USED ITEMS by telling others that you are happy to receive them. Give used items to those who respond that they welcome them also.

GIVE BACK TO YOUR COMMUNITY by preparing care packages for the homeless, or volunteering at an organization to help those in need during the holiday season.

ADOPT A "LESS IS MORE" ATTITUDE toward holiday decorating. Opt for natural trimmings such as clippings from local evergreens and holly bushes.

SAVE PAPER by wrapping gifts in newspaper comics, old maps, phone book, paper bags decorated with markers, or other reused paper. Kids will enjoy the decorating process.

PREPARE YOUR HOLIDAY MEALS with as many seasonal, locally grown, and/or organic foods as possible.

Ideas provided by the Center for a New American Dream.

A few hundred years ago, the Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas because they thought it was frivolous and that the joyousness was inappropriate to true Christian piety.

That's not where we are. We believe in the joy and laughter and meaning that Christmas can bring. We also believe that despite the pressure from our consumer culture, our celebrations of Christmas should make sense with the values of Christ who was born in simple surroundings.

Doyle Burbank-Williams
Simple Living Works

Planning Checklist

For the items on this list, consider the following questions:

- ✧ **Why** do we do this activity?
Personal beliefs? Needs?
Tradition? Habit?
- ✧ **How** are we going to do it?
The same or differently than before?
- ✧ **Where** will we do it?
- ✧ **Who** will do the work? Can we divide up the tasks differently?
- ✧ **How much** will we spend?
Are we willing to spend less on ourselves and give more to the truly needy?
- ✧ **Are the fruits** of this activity worth the effort involved?

Decorations

- ☐ Advent wreath
- ☐ Manger scene
- ☐ Tree/greens
- ☐ Outside decorations

Prayer/Worship

- ☐ Personal
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Church

Preparations

- ☐ Shopping
- ☐ Gift wrapping
- ☐ Travel arrangements
- ☐ Cards or letters

Gifts

- ☐ Close family
- ☐ Others
- ☐ Donations
- ☐ Service providers

Entertaining

- ☐ Hosting parties
- ☐ Holiday meals

Events

- ☐ Attending parties
- ☐ Family traditions

For more simple Christmas ideas, check out these great sites:

- ▶ **SimplifyHolidays.org** (Center for the New American Dream)
- ▶ **BuyNothingChristmas.org** (started by Canadian Mennonites)

**BE ALERT,
BE ALERT,**

so that you will be able to recognize your Lord
in your husband, your wife,
your parents, your children,
your friends, your teachers,
but also in all that you read
in the daily newspapers.

The Lord is coming, always coming.
Be alert to his coming. When you have ears to
hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him
at any moment in your life. **Life is Advent;**
life is recognizing the coming of the Lord.

Henri Nouwen

**Tis the
Season to Turn
Everything
UPSIDE DOWN**

PEACE

HOPE

JOY

LOVE

Simply
Advent



When the Son of God was born...

He didn't come in a show of great power,
but as a helpless baby
He didn't come as an elite,
but as the son of an
unwed teenage mother
He wasn't found by the religious leaders,
but by the poor outcasts and Gentiles
He wasn't born into luxury,
but slept in an animal's feeding trough

So when we celebrate his birth...

Maybe we need to turn things upside down
Like God turned things upside down
when God moved into the neighborhood
and broke all the rules:
Bringing good news for the poor,
Giving sight to the blind, and
Setting captives and the oppressed free.

Christmas Presence

By Louis Lotz

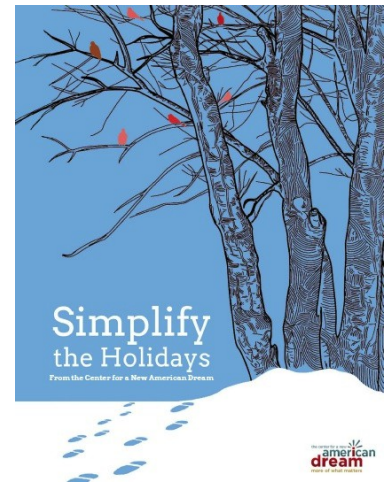
Ask people to reflect on their favorite Christmas memory and they never talk about presents. They talk about people. Try it. Ask the person sitting next to you, "Tell me about your all-time best, most satisfying Christmas," and then sit back and listen. See, what did I tell you? They never talk about presents. They talk about people. It's not the gift we cherish, it's the giver. The best Christmas gift you can give to someone is you—your time, your attention, your presence. This Christmas, give yourself. Go on a date with your spouse, just the two of you. Take your child to a basketball game. Visit a friend. Take your elderly Dad out for breakfast. The simple gift of yourself—your undivided attention—is the best gift you have to give. **What we want most at Christmas is not presents, but presence.**

When you read the biblical story of the Magi with the throttle of your

imagination wide open, you can almost see them traveling across the desert on their silent, plodding camels, following that star up in the sky.

The one fact about the Magi that always gets overlooked is that, more than giving gold, incense, and myrrh, they gave themselves. They presented themselves as an act of homage. They "bowed down and worshiped him." The Wise Men didn't send emissaries. They came in person. The gold, incense, and myrrh are incidental details. The thrust of the story is that the Magi presented themselves.

When you think about it, that's what Christmas is all about in the first place—God giving the gift of himself. To show his love for the world, God does not send a gift. Rather, God is the gift. "You shall call his name Emmanuel," said the angel to Joseph, "which means 'God with us.'" Christmas is all about presence—God with us, and we with each other.



The Center for a New American Dream's "Simplify the Holidays" booklet offers practical tips for reducing stress and increasing your personal fulfillment during this holiday season.

Download a free copy at SimplifyHolidays.org.

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Che Jesus,
They told me that you came back to be born every Christmas.

Man, you're crazy!

...with this stubborn gesture of coming back every Christmas
you are trying to tell us something:

That the revolution that all proclaim begins first of all in
each one's heart,

That it doesn't mean only changing structures but changing
selfishness for love.

That we have to stop being wolves and return to being
brothers and sisters,

That we...begin to work seriously for
individual conversion and social change

That will give to all the possibility of having bread,
education, freedom, and dignity.

That you have a message that's called the Gospel,

And a Church, and that's us—

A Church that wants to be a servant of all,

A Church that knows because God became human
one Christmas

there is no other way to love God but to love all people.

If that's the way it is, Jesus, come to me this Christmas,

Come to my country,

Come to the world of men and women.

And first of all, come to my heart.

Anonymous,
Cordoba, Argentina at Christmas, 1970

The least we
can do is make
his coming not
more difficult...
than the earth
makes it for
spring when it
wants to come.

Rainer Maria Rilke



*Last year, Pope Francis
preached about Advent
as a journey:*

"This journey never
comes to an end. Just
as in each of our lives we
always need to begin again, to
get up again, to rediscover the
meaning of the goal of our
lives, so also for the great
human family it is always
necessary to rediscover the
common horizon toward which
we are journeying. *The horizon
of hope!* This is the horizon that
makes for a good journey. The
season of Advent...restores this
horizon of hope, a hope which
does not disappoint for it is
founded on God's Word. A hope
which does not disappoint,
simply because the Lord never
disappoints! He is faithful!"

An Examination of Conscience For Advent

Where in my life do I need the miracle of Jesus' **healing**?

- Has my anger, judgment, or temper hurt those around me?
- Have I allowed work, hobbies, or other activities to rule my life instead of God?
- Am I able to share with Jesus the parts of myself that need his healing touch?

Where in my life do I need the miracle of Jesus' **generosity**?

- Have I given my time and gifts freely to the service of others?
- Have I cared for the poor and the needy?
- Do I commit myself in tangible ways to the creation of a more just society?

Where in my life do I need the miracle of Jesus' **love**?

- Do I let Jesus love all of me, even the parts that I am not proud of?
- Do I share that healing love with others who are in need of it?
- Do I invite Jesus to be present in my daily interactions with those I love and those I meet?

Where in my life do I need the miracle of Jesus' **companionship**?

- Have I allowed time to connect with God?
- Have I created space in my family or community to learn about Jesus?
- Do I look for Jesus into my daily life?

Where in my life do I need the miracle of Jesus' **wisdom**?

- Do I follow Jesus in times of conflict at home or work?
- Do I ask Jesus to share his wisdom when I am faced with a difficult decision?
- Have I invited Jesus to change my heart and mind?

*by Jennifer Owens
& Jay Mitchell*

God speaks to us in the special sign language of a baby. Not much. A small December child. A baby is birth, beginnings, potential without guarantee. A baby is helpless but not hopeless. A baby is someone to watch. A baby is the future appearing now. Are there baby-signs from God signaling hope to us watchers on the hillside?

Robert A. Raines

An Advent Family Blessing

Dear God,
We thank you for
all of the miracles in our lives,
the small ones that sometimes
we don't even notice,
and the big ones.

Help us to remember this
Advent that you are a
God of miracles
who can bring light
into our darkness.

We ask this in the name of
Jesus, your greatest miracle.
Amen.

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Recovering Jesus

by Tony Campolo

A friend of mine had his TV turned on one morning in early December when he was taken aback by the strange announcement of a newscaster. "I have something disturbing to report," were the words that caught his attention. "Someone has stolen Jesus! Sometime between midnight and three in the morning, someone took Jesus from the manger scene that sits outside the county courthouse. If anyone in our television audience has any information that could lead to recovering Jesus, please contact this station as soon as possible. We very much want to get Jesus back where he belongs."

It doesn't take much of an imagination to be amused by that announcement or to glean all kinds of messages from it. Each Christmas it is easy to get a sense that Jesus has been taken away or gotten lost amidst all our harried activities, decorations, and presents. During the holiday season, we may want to put Jesus back in the center of things where He belongs, but we all know that recovering Jesus involves more than getting some plastic Jesus returned to a crib on the lawn of a courthouse in St. Louis.



If the real Jesus is going to be recovered this Christmas, we will have to make room for Him in our hearts and minds. Whether that plastic imitation is ever found only has symbolic meaning, but making room in our lives for the real Jesus is what is desperately needed.

Each morning try to make room for Jesus through centering prayer. I empty my mind of extraneous thoughts and try to create that sacred space that the ancient Celtic Christians called "the thin place." I establish a subjective condition wherein there is receptivity for an invasion by Bethlehem's Jesus, and when in stillness that invasion occurs, I experience a wonder-filled recovery of the real Jesus. This, unquestionably, is the best of all second comings.

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas

without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, whose who have no need even of God — for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.

—Oscar Romero

Because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are that he might make us to be what he is.

Irenaeus
3rd century

Away In A Stank Manger

by Shane Claiborne

The Department of Licenses and Inspections (L&I) visits us on occasion at The Simple Way community—to cut down our endangered trees, to fine us for cracks in the sidewalk, or to let us know according to city ordinance “it is illegal to invite guests into your home to eat.” (For the record, most of you readers are also criminals for the same reason!) It could all make for a great sitcom.

But here's the newest twist: OUR INSPECTOR'S NAME IS “JESUS” (pronounced “hey-SOOS”). He's not a Galilean peasant, but a young, clean-cut Latino guy from North Philly. But that's not all. Our lawyer handling these theatrics with the City is a friend named Ralph Pinkus who happens to be Jewish (and one of the best real estate lawyers in the city, thanks be to Yahweh!). Ralph and I were joking the other day, and he said giggling: “Well, Jesus isn't helping you out of this one.” We laughed hysterically, and you can imagine we've kept the Jesus-jokes rolling ever since.

It is just like our God to use a Jewish lawyer to save a Christian non-profit from violating the codes of an Inspector named Jesus, here in the City of Brotherly Love. Ha!

The world is groaning this Christmas. The world is groaning in the pains of childbirth as the Scriptures say. We are not simply celebrating the birth of a baby 2000 years ago. We are also in labor, giving birth to the Kingdom of God, on Earth.

This month we are having a Christmas service entitled: “Away in a Stank Manger,” to remind ourselves that the birth of Jesus was not pretty.

Children were being killed by Herod. Jesus' family was forced to flee, born a baby refugee on the run from oppressive rulers, born literally in the dung of our world.

A pastor friend of mine, Wayne Gordon, of Lawndale Community Church, in Chicago told me a story. He had become so troubled by all the distractions of Christmas—buying, decorating, indulging. He struggled with what to do for their Christmas service to stay true to the story. He decided to remind everyone of the filthy reality of the Christ-birth, so before the service, instead of

decorating as usual, he spread out cow manure under all the pews. As people came in and sat down dressed in their best attire, they looked at each other awkwardly, as if someone needed some antacids. At first people squirmed and shifted uncomfortably. As time went on, they mystically remembered the lowly life of the homeless baby.

This is the Jesus we celebrate at Christmas—the one who was born in a stank manger, who told stories where Jewish lawyers and Samaritan

women could be heroes. Everyone was surprised, scandalized by the One who rolled around in the dirt with children. We celebrate the one who refused the temptation to call fire down from heaven—and died the detestable execution reserved for traitors, insurrectionists, bandits, and failed messiahs with the world mocking, laughing, spitting on him. Indeed, we will undoubtedly find ourselves much more likely to meet Jesus this Christmas in the stench of manure or the filth of the ghetto than we are to meet Him in the best decorated sanctuary or the most festive shopping mall.

Shane Claiborne is the author of The Irresistible Revolution and co-founder of The Simple Way community in Philadelphia.

