



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Distinctive Traditions of Advent
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 47-53)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 The Coming Light
(*Advent Ethics*, pp. 54-55)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Distinctive Traditions of Advent

Lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia's Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree can help us faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. These practices involve hearing the ancient and future stories of salvation that are formative for understanding the Incarnation.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:1-2

Meditation[†]

The sacred story, to be understood aright, has to be read backward. Just as the birth and ministry of Jesus are incomprehensible until we know of the Lord's death and resurrection, so too the whole of the past is muddled unless first we have a grasp on the nature of the future.

Laurence Hull Stookey

Reflection

Recovering the distinctive traditions of Advent, both in congregations and at home, can "turn our hearts and minds away from a commercialized interpretation of the season and toward stillness and reflection," Amber and John Inscore Essick write. Not only will they help us prepare to celebrate Christ's coming, they will also form the rich memories and spiritual habits we need to be faithful witnesses. These Advent traditions help us understand and winsomely share the story of God's redeeming love.

- ▶ *Lighting candles on an Advent wreath* and reading the corresponding lections—on Jesus' teaching about the final judgment, John the Baptist's witness to the coming Christ, and Mary's preparation to give birth to the long-awaited promised one—"habituate God's people in hope, expectation, and patience as they await both the arrival of the child and God's future reign," the Inscore Essicks observe. Various Advent themes or virtues may be associated with the candles, but we need not "overburden each candle with arbitrary meanings," they note. Just the progressive lighting of the four candles is a simple, sacred practice. "When it is difficult to recognize the divine at work around us, the lighting of an additional candle each week signals ever so subtly the imminent arrival of the Light of the World. This progression illustrates that God's redemptive activity operates less like a roaring wildfire and more like a series of small, steady flames."
- ▶ *Celebrating St. Lucia's Day on December 13* introduces the theme of the growing light of God's redemption once again. "Lucia (or Lucy), whose name derives from the Latin root for 'light,' was martyred during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian around the year 303," they explain. "Lucia's triumph over the darkness is reenacted each year when a young girl, representing Lucia, dons a white dress and a crown of glowing candles, to deliver coffee and buns to all in attendance. Variations on the practice include 'Lucia' leading a procession in which each processant carries a single candle.... Lucia's story provides ample material for discussions of virtues such as faith, hope, courage, and charity."



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▶ *Decorating a Jesse Tree* helps adults and children recount “the history of God’s redemptive work from creation, through the birth of Jesus, and on to Jesus’ final reign. The story unfolds through short daily readings as ornaments representing each reading are hung on a tree.” Whether the decorations are store-bought or homemade, ornate or simple, “as we gather each day to participate in the ritual of readings and decorations, we learn that not only the story of our faith, but also the manner in which it is told, are counter-cultural. We learn that the best stories take time to unfold and are worth retelling,” they write. “God’s people become storytellers.”

“The continual and communal celebration of Advent over many years yields the richest meaning for Christians,” the Inscore Essicks conclude. “In reclaiming Advent we rehearse our witness to the world as we prepare the way of the Lord.”

Study Questions

1. In each of the distinctive Advent traditions that Amber and John Inscore Essick survey, what are the essential elements to recover? What variations do they suggest for adapting and personalizing these traditions?
2. Consider how the distinctive Advent traditions discussed here can be adapted for the family as well as the congregation. Is it important that they be kept in both contexts?
3. What does Lawrence Stookey mean (in the meditation) by reading the sacred story of God’s love “backward”? How do the distinctive traditions of Advent help us do that?
4. Discuss some common themes that run through Amber and John Inscore Essick’s appreciation for the distinctive Advent traditions. How are some of these themes reflected in the third and fifth O Antiphons?
5. How is Christ portrayed as the coming Light of the World in Georges de La Tour’s *The Dream of Saint Joseph* (cover art)?

Departing Hymn: “O God Among Us, Come” (vv. 3 and 5)

O Root of Jesse, come.
This ensign raised for all
to whom the nations pray,
before whom kings keep silent:
to rescue quickly come.

O glorious Dayspring, come.
The bright eternal light
and sun of righteousness,
on those who sit in darkness
and death’s cruel shadow, shine.

Latin, 8th century, tr. Robert B. Kruschwitz (2010)

Tune: O ANTIPHONS

†Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 122.

Distinctive Traditions of Advent

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To commend the recovery of three distinctive Advent traditions—lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia’s Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree.
2. To identify central themes of these traditions—the growing revelation of God’s redemptive activity, the importance of narrative, and our formation as disciples in storytelling.
3. To consider how the theme of Christ as the light of the world is expressed in art and song.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Advent Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“While the Advent wreath is a liturgical staple for many congregations, celebrating and marking Advent time with a wreath can also be a meaningful familial practice,” Amber and John Inscore Essick write. “Our family constructs an Advent wreath each year out of fresh greenery from a local greenhouse and places it in our living room. We light the appropriate number of candles for meals, gatherings, and times of prayer. The presence of the wreath in our living space is a helpful reminder that we are in the season of Advent. The flickering flames are a serene backdrop for the lections and silence Advent invites. During a time when congregations and families are tempted by rush and hurry, the wreathing of Advent is a worthy tradition that encourages patience and stillness” (*Advent Ethics*, 49).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment to winsomely proclaim God’s narrative of love through distinctive Advent traditions.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 9:1-2 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study highlights the central themes of three distinctive Advent traditions—lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia’s Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree—and presents some concrete ways of practicing them in congregations and homes. If group members are unfamiliar with the traditions, discuss their history and value. If they are familiar with the traditions, consider practical ways of implementing them in your church or homes.

Amber and John Inscore Essick commend several online resources for further information about these traditions. The Voice (www.criovoice.org) has helpful overviews of the Advent wreath and the Jesse Tree. The

website www.jesse-trees.com offers sets of Jesse Tree ornaments and family devotionals for each day of Advent. YouTube videos show how a St. Lucia's Day celebration might unfold in a congregational worship service (www.youtube.com/watch?v=948h_gHSzW0) and in a home (www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5tXLC1Fub8&feature=related).

Study Questions

1. Amber and John Inscore Essick describe a range of practices in each tradition. They summarize the essential elements of the traditions this way: "In lighting the Advent wreath, we attend to the growing light and keep vigil for the coming savior. Celebrating St. Lucia's Day invites us to embrace and embody what she symbolizes: purity, generosity, and light. Using the Jesse Tree to tell the story of God's redemption encourages children and adults to develop the art of telling the gospel as narrative."

2. Based upon members' interests, you might divide them into groups to brainstorm on how one of the traditions could be shared within their congregation, or practiced in their homes.

The Inscore Essicks mention several times how children as well as adults can be formed by these traditions, developing scriptural memory and spiritual habits. This suggests that the traditions are excellent ways for parents to share the faith with their children. While these three traditions should not be *relegated* to the home, they can be *taken* home.

Often parents need encouragement and support to practice these traditions. For example, a congregation might light an Advent wreath together during worship, but also hold a family wreath-making event where members can make wreaths to use in their homes, to share with elderly members who cannot participate in corporate worship, or to give to friends.

3. These traditions remind us that God's redemptive actions gradually unfold in history. Since this is the case, Lawrence Stookey says we better understand the earlier actions in light of later ones. Advent calls our attention, through prophecy and promise, to the return of Christ in glory to unite the redeemed creation, which is the end or goal of God's story of love.
4. Both the Advent wreath and Jesse Tree provide a kind of road map through Scripture: they visually represent the gradual unfolding of God's mysterious plan through events of creation and the history of Israel, help us organize and understand the biblical stories, and inculcate patience as we wait for the completion of the story of God's love to be revealed. The Advent wreath and St. Lucia's Day share the central biblical metaphor of God as the light and source of all life of the world. Lucia represents the faithful continuation of God story through the lives of faithful disciples; as we enact her procession, we are drawn into that story. All three traditions inculcate skills of faithful witness, or storytelling, about God's love. "Thus, in reclaiming Advent we rehearse our witness to the world as we prepare the way of the Lord," the Inscore Essicks conclude.
5. Georges de La Tour depicts the moment when the angel delivers the divine message to Joseph that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. "The presence of the candle, partially blocked by the angel's arm, is a sign of Jesus as the coming light of the world," Heidi Hornik writes. "This single light source—a painting technique known as tenebrist light—reflects strongly off the face of the angel and illuminates Joseph, creating a sense of meditation and mystery."

Departing Hymn

The piano accompaniment for the "O God Among Us, Come" is on pp. 64-65 of *Advent Ethics*. A version with the melody only is available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.